

Opinion

from Prof. Amelia Licheva, Dr. Habil., Sofia University, Literary Theory

Department

on the habilitation monograph of Senior Assistant Prof. Dr. Natalia Hristova,
entitled: “Transhumanism and the future of teaching (literature)”

The text under review meets all requirements of a habilitation monograph: a topic relatively underexplored in a Bulgarian context, analyticity, a personal take on the issues at hand, an impressive list of references, as well as indisputable relevance in that it can serve not just as an authored monograph, but also as a textbook for students of language and literature and further afield.

This study focuses on the genesis of transhumanism, its relationship with the cyber culture that went before it, as well as the medicalisation of life in general and education in particular. In and of itself, this issue is rather topical and, if I may underscore this once again, underresearched in a Bulgarian context. In the light of this, it is extremely valuable to have all those references to preeminent authorities, texts and papers, painting a relatively full picture of the current state of the art. What is more, it is fair to say that this text is imbued with futuristic ideas, appealing to various major theories of the future and describing a world which promises to be radically different from anything that we have seen.

One cannot help but notice that this text was conceived and created with a reliance on sources and ideas unaffected by the pandemic, since the Covid crisis has somewhat undermined and dampened the enthusiasm of futurologists, demonstrating that we live in a world which had set its sights on immortality and as it were was convinced of eternity, but it has given it all up all too quickly, failing to come to grips with its day-to-day existence or with death in the face of imminent danger. This observation is no criticism of the text under review. Rather, it is aimed to engage indirectly in a debate with the authors whom Natalia Hristova

cites, as well as to make a claim that many contemporary philosophers, including those who talk about transhumanism, actually argue against its ideas. Luc Ferry, whom the author refers to, is likewise one of them.

A great deal of the criticism and debate engendered by transhumanism has to do with the question of immortality. Quite apart from religious arguments, some of the objections are directed at the problems which immortality could conceivably bring with it. Earth would become overpopulated, having children would be rendered pointless, as well as impossible, since no one would die. As critics of transhumanism point out, it is highly likely that such an immortal humanity would be faced with the question of famine at the very least. With immortality on the agenda, we would have many more questions to answer – would humans have motivation to work, or motivation to act altogether in the first place, and what would happen to human beings if they lost their sense of finiteness and transience, which philosophy believes to be a defining feature of human nature. In view of this, it would not be amiss to refer back to the ideas of philosophers such as Francis Fukuyama, Michael Sandel and Jürgen Habermas. I would like to dwell on Fukuyama's ideas fleshed out in *The End of History and the Last Man*, as well as in *Our Posthuman Future*. According to him, tampering with humans' biological makeup would herald the end of humans themselves. He is convinced that human nature is fundamental to our understanding of justice, ethics and welfare; and if biotechnology inevitably enters human life, all those categories will inevitably change as well. In view of this, Fukuyama makes a plea that we should maintain "the natural order of things".

Through the various points she makes, Natalia Hristova implicitly argues that technologising human nature can trigger a shift in the moral self-awareness of humankind, which is the big issue. Especially interesting are her observations on medicalisation and the complex relationships between doctors and patients,

parents and children, as well as those eugenic self-transformations which undermine the normatively structured forms of human life.

It is also worth highlighting the debate on the future of education, its medicalisation, the presence or absence of literature and the humanities in it, the absence of sustainable knowledge, commodifying education and the question whether traditional education will become useless – all of those are matters that seem even more topical in today's context.

In view of the merits outlined above, as well as the author's detailed and meaningful analysis, showcasing her impressive erudition and reasoning skills, I wholeheartedly vote in favour of awarding Senior Assistant Prof. Dr. Natalia Hristova the academic title of associate professor.

Prof. Amelia Licheva, Dr. Habil.