

Embodied Affirmation: Rosi Braidotti's Neo-Materialist Ethics Between Biology and Phenomenology

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Abstract

Rosi Braidotti's neo-materialist ethics is grounded in a principle of embodied affirmation that challenges the modern opposition between the human and the non-human, redefining subjectivity as a relational and dynamic process within a vital continuum. Central to this framework is the concept of *zoe*, understood not as a property of the subject but as an impersonal and immanent force traversing human, animal, and technological forms of life. Ethics thus emerges as a material practice unfolding across bodies, environments, and technologies. Through a genealogical engagement with Foucault, Agamben, Haraway, Varela, and Guattari, this article places Braidotti's thought in dialogue with Lynn Margulis's theory of symbiogenesis and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. It argues that neo-materialist ethics can be situated within a robust empirical-ontological framework, countering interpretations that reduce it to poetic vitalism. The critique advanced by Francesco Paolo Adorno – who warns against the risk of collapsing subjectivity into mere biological life – serves as a critical test of the coherence of posthuman ethics is ontologically supported by both the biology of symbiosis and the phenomenology of flesh; and second, that responsibility and difference must be articulated through practices of care and situated knowledge that recognize the active materiality of the living world. The posthuman thus appears not as a negation of the human, but as an epistemic reconfiguration at the intersection of life sciences, phenomenology, and relational ethics.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Neo-materialism, *Zoe*, Embodiment, Symbiogenesis, Phenomenology, Ethics, Relational Ontology.



Introduction

In recent decades, the combined transformations of the life sciences, technologies, and planetary ecologies have radically destabilized the modern idea of life as the exclusive attribute of the human (Braidotti, *Il postumano* 1: 5). Subjectivity no longer appears as an autonomous and self-sufficient center, but as an embodied and relational process, inscribed in material networks that include non-human organisms, environments, and technical devices. In this scenario, the ethical question can no longer be formulated in terms of an abstract normative foundation; it must instead confront the material and ontological conditions through which life itself is articulated, governed, and valorized.

It is within this horizon that Rosi Braidotti's neo-materialist ethics is situated. Through the notion of *zoe*, understood as an impersonal and immanent vital force that traverses human and non-human forms of life, Braidotti proposes a radical reconfiguration of subjectivity beyond the anthropocentric paradigm. Ethics no longer emerges from the separation between human and non-human, nor from the superiority of consciousness over matter, but from the capacity to inhabit in an affirmative and responsible way the relational continuum of the living.

The guiding question of this article is whether, and to what extent, Braidotti's *zoe*-centered ethics can be considered ontologically grounded and capable of articulating responsibility and difference without falling back either into residual humanism or into a naturalization of subjectivity. In this sense, the engagement with Francesco Paolo Adorno's critique – which identifies in posthumanism the risk of dissolving ethics into mere biological life – plays a central role in testing the consistency of Braidotti's neo-materialism.

Methodologically, the article is structured in two distinct but complementary movements. The first part adopts a genealogical approach aimed at reconstructing the critical and epistemic field within which Braidotti's neo-materialism takes shape. In this section, the analysis of biocapitalism and contemporary transformations of biopolitics is not merely contextual or descriptive; it serves instead to indicate the historical-material point of departure from which *zoe*-centered ethics arises as a

theoretical response. Biogenetic capitalism, the technologization of life, and its growing economic valorization constitute the critical negative against which Braidotti's neo-materialism takes position, without limiting itself to a reactive critique.

The second part of the article tackles the core theoretical issue, testing the ontological validity of the neo-materialist approach through a double confrontation. On the one hand, Adorno's critique makes it possible to interrogate the risk of a biological reduction of subjectivity and to clarify the differences between a dialectical conception of the relation between bios and *zoe* and an immanentist, relational perspective. On the other hand, the dialogue with Lynn Margulis's biological theory of symbiogenesis and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment shows how *zoe*-centered ethics can be rooted both biologically and perceptually, thereby eluding the charges of abstract or poetic vitalism.

Through this double genealogical and critical movement, the article argues that Braidotti's neo-materialist ethics does not represent a negation of the human, but rather an epistemic and ethical reconfiguration of the human within the continuum of the living. The posthuman thus emerges not as a dissolution of difference, but as a situated relational practice in which responsibility, embodiment, and multispecies coexistence become the fundamental criteria for thinking ethics in the present.

Post-Anthropocentrism and Biocapitalism

The theoretical core of Braidotti's work is rooted in a neo-materialist ethics tightly interwoven with Spinoza's vitalist materialism and its monist premises (Spinoza, *Etica* I.14-15; III.6-7), which inform her entire worldview and her way of conceiving the relation between body, life, and power (Braidotti, *Il postumano* 3: 260). The deadlock to be overcome concerns a politics of life conceived as an exclusive prerogative and inalienable right of the human – an ontologically guaranteed and unquestioned principle – in favor of a relational and open-ended process devoid of any final telos:

My point of departure is the death of the anti-humanist Man/Woman, which highlights the decline of certain fundamental presuppositions of the Enlightenment—specifically, the idea of humanity’s progress through the self-regulatory and teleologically oriented use of reason and secular scientific rationality, both of which were assumed to be directed toward the perfectibility of Man. The posthuman perspective is grounded in the historical acknowledgment of the decline of humanism, yet it goes further by exploring new alternatives, without falling back into the anti-humanist rhetoric of the crisis of Man. Instead, it commits itself to developing alternative ways of conceptualizing posthuman subjectivity. (*Il postumano* 1: 43)

To this end, Braidotti introduces two conceptual categories for analyzing the vitalism of matter, aimed at deconstructing traditional binary oppositions. On one side stands the domain of bios – qualified, organic, discursive life, historically reserved to the anthropos – and on the other the broader dimension of animal and non-human life, *zoe*. The perspective of a nature-culture continuum allows the dimension of *zoe* to expand and to manifest itself within the colonized idea of the “human,” identified with the male, white, heterosexual citizen belonging to privileged classes. Post-anthropocentrism, in its posthuman articulation, dissolves the barriers separating vitality and rationality, opening up the space for a new scene of relations among humans, non-humans, and the environment, one that is entirely *zoe*-centered. This implies that the irrational intensity of life that acts and moves independently of the rational control that the plane of bios seeks to exercise (*Trasposizioni* 51).

In developing her argument on the affirmative power of *zoe*, Braidotti explicitly challenges Giorgio Agamben’s theory, which offers a radically different interpretation of the bios/*zoe* problematic. Heir to Heidegger, Agamben assimilates the dimension of *zoe* to that of “bare life”. The latter refers to the ways in which embodied subjectivities can appear as non-human due to the subjugating work of power: “bare life” is the corporeal residue resulting from the removal of the humanized “bio-logical” dimension. “Zoe is consequently assimilated to death as corpse, as the liminal corporeal existence of a life that does not qualify as human” (51). According to

Agamben, *zoe* is the constitutively elusive horizon of an alterity that must be simultaneously included and excluded so that the edifice of the subject may stand. Finitude thus reflects itself in a structural element of subjectivity, which nourishes an affective economy marked by loss and melancholy at the heart of subjective experience.

In opposition to Heidegger's ontology of Being and the proximate perspective of Agamben, Braidotti aligns herself with the philosophical approach of Deleuze and Guattari: starting from nomadic theory, the subject is simultaneously dissolved and refounded within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, characterized by a marked interest in pre-human and even non-human dimensions. These elements give rise to a network of forces, energies, and encounters that together configure an ecological entity and a conception of life as a non-teleological, generative vitality, conceived as continual becoming. The idea of life as "becoming corpse" must be surpassed; besides omitting the positivity of *zoe*, it reinforces the dialectical model of the Same and difference that Braidotti's entire philosophy seeks to overcome. It is instead more fruitful to begin thinking of a life that eludes individuality as its center and fulcrum, in order to distance thought from conceptualizations of rigid demarcations between bios and *zoe*, that is, from the supposed superiority of consciousness.

From this perspective, Braidotti lucidly observes that the expansion of scientific, technological, and social practices intervening in life reveals how contemporary 21st-century capitalism no longer merely organizes production or labor, but directly incorporates vital processes, transforming them into resources, data, and opportunities for valorization.

Nikolas Rose's "biocitizen" provides a clear example. He interprets the implications of biopolitics as a specific declension of the broader logic of governmentality, that is, as a dispositif of self-management whereby the bioethical subject takes on the responsibility of exercising integral control over their own genetic existence. This perspective virtually incorporates not only the possibility of illness, but also the assumption of responsibility by the embodied subject for their

own body, understood as a potential corpse and thus as an object of continual ethical-political governance.

In *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, Rose argues that, with the progressive expansion of political intervention into the vital dimensions of existence and with the elevation of biological life into a focus of economic and subjective interest, collective vitalitas begins to be configured as a strategic resource of value (237). Starting in the nineteenth century, the protection and enhancement of vital value became central tasks of the state apparatus, which claimed responsibility for preserving, safeguarding, and optimizing the biological capital of the population. In parallel, private initiative plays a decisive role in the production of goods and services – nutritional, therapeutic, pharmacological – capable of combining economic profit and public utility.

In this context, biogenetic capitalism, through its ability to render the body visible, intelligible, quantifiable, and manipulable down to its molecular dimension, has inaugurated unprecedented articulations between life and the market. The criteria for evaluating the nature and value of different forms of life and the various modes of being human are now inscribed in the practices and knowledges produced by the life sciences and contemporary biomedical research. In this framework, the process of generating “biovalue” does not merely describe life, but directly incorporates and transforms its conditions, reshaping the very experience of living subjectivity.

The effects of practices of manipulation and surveillance enacted by the dynamics of advanced capitalism inevitably spill over onto those categories considered inferior or marginal with respect to the centrality of the human (Shiva 44). The generative powers of women, animals, plants, and cells are subjected to mechanisms that Vandana Shiva, in *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, radicalizes under the term “biopiracy” (xii). Biogenetic capitalism generates a reciprocal interconnection among all living organisms, humans included, which manifests itself primarily in reactive terms. This form of unity asserts a negative connection, expressed through a shared vulnerability: a global sense of

interdependence between humans and the non-human environment in the face of common threats.

For the biogenetic political economy of capitalism to generate profit, it requires, if not the complete dissolution, then at least the progressive attenuation of the distinction between the human species and other forms of life: seeds, plants, animals, and microorganisms are pulled into a logic of consumerist exploitation. Consequently, the global economy becomes post-anthropocentric, subjecting all species to the imperative of the market and, through its excesses, jeopardizing the sustainability of the entire planet. The result is a form of negative cosmopolitan interconnection, grounded in the shared bond of vulnerability.

Braidotti responds to this negative configuration of the present by proposing an eco-philosophical approach based on the articulation of new ecologies of belonging. Against the neoliberal reduction of technological resources to mere instruments of profit, posthuman theory seeks to assert itself as a horizon capable of valorizing their emancipatory and relational potential. What is needed is the adoption of an affirmative perspective capable of recognizing in technological innovation a site of conceptual reconfiguration and of rejecting any form of technophobia. For Braidotti, the contemporary era opens up a field of possibilities – posthuman becomings – directed toward the posthuman recomposition of relations beyond a reactive conception of vulnerability. The core of this intensive exploration lies in affirming a relational bond in which the subject inscribes itself within the continuous flow of interconnections with multiple others, promoting a form of productive cooperation that exceeds mere exposure to shared risk.

Genealogical Perspectives: Autopoiesis and Relational Ontology

In order to redefine an ethics of co-determination between self and others, Braidotti explicitly acknowledges the inspiration of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (*Il postumano* 1: 98). Autopoiesis, ascribed to organic systems capable of self-organization, can be understood as processual creativity, which – according to Braidotti – finds its most complete place within a broad ontology of gratuitousness, or of “no-profit” in an

ontological-existential sense: an act of affirmative self-creation that does not root itself in any transcendence. It is not a matter of the death or dissolution of an atomized self, of an isolated and self-sufficient individual, but of the affirmation of a subject traversed by multiple speeds and intensities of becoming.

There is a constitutive tension between resistance and sustainability, in which subjectivity is expressed not as the private property of the “I,” but as an impersonal mode of singularity (Braidotti, *Trasposizioni* 118). The imperative tone dissolves the sentimentalism of dominant visions of the subject still anchored to nostalgic, identity-based representations, opening instead onto an ethics of transformation and perseverance in becoming. Oriented toward self-accomplishment – understood as the realization of singularity – the subject emerges as an affective and receptive entity, capable both of exercising influence and of allowing itself to be transformed by the multiplicity of relations that traverse it.

Autopoiesis, however, is not limited to the human, animal, or natural world; it extends beyond the biological domain to include machines and technological artifacts. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari develop a machinic ontology in which living organisms and technical dispositifs are conceived as qualitatively continuous. This contribution is crucial for Braidotti, as it involves a radical reconceptualization of machines as intelligent and generative systems capable of producing new connections and new subjectivities. Deleuze and Guattari thematize this dynamic through the notion of transversal assemblages, in which nature and culture, organism and environment, subject and collectivity are combined and recombined in contingent configurations, always open to becoming. Transversality opens up a conceptual space for a *zoe*-centered egalitarianism able to welcome and valorize alternative forms of posthuman subjectivity (*Il postumano* 1: 100).

In Braidotti’s perspective, transversality is broadened and enriched through empathic dispositions that enable different affective intensities to enter into relation within the vast and intricate world of *zoe* (*Nuovi soggetti nomadi* 17). For Braidotti, empathy is the point at which the subject enters into relation with alterity through a direct affective involvement that operates beyond symbolic authorizations, identity

categories, or structured identifications: it is an ethical movement through which subjectivity comes to be constituted by including itself in the very event, actively participating in its contingency.

This process is clearly figured by Donna Haraway through the metaphor of the “tentacle”: a relational movement inherent in living matter, a renewed kinship that binds together species, environments, and both biological and social spheres. “With Haraway the bond becomes tentacular. It searches, senses, experiences, touches, finds, connects, is one among many and enables movement” (Tedeschi, *Innamorarsi del mondo* 3).

Haraway’s celebrated motto “make kin, not babies” (102) today offers one of the most incisive syntheses of relational and posthumanist thought. She radicalizes this perspective further by introducing the notion of “oddkin”: unusual, eccentric forms of kinship capable of exceeding the boundaries of identity and species. These “strange” bonds are an invitation to experiment with modes of coexistence and affiliation grounded not in similarity but in the contingency of vital relations and in a shared responsibility for the common world. In this direction, Haraway proposes conceiving subjectivities as humanimals, a hybrid figure that dissolves the presumed ontological fracture between humans and non-humans, highlighting the processes of co-construction and co-emergence through which both dimensions are reciprocally constituted in history.

To think in terms of “humanimal” thus means to interrogate the material and affective networks that link forms of life: who has access to food, which systems of production fuel ecological crisis, how relations of exploitation and care unfold between species and within them. Such questions cannot be formulated from the standpoint of a mono-species conception of existence. The prospect of multispecies coexistence requires a multispecies reflection capable of thinking simultaneously the plurality of agents, needs, and vulnerabilities that cohabit the Earth. From this perspective, the cyborg, the monster, and the animal no longer appear as degraded or excluded forms of alterity, but rather as emancipated figures, released from the negativity historically imposed upon them. By rejecting the dialectics of alterity,

Haraway moves beyond a conceptual schema that opposes identity and difference, inhabiting instead a posthuman horizon in which technology becomes a medium for new forms of belonging and subjectivity (*Manifesto cyborg; Staying with the Trouble*).

It is precisely this departure from traditional models of the subject that Braidotti recognizes as one of the most innovative aspects of Haraway's thought. At the same time, however, Braidotti maintains that reflections on the cyborg must remain at the conceptual level and cannot be taken as an automatic resolution of the tensions that traverse subjectivity. While Haraway's framework does not exclude the body or the sexual dimension, her model of fluid and plural subjectivity tends, from Braidotti's perspective, to simplify the complexity of the psychic and symbolic structures that inform desire. What risks being overlooked is the persistence of a contradictory and unresolved dimension of subjectivity, traversed by drives, affects, and ambivalent tensions that cannot be fully dissolved or rationalized within a purely theoretical or technological perspective. Even as the cyborg exceeds traditional opposition – human/machine, natural/artificial, masculine/feminine – the posthuman subject remains, for Braidotti, structurally non-coherent and always in the process of becoming (*In metamorfosi* 289).

In pursuing this aim, Braidotti adopts the politics of positionality as a central tool across her entire philosophical corpus. Paying attention to embodied and situated positionality makes it possible to highlight the diverse modes and conditions of access to the point of entry into the posthuman convergence. This entails a serious collective negotiation aimed at understanding how many and what processes of disidentification and improvement embodied selves are able to bear: "The posthuman is only the question. The answer is what 'we' are able to become" (*Il postumano 2*: 85). This collective entity, exemplified by Braidotti under the sign of a "we," embraces the multiplicity and diversity of various points of view depending on the place of enunciation. Far from being a relativist position, practices of knowledge unfold within a qualitative and collaborative dimension. It is not a new "pan-human" system, but an autopoietic force that mirrors the variety of assemblages and interconnections among

heterogeneous subjects, each diversified in its situatedness: a praxis of posthuman trans-subjectivity.

Neo-Materialism Between Biology and Phenomenology

It should now be clear how the genealogical framework just outlined provides the fertile ground on which neo-materialism is grafted, revealing in any case that subjectivity – within the complex posthuman network – can no longer be defined in terms of a stable, separate unity, but only as a node in a vital, technological, and affective continuum.

Continuing along this argumentative line, I would like to suggest that Lynn Margulis's theories of symbiogenesis and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied experience in the world – in addition to situating Braidotti within a shared epistemic matrix – represent two complementary theoretical axes that make it possible to root Braidotti's immanent ethics both biologically and phenomenologically. This does not mean providing empirical proof or a historical antecedent, but rather furnishing a methodologically distinct lexicon that renders Braidotti's politically and affectively formulated neo-materialism more operational.

In *What is Life?* Margulis develops a theory of life based on a symbiotic conception of biological processes. According to her, bacteria have the capacity to merge and cooperate, generating new emergent properties and giving rise to more complex cells. In other words, evolution does not derive solely from competition or random mutation, as traditional Darwinian models claimed, but rather from processes of collaboration and fusion among organisms belonging to different species or biological kingdoms. It is interaction itself – the cooperative effort among heterogeneous entities – that constitutes the driving principle of life, making life a relational and interdependent system in which new forms emerge from the encounter and co-evolution of multiple biological subjectivities.

Organisms are thus constituted as embodied and situated entities that participate in continuous exchange processes and forms of vital cooperation. In this perspective, life is thus described as rhizomatic and planetary, insofar as it resists hierarchical organization and individualistic models of biological explanation. Rather

than being centered on autonomous organisms, it takes the form of an eco-centric horizon of relations, where living beings emerge through ongoing processes of interdependence and material co-evolution. From this perspective, individuality and biological agency are radically redefined, no longer understood as fixed or self-possessed capacities, but as emergent effects of relational dynamics within the living world.

Living matter thus turns out to be endowed with capacities for choice, able to orient its own trajectories of existence on the basis of sensory information and to transform itself through the differential transmission of such data. Life is not therefore reduced to a mere biological function; it manifests itself as a cognitive and relational process of matter itself: the world becomes the immanent site of thought, where reflection and transformation coincide with the becoming of matter. With Margulis, the Earth becomes a self-regulating physiological system, articulated in a multiplicity of bacterial communities and symbiotic networks whose cooperation sustains the ensemble of vital processes. This valorizes the autopoietic and self-organizing activity of the planet, in opposition to the instrumental rationality and anthropocentric narcissism that have characterized human action and its modes of technical and conceptual domination.

Within this ontological frame, matter manifests its intrinsic vitality and its ability to produce ever new forms of life within a field of systemic interdependences. Life is thus configured as a processual ecology of difference, in which every entity is constitutively relational and situated within a continuum of co-development between human and non-human. Multiplicity is not an attribute exclusive to human life, but a transversal ontological condition that traverses the planetary ecosystem, redefining the very boundaries of agency and thought in post-anthropocentric and co-evolutionary terms.

Margulis's insights, which decenter the centrality of the biological individual, find further articulation on the perceptual and ontological level in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he defines perception as the primordial mode through which the human being inhabits the world: an embodied,

pre-reflective activity rooted in the “motor intentionality” of the lived body. The body is not one object among others, but a situated subjectivity that comes into direct contact with its surroundings through a dynamic play of orientations, postures, and affordances.

What Merleau-Ponty calls “flesh” – a key notion in our context – designates an ontological element common to perceiver and perceived. It does not signify biological matter, but a sensitive and relational tissue that precedes the distinction between subject and object and that manifests itself paradigmatically in the reversibility of touching and being touched. In this intertwining, Merleau-Ponty identifies the fundamental structure of experience: a co-belonging that dissolves classical dualisms and reconceives being as a shared, intercorporeal, and intermaterial field. To think materiality as active, relational, and in becoming provides a conceptual frame that surpasses the centrality of the subject in favor of a broader and more responsive vision of the relations that sustain life.

As Sara Ahmed argues in *Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects, Others*, phenomenology clearly shows that what distinguishes bodies lies in the ways they inhabit and relate to space: space should not be conceived as a mere container for the body, within which it would be placed like a passive object. On the contrary, bodies immerse themselves in space to the point of defining and transforming it through their presence; moving within it, they are continuously influenced by the specificities of place. It is through this dynamic interaction that both the surface of surrounding space and that of bodies themselves are configured and assume form and structure. From this perspective, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment is not merely phenomenological but also ethical, functioning as a way of situating the subject within a network of material relations that exceed the human.

Ultimately, Margulis’s concept of symbiotic life helps to construct a plausible biological basis for thinking cooperation as an evolutionary principle, while Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology clarifies how perception and existence are always already an intertwining of corporeality and world. These theories show that living matter is in itself intelligent and self-organizing, to the point of being independent

from the human mind. If the latter is capable of perceiving the world to varying degrees, the concepts and ideas that it represents do not coincide with the qualities of the entities it seeks to grasp. It is not possible to fully objectify matter, because materiality exceeds the codifications governed by a symbolic system of anthropomorphic and anthropocentric sign. “The world exists even without the confirmation of the human gaze” (*Il postumano* 3: 143). Taken together, these contributions make it possible to defend *zoe* as a non-metaphysical but material and perceptual horizon. In this sense, Braidotti’s work does not remain confined to the plane of abstract or “poetic” vitalism, but asserts itself with full ontological credibility.

“True Life” Beyond Consciousness

Within this theoretical scenario, Francesco Paolo Adorno’s critique assumes particular importance. He locates in technical posthumanism a reduction of the human to the purely biological dimension and a consequent dissolution of ethical subjectivity (457). His perspective serves as a decisive testing ground for evaluating the ontological and ethical coherence of Braidotti’s project. Through the notion of “true life”, Adorno offers a counterproposal that, moving within a post-Hegelian sensibility, insists on the need to preserve a constitutive distance between bios and *zoe* as the condition for freedom and for the ethical sense of existence.

In the essay “Real Life Is Always Elsewhere: On the Ethics of the Posthuman” (“La vera vita è sempre altrove. Sull’etica del postumano”), reflection shifts from a productive attempt to understand emerging forms of embodied subjectivity and their modes of relation – associated with critical posthumanism – to an interrogation of the intensification of technological techniques oriented toward a “superior” human. The distancing from biological constraints is formulated by Adorno in terms of a reduction of the human to nature, to the purely animal sphere. This is the paradox that runs through technological modernity: enhancement – the improvement of cognitive and physical performance – appears as an emancipatory act, but in reality, marks the reduction of the human to animality, that is, to the mere biological life (*zoe*) that structures and sustains it. For Adorno, reducing life to its biological dimension, even

if enhanced, means destroying the tension between body and spirit that constitutes the essence of the human. It is a veritable “theoretical suicide”: in seeking to surpass the human, posthuman philosophy ends up abolishing it.

To clarify his position, Adorno distinguishes “reduction” to animality from “reconciliation” with it. The former is the movement proper to technical posthumanism: the human being allows themselves to be defined and manipulated according to their biological nature. The latter, in contrast, is the ethical and philosophical task of recognizing one’s animal component without dissolving into it. “True life.” for Adorno, is not that of the eternally young and enhanced cyborg, but that of a being capable of accepting its own vulnerability, of speaking truthfully about itself, of inhabiting its own finitude (461).

Adorno’s critique of transhumanism is extremely significant for our purposes because it allows us to raise further questions and to explore far more deeply the field of relations between bios and *zoe*. The premise on which both Adorno and Braidotti structure their respective critiques is the same: the denunciation of the exploitability of life in the contemporary world. Braidotti shows how advanced capitalism has transformed *zoe* into an economic resource; Adorno, in turn, identifies in technical posthumanism the same form of domination: biological life is manipulated, optimized, enhanced, but always with a utilitarian function in view. In both cases, life is reduced to an object of management.

It is around the concept of *zoe*, however, that a critical debate between Adorno and Braidotti becomes possible. First of all, Adorno reprises a theme typical of modern dialectics, which can be traced back to Hegel but also passes through Kojève and Agamben: reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) between human and nature is not fusion, but awareness of their reciprocal belonging in difference. Adorno preserves a distinction between human and nature, but he uses it not to establish a hierarchy, rather to preserve the ethical sense of existence: a distance that makes freedom possible, not an abyss to be abolished. “True life” is not the fusion with nature but the ability to remain within the tension between the natural and the symbolic, between body and word, between finitude and consciousness. The overcoming of the distinction between

human and nature, between mind and body, ends up dissolving the human into biological nature – that is, reducing it to mere *zoe*. Adorno fears that such fusion erases what makes the human an ethical being: the capacity to reflect upon oneself, to tell the truth, to choose (461).

The relation between bios and *zoe* thus does not concern a question of hierarchy or coincidence, but of a constitutive distance, a “between” that is the space of consciousness and freedom through which humans can interrogate themselves, tell the truth, choose how to live. Without it, there is no ethics, only biological or technical functionality. Adorno’s position is therefore deeply dialectical to the extent that human and nature belong together yet remain different within a dynamic equilibrium that is neither fusion nor absolute separation. The error does not lie in recognizing the animal dimension of the human, but in fully absorbing the human into it, erasing what in the human exceeds life. Adorno calls for responsibility toward the limit: reconciliation does not mean dissolution but finding harmony between animality and the spiritual dimension of the human. It is an invitation not to confuse reconciliation with life with reduction to life: only by safeguarding the distance between *zoe* and bios, between body and truth, can the human avoid losing itself in the machine built to surpass itself (459).

Notoriously opposed to dialectical logics, Braidotti’s wager is articulated from within a Spinozist neo-materialism. What Adorno identifies as crucial corresponds, in Braidotti’s terms, to the condition of possibility for an affirmative ethics of nomadic and posthuman becoming. While for Adorno it is crucial to institute a dynamic equilibrium between human and animal life – thus remaining anchored to a “modernist” understanding of human qualities – for Braidotti the rigidification of distinctions between rationality and materiality is deeply problematic. For both thinkers, difference is the condition of ethics; yet Adorno conceives it as a limit separating the human from the natural, whereas Braidotti understands it as a mode of relation among heterogeneous forms of life.

From Rosi Braidotti’s perspective, the renewed perception of the human as embedded within an expansive and irrepressible animal life does not entail a reduction

of subjectivity to biology or animality. Rather, the aim is to establish affirmative relationalities among differences, which are not conceived in terms of “reconciliation” or equilibrium between distinct entities. In this framework, there is no moral distance separating the human from the rest of the living, but instead a responsibility toward it. Difference unfolds in the ways human subjectivity inhabits and articulates its relations with the world through language, technology, affectivity, memory, and creativity. These capacities do not place the human outside the living, but rather configure it as one of its more complex expressions. In Spinozist terms, the human is a mode of substance rather than a distinct substance: its difference is modal, not substantial.

One way of reading Adorno is to see him as defending a specifically human difference of thought, an “interior” difference in which the human is the being who reflects upon itself. Braidotti, in contrast, asserts an “exterior” difference, marked by a subjectivity that differentiates itself in the manner of its relations to what it is not (Adorno; Braidotti). Adorno’s position shows a limit when read in light of the epistemological and material transformations of the present. His insistence on the role of speech, consciousness, and freedom as foundations of human difference preserves – in my view – a form of critical dualism that, although non-hierarchical, continues to separate the plane of bios from that of *zoe*.

In a world in which the life sciences, technology, and phenomenology have dissolved stable boundaries between human, animal, and environment, such a distinction risks being insufficient to address the complexity of the contemporary posthuman condition. Adorno’s ethics of the limit, centered on the reflective subject, offers few tools to grasp the material and perceptual interdependence that now characterizes the living. The question, then, is: how can we think “true life” today without falling either into technical posthumanism or into a residual humanism grounded in the distance between human and nature?

In formulating a plausible answer, I would once more recall the theories of Margulis and Merleau-Ponty. These perspectives make it possible to think an idea of life not grounded in the difference of the human but in the relationality of the living,

thereby overcoming the humanistic limit highlighted by Adorno. *Zoe* finds in the theory of symbiogenesis a strong empirical confirmation. Margulis – like Braidotti – conceives life as diffused intelligence, a mind distributed through the body and the ecosystem. It is not the human who thinks life, but life that thinks through the human. The resulting ethics is one of co-existence: the good does not lie in preserving a boundary, but in caring for the interdependencies that guarantee the continuity of the living.

On the phenomenological side – as argued above – Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body as flesh in the world (*Il visibile e l’invisibile* 96) is particularly significant. The body appears as a site of intersection between subject and world and belongs to the same substance as the visible. Every perception is configured as a reciprocal relation – every act of touching implies being touched – revealing the ontological co-belonging of the living and the world that hosts it. The human does not differ from other living beings by a rational consciousness, but by the capacity to live its own perceptual openness as a horizon of becoming. Subjectivity is a process of intercorporeality: not a closed ego that observes, but a node of visual, tactile, affective relations that link inside and outside.

From this angle, we might say that in Merleau-Ponty “true life” cannot be determined as a harmony between consciousness and body, but rather as a continuity between perception and world, an embodied reversibility (*Fenomenologia della percezione; Il visibile e l’invisibile*). Relying on this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, we are led to affirm that posthuman subjectivity is relational flesh, neither spirit nor machine.

In light of the theories just discussed, Adorno’s proposal appears as an intermediate moment in the history of posthuman thought: he intuits the risk of a technical reduction of life, but remains tied to a model of the human as reflective distance. Braidotti, by contrast, can be read as the fulfillment of that tension: by freeing *zoe* from the hierarchy of bios, she restores to life its creative immanence. Margulis and Merleau-Ponty make this vision tangible: the former shows that life is a symbiotic network; the latter affirms that perception is shared flesh. Both provide,

at different levels, the bases for a non-anthropocentric but ecological and relational ethics in which responsibility arises from reciprocal belonging rather than from separation.

“True life,” then, is a life made of cooperation and perception, of biological and affective alliances, of bodies and technologies that coexist within the same flesh of the world. Only by recognizing this network can we think an ethics adequate to the present, capable of inhabiting posthuman complexity without nostalgia for a lost human. The place of truth is not situated in word and consciousness, but in embodied experience and perceptual relation. Ultimately, human difference is not a matter of balancing consciousness and nature, but of the affective and responsive mode by which we inhabit the vital network of the world.

Conclusion

Braidotti’s zoe-centered perspective allows us to rethink subjectivity as a field of trans-species relations, beyond the modern distinction between human and nature. The engagement with Adorno has shown, on the one hand, the relevance of the risks posed by a biological reduction of the human and, on the other, the limits of a conception still bound to the separation between bios and *zoe*. In this direction, Margulis’s and Merleau-Ponty’s theories offer conceptual tools for materially grounding posthuman ethics by showing how life can be understood as biological interdependence and embodied perception. These perspectives suggest a conception of subjectivity as a relational and affective node inscribed in a multispecies network. Posthuman ethics thus appears as a practice of coexistence that affirms the generative power of life and responsibility toward the living. This contribution has therefore suggested a possible path for materially grounding posthuman ethics, in which zoe is configured as the relational principle capable of integrating the biological, perceptual, and political dimensions of the living.

Nevertheless, in conclusion it is necessary to make explicit the limits and the ethical, political, and epistemological risks that Braidotti’s neomaterialism leaves unresolved. First, it is important to clarify that the critical impetus of Braidotti’s philosophy is directed at the modern philosophical subject, which is assumed as the

figure of an epistemic dispositif grounded in rationality, autonomy, and self-transparency, and employed as the emblem of the humanist paradigm to be deconstructed. However, this subject is at times constructed retrospectively as a monolithic figure, functional to the critique itself rather than as a historically determined object. This gives rise to the risk of a theoretical circularity, whereby the unity, stability, and centrality of the modern subject are presupposed precisely in order to dismantle them, thereby obscuring its historical and conceptual complexity (Braidotti, *Dissonanze*).

This point has been addressed by the linguist Kieran O'Halloran, who argues that:

Naturally, she [Braidotti] is correct that the human of the historical humanities was restricted (male, white, educated, moneyed, heterosexual). What of her assumption that the humanist subject coincides with rational consciousness? Enlightenment humanists argued differently. They held that humans are capable of being rational, but that does not mean they always are. ("Braidotti Within Reason" 154)

O'Halloran further clarifies that Enlightenment humanists never claimed that human beings constantly act rationally, but rather that they are capable of rationality, while remaining exposed to limits, illusions, and prejudices. Even figures often taken as emblems of modern rationality, such as Kant, explicitly acknowledged such limits, as did thinkers like Spinoza, Hume, Smith, and the Encyclopedists, whose conception of rationality was deeply aware of the affective, social, and collective dynamics that condition its exercise (154).

From this perspective, O'Halloran highlights how, in the attempt to overcome anthropocentric universalism, Braidotti risks reasserting it in a different form, insofar as zoe-centred vitalism comes to assume an ontologically universal value. He thus comes to recognise as productive Braidotti's attempt to connect human consciousness to the moral innateness of other primates, while nevertheless underlining the tension implied by such universalisation. I therefore concur with O'Halloran in regarding,

Braidotti's linking human consciousness to the moral innateness of other primates as productive for a non-anthropocentric posthuman ethical subjectivity. Indeed, I believe this subjectivity should be universally endorsed. Surely this is what Braidotti wants too, despite distancing herself from universalizing. (170)

Alongside this line of critique stands that formulated by Niki Young, who brings to light further problematic implications of a radically relational perspective. On the one hand, the emphasis on relationality risks implicitly reproducing a form of human centrality, insofar as the normative framework continues to be articulated through human categories and practices; on the other hand, it may lead to a dissolution of the individual into an undifferentiated vital continuum, thereby compromising the possibility of thinking meaningful forms of difference (Young, "Non-Anthropocentric Posthumanism and the Stakes of Relationality" 9).

At this point, some clarifications are necessary. With regard to the first issue, it should be emphasised that, from my perspective, transversal alliances do not aim to conceive of a world independent of the human, but rather to deconstruct the claim to human centrality with respect to the environment it inhabits. In Braidotti's neomaterialist framework, the world is intrinsically linked to the human insofar as the human is part of the relational flow that weaves the networks of the world. The central point lies in advancing perspectives that deny the idea of a "purely human" human – one that is superior to the rest of the living and not intensively and ontologically affected by the environment and by the relations it entertains with it (*Trasposizioni* 150).

The risk and limit of a possible persistence of anthropocentrism nevertheless remains bound to the question of normativity. "If everything is thoroughly connected to everything else, then ultimately everything is also thoroughly connected to humans, and to our all-too-human modes of normative and epistemic evaluation" (Young 10). The normative regime that a potential *zoe*-centred and non-anthropocentric system should assume does not eliminate the problem that such a regime remains supported by a rationality and by conceptual tools that are

predominantly human. This does not preclude, however, the formulation of a renewed normativity capable of structuring itself through a system of thought able to respond to *zoe*-centrism and to the transversality of the immanent relations that Braidotti seeks to affirm.

With regard to the second point, I intend to be more critical of Young's thesis. If neomaterialism conceives the human as involved in a network of relations with the rest of the living, the human does not thereby remain "absorbed" into the vital continuum instituted by *zoe*. On the contrary, the ethical dimension of such a vision presupposes that, within an immanentist monism, every being is always already in relation with the other, but only insofar as subjects recognise one another in their alterity. Braidotti states: "We find ourselves within this assemblage, but we are not all the same" (*Trasposizioni* 152). Subjects are different modes of a single substance that enter into relations with the multiplicity of the living in differentiated ways, according to the degree of affective intensity they embody. Within the *zoe*-centred system, therefore, difference does not disappear; rather, it proliferates.

Nevertheless, the task of determining which relational forms are ethically and politically sustainable remains entrusted to an inevitably human normative regime. This is a tension that Braidotti's neomaterialism does not succeed in resolving definitively, but which constitutes a structural critical limit – and perhaps one of its most theoretically productive questions.

Notes

Every translation from an Italian text into English present in this article is my own work.

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