COMMENTARY

The Concept of Property Between Technology, Anthropology and Ontology

Giacomo Pezzano[1]

Abstract

The article *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status: a philosophy of technology approach to the moral consideration of artificial intelligence* questions the anthropology of properties commonly assumed in philosophical discussions about the relationship between humans and technologies and the attribution of moral status. By beginning to develop the possible link between the ontology of properties and the anthropological question aptly outlined by that contribution, this short commentary suggests that the adoption of a truly relational or non-proprietary approach in the philosophy of technology seems at once necessary and challenging. For, on the one hand, it represents a response to the demands posed by information technologies; on the other it seems to call into question some of our deeply ingrained habits of thought.

Keywords Properties · Dispositionalism · Structuralism · Anthropological models · Philosophical Anthropology

This text is a commentary of the article *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status: a philosophy of technology approach to the moral consideration of artificial intelligence*. As a starting point, I summarise the 'relational turn' at its core in three main claims:

– *C1*. The traditional, proprietary conceptions of human being as defined by the exclusive possession of a given X, which also justifies its exceptional moral status, should be questioned.
– *C2*. Human beings and technologies are to be understood relationally, not as two separate entities with predetermined properties.
– *C3*. Moral status should be reconsidered both as relational and as grounded in the properties of human being/technologies.

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These claims are relevant not only because of their contents, but also, and perhaps especially, because they are supported in an original way, combining several approaches from the philosophy of technology and considering the influence of the concrete socio-technical context on how we conceptualise our relationship with technologies. In this way, *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*'s arguments give a new and more solid foundation to what has also been highlighted by authors such as Gilbert Simondon, Gotthard Günther and Paul Watzlawick: the latter argued, for example, that thanks to cybernetic technoscience we can begin to insist not on the characteristics of separated elements, but rather on their interactions, promoting a shift "from the individual to the *relationship between* individuals as a phenomenon sui generis" that even challenges "the tradition of occidental thinking", based on the "monadic concept" of subjects/objects, which is reflected "in the structure of Indo-European languages" and constitutes "the foundation of classical logic" (Watzlawick, 1990, pp. 12, 14–15).

Yet, this is exactly where things get rough: to what extent can *C1-C3* actually be supported and developed if they challenge the same ground of our Western thinking? Such a problem can be further clarified by insisting on the promising approach outlined in the last section of *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*, whose merit is to show how considering (a) the ontology of properties can help in mapping and elaborating (b) the anthropological question. I thus present some general aspects of (a) in § 1 and their possible applications to (b) in § 2, before returning to *C1-C3* in § 3.

1 Ontology and Properties

Assuming that the world consists of objects that have certain properties, one of the most important classifications of fundamental properties distinguishes between *categorical* properties [*Cp*] and *dispositional* properties [*Dp*]. *Cp* are intrinsic, referring to what something is like, the essential qualities of its being; *Dp* are powers, expressing a certain kind of behaviour: a sheet of paper is rectangular (*Cp*) and tearable (*Dp*). In particular, *Dp* are less than necessity and more than contingency as they *tend* towards their manifestation: a disposition is a given capacity, a kind of readiness that an entity has to perform specific kinds of behaviour under specific kinds of conditions (if I am angry, then the tearable sheet can actually be torn). In this framework, the debate is about:

- Do we have *Cp* + *Dp*, or just *Cp/Dp*?
- Do we have bearers + *Cp/Dp*, or just properties?

According to Vetter, (2015, pp. 23–24, 11), for example, the world is ordered by a relation of "objective grounding" in which "the more fundamental grounds the less fundamental"; objects thus ground properties: the world consists of individual things that have properties, so that *Dp* – as well as *Cp* – are anchored to objects, "realistically respectable bits of the world". It is the traditional idea that properties cannot float freely, but need some-thing to bear them, i.e. an entity

to which they can belong: every predicate needs a subject, according to the 'S is P/P belongs to S' model that structures our logic, ontology and metaphysics. Significantly, even the pandispositionalists who claim that we only have *Dp*, emphasise that this does not necessarily mean that *everything* is a power: properties are all powerful, but they are carried by some kind of bearer (Anjum & Mumford, 2018, p. 8). We need a substratum, to explain both the 'change + permanence' of an object and the numerical distinction between two particulars with the same properties. In short, no accidents without substances.

Nevertheless, not everyone agrees with such a view. On the one hand, the idea of the extrinsicity and dependence of *Dp*, i.e., their context sensitivity and openness, can be taken so far as not only to reduce all properties to *relations* [*Rp*], but also to claim that there is no such thing *as a thing*, i.e. a substance-bearer: there are no self-subsistent individuals with properties, but only structures, i.e. we have *Rp* all the way down (Ladyman & Ross, 2007, pp. 130, 228–229, 242–243). Strictly speaking, if there are only *Rp*, then we have no properties, since their existence makes one with that of the bearer: we are "constrained logico-linguistically" (French, 2014, p. 97) to speak of substantival individuals acting as property-bearers, but they are a mere illusion. On the other hand, the problem is that a bearer by itself, without all its properties, seems to be a nothing, as Russell, (1995, p. 120) had already pointed out: a bare particular conceived as a subject in which qualities inhere runs the risk of becoming "a mere unknowable substratum, or an invisible peg from which properties would hand like hams from the beams of a farmhouse". Here again we face the constraints of our "subject-predicate logic", which depends for its convenience "upon the fact that at the usual temperatures of the earth there are approximately permanent 'things'", but "this would not be true at the temperature of the sun, and is only roughly true at the temperatures to which we are accustomed" (Russell, 1995, p. 179). Briefly, the existence of separate and countable substances becomes a myth (Seibt, 1996).

And yet, if indeed "our mammalian brain, our sensory apparatus, our Indo-European language, and our Western culture by their very nature 'cosify' (i.e., hypostatize or reify) the world, organising it like a Lego" (Floridi, 2020, pp. 28–30), then the more reasonable solution – even for a truly convinced relationalist – is to accept that "entities and structures, relata and relations, simply co-exist as a package" (Floridi, 2011, p. 354). The 'S + P' combination still reigns, even if it is seen as an unfortunate necessity: if you really want to, it is 'bearers + relational properties' all the way down. Abandoning the 'S + P' setting would be tantamount to abandoning the "distinctness-thesis" (Molnar, 2003, p. 181), thus, to ask about the number of things, which seems to imply the claim that all subjects are vague and that the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals is invalid: a route that looks really discouraging (Berto & Tagliabue, 2014). In fact, this would lead us to lose any possibility of distinguishing not only between different things, but also between different properties: a relation (or a disposition) should still be *a particular one*, about *this rather than that* – no matter how open, contextual, etc.

2 Anthropology and Properties

Of course, the ontological debate is far more nuanced and articulated than this brief reconstruction; nevertheless, it suffices to sketch at least three general anthropological views – conceived as a spectrum going from the more essentialist position to the less essentialist one: we have a) bearer + *Cp* [*b* + *Cp*], b) bearer + *Dp* [*b* + *Dp*], and c) relations without bearer [*R*].

a) *b* + *Cp* is the classical substantialist approach, which seems to be particularly challenged by *C1-C3*: human being is the (exclusive) bearer of one/several essential, intrinsic and fundamental properties. These determinate and static qualities can be 'spiritual', such as rationality, linguisticity, sociality, etc. (*zoon logon echon/politikon*), or 'physical', such as dexterity, instrumentality, technicity, etc. (*homo faber/maker*); however, they define a specificity which almost automatically leads to a *speciality*. In short, what is properly human is borne only by humans, elevating them to the lonely top of the pyramid of beings.

b) *b* + *Dp* can be seen as a combination of Aristotle's *dynamis* and Marx's *Gattungswesen* (cf. Vadée, 1992) and probably finds its best formulation in Nussbaum's capability approach (e.g. Nussbaum, 2006), which is a particular form of *dispositional essentialism*. Nussbaum enucleates a set of properties which are both thick, i.e. inherent in all human beings and expressing their dignity, and vague, i.e. dynamic and determinable: *being able to* live, have good health, move freely, imagine, think, decide, etc. These properties must be exercised, specified, declined and interpreted in different ways, according to social and individual needs, desires, preferences, etc. In short, human properties are context-dependent and relatively open, since they can also be participable by other beings, but they remain anchored all together in *this* subject.

c) *R* takes the idea of multi-potentiality, multi-ductility, multi-ability, multi-flexibility, etc. to the extreme consequences (e.g. Floridi, 2016). Its most emblematic representative is perhaps Pico della Mirandola (2012), for whom the human creature is an indeterminate chameleon, a Proteus capable of assuming any kind of form, as it has no specific property at all: it has "nothing wholly its own" but has "a share in the particular endowment of every other creature". This combination of indeterminacy and lack of inherent properties defines the 'scarcity principle' which was at the heart of the paradigm of twentieth century German philosophical anthropology, culminating in Gehlen's "deficient being", Plessner's "eccentric positionality", and Scheler's "world-openness". In short, since it has no given properties, human indefinite 'being' is entirely hetero-referential: it is exposition all the way down.

But this is precisely where the difficulties begin. *First* (cf. also *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*), not only could negative characteristics still be regarded as properties, but indeterminacy itself can be sustained by some property (like free will in Pico's chameleon). For this reason, Sloterdijk, (2016, pp. 651–662), for example, reverses the austere perspective of *homo pauper* affirming an 'abundancy principle' for which human being should rather be seen as "a luxury being" having a fortune to manage. *Secondly*, to what extent do the

relationships that engage human beings depend on human properties or do they themselves consist in some kind of human properties? Do they presuppose – to put it mildly – a relatable human being, viz., a human being that bears the property of relationality? For this reason, Adorno, (1973, p. 124), for example, has described the thesis that "man is 'open'" as "empty", arguing that it would pass off "its *fallissement*" as "its definite and positive side": it promises to "establish a peculiarly majestic anthropology", but in the end "it vetoes any anthropology". It seems really hard to give up the idea of an anthropological substratum bearing some kind of anthropological properties – just as it is hard to understand entities in purely relational terms more generally.

3 Philosophy *through* Technology

Now we can return to *C1-C3*. As for *C1* in particular, whilst there are good reasons – both theoretical and ethical – to question the $b + Cp$ model (humans are defined by their fixed nature), it is not so clear whether the same is true for the $b + Dp$ model (humans express some capabilities), and the *R* model (humans are shaped by relations) seems as attractive as it is problematic – not to mention the possibility of some kind of 'mixed model'. As for *C2* and *C3* in particular, the "hybrid approach" advocated by *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status* aims to integrate a relational account and the proprietary paradigm in an appropriate way, and offers a first attempt in this direction; however, it risks treating relations as an alternative to properties rather than as a kind of property, in contrast to what generally happens in ontology, where the discussion is about whether relations are – for example – internal or external to their terms, exactly *as properties*.

Admittedly, such oscillations do not simply reveal a limit in *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*'s argument: rather, they are related to the immaturity of both the literature on moral status (as the author also emphasises) and – I add – the debate on anthropological properties in general, which nowadays have given very little weight to the analysis of the concept of property and its implications. Moreover, the formulation of a similar analysis with a more specific 'techno-anthropological' intention could contribute to the development of *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*'s proposal, for example, in two ways – at least ideally: it could make it possible to consider a new additional anthropological criterion, according to which anthropological models also differ in what kind of properties (*Cp/Dp/Rp*) are attributed to humans and/or technologies; it could consolidate the conceptualisation of the three criteria – for example, enriching the classification of the types of relations between humans and technologies both ontologically (*Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*'s first criterion) and practically (*Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*'s third criterion).

Finally, I hope that this hybrid, 'onto-anthropological' line of research can be strengthened and refined in the future by following the path opened by *Anthropological crisis or crisis in moral status*, to explore how – as the article itself suggests – interaction with digital technologies and AI allows and even forces us to

exercise new habits of thought. This is the way forward to develop a philosophy not just 'about' or 'of' technology, but truly *through* it.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This is an observational study: no ethical approval is required.

Competing Interests The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Consent to Participate Not applicable (the research did not involve human subjects).

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