

The Relevance of Michel Serres's Idea of Bodily *Hominescence* for a Convergence of Posthumanism and Transhumanism: A Trans/Posthuman Body

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Faced with the challenge of arguments about the relation of post-, and trans-humanism, putting forth questions on their “antagonism”, or “convergence”, I propose to (re-)evaluate/highlight the relevance of the thinking of Michel Serres for posthuman debates. It specifically seems to me that Serresian idea of bodily *hominescence* can be read as a suggestion of “convergence” of post- and trans-humanism. Starting from the assumption that the body is a crucial node of both of them in that its consideration by one and the other marks a major front of their divergence (tool body according to transhumanism, dimensional body according to posthumanism), I seem to grasp, within the Serresian theme of the hominescent body as totipotent/virtual, the idea of bodily virtuality as a point of their convergence. Following Serres's argument that, due to its virtuality/potentiality (intended as the totality of the possibilities), the body, though always involved in (technological) hybridization processes, is difficult to be artificially reproduced and to be reduced to information, I assume virtuality as an “operational concept” capable of “producing” convergence of post- and trans-humanism. Such a concept allows me, in fact, to read the body (re-)invested, by technology as an infiltrative agent, of a dimensional role as hybridizer (and in this sense normalized). Through virtuality, therefore, I think to be able to understand the body as a meeting ground between trans- and post-component, in the sense that technological “intervention” no longer constitutes an enhancement of the body, but a hybridizing event not implying dis-incarnation but rather normalization of body's dimensional value; precisely such, due eminently to hybridization with otherness within a process of technological infiltration. The body normalized by such a technology is therefore a trans-posthuman body, in the sense of being contaminated by technological processes keeping it in its dimensionality. In order to better illustrate this idea, I propose to examine Serresian metaphor of the body as a trunk without branches with cultural cut twigs, which seems to me to effectively express the theme of the body as a ground/condition of hybridization, i.e., as an anthropo-techno-poietic dimension. I aim so at showing the relevance of Serres's thought to conceive, in a convergent perspective, a body, not to be strengthened, but to be normalized in its dimensionality, namely, a trans/posthuman body in a trans/posthumanist context.

Keywords: transhumanism, posthumanism, body, convergence, Michel Serres, *hominescence*

Introduction: Thinking of a Trans/Posthuman Body

Faced with the hardly negligible question/debate concerning the relationship between post- and trans-humanism, and their antagonism and/or possible convergence, I propose to consider/highlight the relevance of Michel Serres's thought (Abbas, 2005; Assad, 1999; Crahay, 1988; L'Yvonnet & Frémont, 2010; Rödel, 2016; Dolphijn, 2019; Watkin, 2020) for posthuman debates. It seems to me in particular that Serresian idea of bodily *hominescence* can be read as a suggestion of convergence of post- and trans-humanism, towards a non-anthropocentric and transhumanist posthumanism. In this perspective I take into consideration the idea of the body as precisely both transhumanism's (Bostrom, 2005; Moravec, 1988; Blake, Molloy, & Shakespeare, 2012; Clark, 2003; Jones & Whitaker, 2009; Barilan, 2006) and posthumanism's (Hayles, 1999; Badmington, 2003; Wolfe, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; 2017; 2019; Nayar, 2013; Marchesini, 2018; 2019; Ferrando, 2019; Alaimo, 2010) crucial node, in that it seems to mark a major front of divergence between them: while transhumanism conceives the body as a tool in the hands of a human eventually able to get rid of it, posthumanism understands it as a potential, place and flywheel of hybridization with other than human, and therefore ground of building the human (dimension).

Drawing on a theoretical reservoir such as Serres's reflection, and specifically the idea of the hominescent body as totipotent, i.e., virtual (from the Latin *virtus*/possibility), I however, for my part, feel to argue a convergence between such transhumanist and posthumanist positions.

Taking virtuality as an "operational concept" likely capable of inducing convergence, I grasp/read the idea of bodily virtuality as a catalyst and/or convergence focus of post- and trans-humanism. Following Serres's argument that, due to its virtuality, the body, although always involved in (technological) hybridization processes, is difficult (i.e., in excess) to be artificially re-produced and reduced to information, I find myself able to read the body itself (re-)invested, by means of a technology intended as an "autonomous" and infiltrative agent, of a dimensional role as hybridizer (and in this sense "normalized"). That is to say that, thanks to virtuality, I think I may consider the body as a meeting ground between "trans-" and "post-" "component", in the sense that technological intervention is no longer an improvement/enhancement of the body itself, but a hybridizing event not implying dis-incarnation but rather restitution/restoration of body's *virtus*, namely, "normalization" of its "dimensional" value (precisely such, due eminently to hybridization with otherness within a process of technological infiltration).

Arguing, therefore, for an idea of a trans/posthuman body anthropo-de-centrally contaminated by technological processes "keeping" it in its dimensionality, I also take into consideration Serresian metaphor of the body as a trunk without branches with cultural cut twigs (Serres, 2003), which seems to me to effectively and "iconically" express this theme of the body as a focus and condition for meeting/exchange/hybridization, that is as human's anthropo-techno-poietic dimension (Rignani, 2018). Through these arguments therefore I highlight the relevance of Serresian thought in order to conceive, in a convergent perspective by means of the concept of body virtuality, a body to be "cured", not strengthened, namely, a body to be "normalized" in its potentiality (dimensionality): a trans/posthuman body in a non-anthropocentric and transhumanist posthumanism.

Michel Serres and Body's Virtuality

I'm convinced, as mentioned, of the possibility of finding/thinking a convergence between trans- and post-humanism precisely on the topic of the body, which has so far marked a clear gap between them; my

conviction is so to speak backed/stimulated/encouraged by Serres's arguments on body's virtuality, whose relevance I grasp and go to highlight.

In expressing/theorizing for now and for the future within the process of hominization an epochal "paradigm shift" (Serres, 2001; 2003; 2004; 2006a; 2006b) that gives place to a new human condition characterized by anthropocentrism decline, openness to otherness, cultural *mélange*, life extension, digital networks as new spaces of communication, diffusion of knowledge, new at par relationships with the world, Serres pays specific attention to the body, whose passage from the role of object/instrument to that of anthropological dimension, constitutive for the human, he argues.

At the height of his "synthetic philosophy" (Serres, 2019), theming precisely of the advent of an era in which the change in culture and practices (digital revolution etc.) has imposed new links (synthesis, for Serres, means union, bond, "bridge building") that have taken the pre-eminence *lato sensu* over the "analytical" tradition (analysis, as Serres says, etymologically means "division") (Serres, 2019)—nowadays partial and ineffective—, he coins the inchoative neologism *hominescence*. By it he means that now, for the first time in its history, the human does not inherit its condition but begins to build it by itself, and does it by entertaining new relationships, as well as with the world (become a subject of right) (Serres, 1990) and with its similar (in a virtual space that erases all kind of distances) (Serres, 2012), but especially with its own body, which, having abandoned its subordinate and instrumental role, assumes a cognitive and hybrid-cultural function, i.e., a dimensional value.

I can't help observing here that, although Serres has never openly faced the Posthuman debate, I feel I can read his philosophy of *hominescence* as a sort of conceptual catalyst of meaningful ideas in it (included the question of the relationship of trans and posthumanism): e.g., the theme of human change (effective change of human condition, change in the perception of it, theming/management of the change etc.), threshold of hybridization (of body and soul, cultures, human and other than human—nature, technology etc.—), human essentialist un-definability, criticism of any dualisms, monism, (anthropo)centrism, essentialisms, reductionisms, and, specifically, the issue of the body.

We have in fact, both in Serres and in Posthumanism, to deal with an idea of a mimetic-metamorphic-relational-transversal-hybrid-trans-itive (in transit) body, condition/ground of a knowledge as hybridization with otherness, and place of a psycho-physical flexibility, exchange (reception/projection), and inter-implication with other than human (Braidotti, 2013; 2019; Ferrando, 2019; Haraway, 1997; 2003; Marchesini, 2009; 2018; 2019; Serres, 1999; 2001; 2003; 2004; 2006a; 2014; 2015; 2017).

So much that, questions as: What can we do and not do without the body? What manipulations can we experience without it? What work can we do at a distance? (Serres, 2011, p. 140), they, for Serres and for the trans-posthuman debate, become unavoidable when faced with such a body, precisely characterizing both itself and—dimensionally—the human *in* and *through* largely technological hybridization processes, and inevitably finding itself immersed in a context in which communication networks master real time as well as global space and perform part or all of human activities, and where simulations and bodiless experience are progressively taking the field.

As known, in this regard, the transhumanist movement advances hypotheses of body's artificialisation, codification, informational reduction, dis-incarnation (such as mind uploading to a computer), in a post-organic, post-biological, and post-specific perspective. What in fact emerges from transhumanism is specifically the idea

of a technical/technological intervention capable of acting on the limits of life, and notably the exaltation of human tension to self-overcoming; so as that the biological body becomes a sort of burden from which to be freed, concretely (emancipation from the biological condition), or phylogenetically (emancipation from belonging to *Homo Sapiens*). In other words, the body, as mentioned, comes to be a sort of machine that the human, being able to improve and correct it, fully has, while waiting to definitively abandon it (Bostrom, 2005; Clark, 2003; Jones & Whitaker, 2009; Moravec, 1988; 1998).

Conversely, what emerges from the Posthuman debate, I repeat, is the idea of a body as a dynamic link of continuity between “inside” and “outside”, threshold for passage/mediation/transition, coextensive to the mind (and vice versa), and accomplice of technological regimes. Namely, the idea of a welcoming, projective, “invaded” (by technology etc.) and “extended” body, metamorphic interactive dynamics manifesting and shaping itself, and the human, by virtue of always, new encounters/hybridizations with otherness (Marchesini, 2019). This means precisely that, *due to* its transversality and metamorphism (virtuality, as Serres calls it), the body assumes a dimensional-anthropo-poietic role towards the human, i.e., a sort of unavoidability/irreducibility. (Paraphrasing Serres, one can indeed say that the body—and the human—is *not, but can*).

We, therefore, are faced with two body concepts that seems at first antagonistic: on the one hand, the transhumanist hypothesis of an instrument body (and of an instrument technology useful to strengthening body itself) which the human can also do without; and, on the other, the posthumanist concept of a “companion”, irreplaceable, dimensional body, infiltrated by an “agent” technology.

If however placed in a reaction effect with Serresian observations/positions, the (apparent) antagonism of transhumanist “affirmative” and posthumanist “negative” answer to the above questions may, as I said, undergo a “de-constructive” rethinking process, as well as a re-declaration. To this purpose, I take, as a sort of an operational concept, virtuality in the meaning in which Serres understands it, that is, virtue, potential existence, potentiality as the “essence” *by virtue of* which the plastic and metamorphic body bends, curves, adapts, transforms and deforms, in an explosion of hybrid relationships with the world. “Virtual”, “potential”, “possible”, in the sense of cause or quality, i.e., principles by which certain effects are produced, express, in fact, according to Serresian arguments, the virtue of the body (and of the human), that is, precisely, its “essence” as an ability to everything be, do, and become.

And precisely such a characterization of the human as maximizing the possibility/virtuality *in and by virtue of* a body-substrate/flywheel of every transformation constitutes an “excess” beyond the limits of any reproducibility and reducibility. In other words, the consideration of the body as totipotent, active at the origin of knowledge, bearer of intelligence, flywheel of hybridization/transformation leads to critically rethink its artificial simulation, reproduction/reproducibility, and substitutability; up to wonder: What can we do without it? And answer: Everything, except an essential residue!

So much so that Serres comes to an idea of it as what defines the extreme limits of what networks and software cannot achieve, even claiming for a “body supplement”, in order to counteract the bombardment of signals, images, messages, and information (Serres, 2011).

Otherwise said, what Serres aims at meaning is therefore an embodied virtual body that is a possible/potential (i.e., awaiting any metamorphosis) “made flesh”, a flesh, which, alone, for its part, is able to distinguish human from the machine (Serres, 2015). He speaks in other words of an “excess body”, a sort of adherence that resists messaging, an element of discrimination that makes the difference with respect to the

machine, to which therefore it is irreducible, as well as it is artificially irreproducible.

In short, involuntary but effectively theoretically converging with posthumanist positions, Serres themes, due to its virtuality, body's unavoidability, artificial irreproducibility, and technological irreducibility.

We are so faced with a "virtual embodied" *vs.* outcomes of dis-incarnation; is it, then, possible to conceive/derive a trans/posthuman body? I repeat that I'm convinced of yes, since this possibility lies in the idea of virtuality as virtue, that is, as the totality of potential constituting the "essence" of the body.

By such an idea, in my opinion, Serres opens, in fact, the way to consider technological intervention not as a body's improvement/strengthening, but rather as a restitution/restoration/keeping of its virtue/virtuality, that is as a normalization of its hybridizing/dimensional value. A value which, for its part, is such due eminently to the ability precisely to at par exchange and hybridization with otherness, in the context of a process of technological infiltration within which the technique is not an instrument of an anthropocentrically managed human enhancement, nor the body is a tool/object to be used and then eventually put aside.

This is how I speak of a trans/posthuman body, in which the "trans component" can be identified in the restoration/normalization, and the "post component" in the hybridizing/cultural, /cognitive/dimensional value. The body constitutes in fact the ground of "trans" and "post" encounter/convergence, since cure/improvement does not mean dis-incarnation but normalization of a dimensional value, within a process of technological hybridization/infiltration.

Conclusion: A Serresian Metaphor for Conceiving a Trans/Posthuman Body

If, as I'm convinced, due to its aspects of closeness to posthumanist positions, Serresian philosophy of bodily *hominescence* overall constitutes a valid catalyst of key posthumanist ideas as well as of possible convergences of posthumanism and transhumanism, I believe that the "metaphorical device"/"force field" put in place by Serres could be even more concretely effective in such an "operation".

It should be briefly noted here that metaphor is one of the "distinctive" features in Serresian thought, aiming, as mentioned, at finding/building *passages* and *bridges*. By its *passing through*, the bridge, in fact, symbolizes and realizes, for Serres, a *method*, which, in turn, is a term literally designating a road that *passes through*, i.e., a *crossing* (Serres, 2006a). So, the bridge is a symbol, but more importantly, the symbol, as well as the metaphor, the analogy, the allegory, and the example, is a bridge (between concrete and abstract etc.) (Serres, 2014; 2015). Therefore: not so much and/or just the way of the concept, but rather the metaphor, and the example; and—this is the case—not so much and/or just the concept of the body, but rather the "force field", the "bridge device" towards the body.

If the dynamism of "passages" more than binary, declarative logic is suitable for constructing a discourse on the human whose essential virtue is precisely the virtual, it's then inevitable that the question concerning the body does not consider just the concept of the body, but largely employs the metaphorical device; namely, it is not avoidable that such a question displaces the think-ability of the body in a metaphoric space of meaning translocation.

It is in fact by transferring meanings, by creating intuitive connections, and by opening to the possible that the metaphor clearly favors conceiving/understanding/representing the toti-potent body; and it's precisely to Serresian metaphor of the trunk without branches with cut cultural twigs that now I turn to more effectively express the thesis I have supported so far.

In ordering the theoretical-thematic plot in which he waves the idea of the virtual body, Serres supports his

vis metaphorica, in this case as moreover widely in his work, drawing from the vegetable context. That of the trunk is in fact a vegetable metaphor gravitating around the *tree*, a sort of “crossing word”, which, although not carrying some particular definition difficulties and belonging to daily vocabulary, still takes on in Serres a meaning quite singular in forming precisely an intersection of several tracks crossing his writings, a node from which his work continually starts and returns (Rodel, p. 142)¹.

In the case I’m considering Serres presents therefore a trunk in the curious condition of deprivation of branches and supply of cut (cultural) twigs. Otherwise said, the trunk has the “substantial” characteristics of the trunk itself, but in the state of absence of fronds and presence of (cultural) twigs. If then the trunk is tree supporting structure connecting roots and leaves as well as constituting the distinguishing element from shrubs, just as it is a temporal archive (circles), all this, here, it is precisely without those ramifications which together make up the crown, whose shape, moreover connected to environmental characteristics, specifies tree itself. And it is, as said, with small cultural cut branches.

So as that what the trunk returns is a body inter-implicating/exchanging/mixing “low” and “high”, and, in this sense, condition of possibility, (peculiar) element of peculiarity as well ontogenetic and phylogenetic time database. Furthermore, trunk’s lack of branches as deprivation of specialization/specification elements means that it is not fixed in specifications as it precedes/exceeds and potentially contains them all. Therefore, if the trunk, as such, is what distinguishes the tree from shrubs and without which the tree would not be such, it is in the lack of branches, namely in de-specialization, in-differentiation, and toti-potentiality. So, it happens that an indistinct trunk constitutes tree’s distinguishing element, that is, the totality of the possible constitutes the “essence” of the tree. The trunk *is not but can*, the tree *is not but can*, and, precisely, as such, emerges as the origin/condition of branches: poverty of specialization is wealth of possibilities (Serres, 1999).

The fact, then, that the trunk has no branches but just smallest scattered here and there cut twigs implies that it is “partially” present in individual branches, exceeding however overall; and, taking a step forward, means that, only by gathering all the branches it could be found as their virtual sum: behind branches “partiality” is in fact trunk “universality” (Serres, 2003). Otherwise said, the trunk potentially contains all the twigs as its partial objectifications in which, however, it does not specialize nor ends. Therefore, the trunk is the toti-potentiality of specializations, through whose variations, in a dynamism for which the greater the in-differentiation, the greater the branching, the greater the outsourcing, and the greater the in-differentiation, it remains the same.

So, what the metaphor ultimately conveys is a body that, although being crossed *by* and in exchange *with* things and the world, remains invariant, namely always undifferentiated, de-specialized, producing “objectifications” (cultural branches) in which it is precisely partially present but altogether exceeding; a body that is possible and, as such, dimension/condition of ever new possibilities/“cultural” differentiations.

In conclusion, I find Serres’s “casually posthumanist” reflection on *hominescence* a profitable theoretical reservoir/catalyst for conceiving and declining convergences between trans- and post-humanism, precisely on a topic of divergence par excellence such as that of the body. Serresian idea of (bodily) virtuality, which makes the body an irreducible and artificially irreproducible anthropo-poietic dimension, it emerges as the concept capable of operating convergence. It’s in fact through it that posthumanist bodily dimensionality and

¹ For example, Serres understands arborescence as figure of evolution, and reads history of thought through an analogy between blossoming of the twig with the stem and emergence of cultural novelty (Serres, 2004).

transhumanist instrumentality/enhancement/overcoming come to converge in “normalization”, intended as a restoration/keeping of potentiality and dimensionality of the body in the context of “cultural” (technological etc.) hybridization processes.

So, thanks to Serresian metaphorical/conceptual thinking is now possible to speak of a Trans/Posthuman body in a Trans/Posthumanist context.

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