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## Book Review

Marchesini, R. (2021). *The Virus Paradigm. A Planetary Ecology of the Mind* (S. De Sanctis, Trans.), Cambridge University Press, 2021, 75 pages. ISBN: 9781108965811

Reviewed by Pablo a Marca<sup>1</sup>

In *The Virus Paradigm*, Roberto Marchesini identifies the multiple connotations that the word *virus* has acquired in the 21st century and connects them to questions of ontology, focusing on the role that humans play in relation to their environment. Beyond the biological understanding of the word *virus*, there are multiple metaphorical meanings that are operative, from viral materials on the internet to the mind as a virus of the human body. Marchesini takes an environmentalist approach by focusing on the analogy that drives the whole book: viruses are to living beings what humans are to the planet. In several respects, the analogy seems to hold, making *virus* a paradigmatic way of conceptualizing relationships between humans and the non-human world. However, Marchesini shows how humans are not just a disease of the planet but relational beings that depend on other entities in order to share the same space on the Earth. Like viruses, humans need a host, though they do not necessarily need to exploit it before they move on to another space. A planetary rather than an exclusively anthropocentric perspective is therefore needed to address the ethical and political issues that are at stakes in what is called the Anthropocene epoch.

Written during and partly about the Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, Marchesini's book takes the current political situation as a chance to reflect on the possible causes and responsibilities behind the pandemic, and the larger effects of humanity on the Earth. That is why he begins with climate change and other anthropogenic misuses of the land—for example, deforestation and the consequent pastures or monocultures for fodder—rather than from Covid-19. He is cautious about using the word “Anthropocene” because it sets apart humans and the rest of the world, portraying humans as an external force acting on the biosphere. On the contrary, by taking into consideration the different times that are involved in planetary changes, what humans have done to the Earth shows a deep interconnectedness among all living entities. Climate change and the sixth mass extinction do not only target those who suffer directly; the consequences will be felt by all remaining species well, as they become disconnected from the biocenotic relationships that regulate the planet. This is the reason why humans must be considered within the same self-regulating mechanisms of the Earth. To show this, Covid-19 is a perfect case in point. The pandemic has emphasized, not created, problems that directly impact humans: “the destruction of the environment, the demographic boom, the speed of movement and inequalities” (p.17). Therefore, the book seeks to intervene in the field of ecocriticism and environmental studies rather than that of epidemiology,

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providing a philosophical and ethical reflection on how the pandemic can help humans reconceptualize their role on the Earth. The solution, Marchesini argues, lies in letting anthropocentrism go and taking a posthumanist perspective. “The anthropocentric assumption,” he writes, “traces a clear distinction between the human being and everything else, placing our species above nature, so that no dependencies, sharing or hybridization is possible” (p.50). Other philosophers before Marchesini have raised a similar point, arguing that human and non-human, as well as culture and nature, are not separate but always already connected (Haraway, 2016; Braidotti, 2019). Marchesini’s innovation, in his previous works (e.g. Marchesini, 2017) but reframed in the context of the pandemic here, focuses on hybridity: because all living beings are relational, they evolve through processes of imitation and hybridization, leading to homeostasis. Therefore, if humans want to address the problems that Covid-19 has brought to the surface, including but not limited to climate change, they must start from a deep reassessment of the way that, ontologically, humans and other species are constructed. Only then can all living beings attempt to work towards a new equilibrium.

Marchesini opens the book with the analogy between viruses and humans that characterizes the rest of the text: “If life on Earth . . . were an organism, we should now take a seat at its bedside and understand that we are the disease that is killing it” (pp.3–4). In many of the contexts in which Marchesini discusses this analogy, it seems to prove true. Viruses need a host to survive, then are transmitted to other hosts; similarly, “the nomadic habits of human beings lead them to massively exploit one territory, only to abandon it to move on to the next” (p.5). Not properly organisms, viruses are entities at the edge of life; according to the humanist view, humans too are beyond a merely biological definition of life, setting them apart from other living beings.

Technology plays a great role in the discourse around humans and the planet. If climate change risks hurting humans, a common response among certain scholars, particularly the trend that takes the name of transhumanism, is that technology will eventually help humans overcome their biological limits. In life extension and mind upload narratives, the human body is seen as a faulty organism that needs to be surpassed in order to ascertain the survival of the species. The logic of the virus operates in this conception, as it considers the mind as a sort of virus that can navigate multiple bodies until they are exhausted. As Marchesini writes: “The virus paradigm thus becomes a model that lends itself to transmit the concept of ‘inhabiting the body,’ which presupposes not recognizing oneself, except in part, in one’s own flesh” (p.40). The answer lies instead in the opposite, that is, in recognizing and accepting that the mind is inseparable from the body. Covid-19 is a reminder of this condition, as it causes both physical and psychological problems, highlighting humans’ vulnerability and dependency on what surrounds them.

To counter the transhumanist logic, Marchesini proposes posthumanism as a viable philosophical alternative to start thinking about the position that humans occupy in the world. Posthumanism reintroduces animality into the definition of the human, not as a return to an originary state, but as the acknowledgment of a trait that has always been there, and that humanist thought has tried to ignore. Because of this, humans and all other living entities are related to each other, cohabitating the same planet, a principle that should drive all discussions about the environment. If this position were to be adopted, then “a real ontological conversion, capable of rediscovering the human being as relationship and participation” (p.54), would be established. Humans are like viruses because they need the Earth to survive,



but viruses do not only possess negative traits. On the contrary, they are essential to living beings' survival, suggesting that humans are not simply a disease, but they can also contribute to the good of all living creatures.

While Marchesini's discussion is persuasive, and his constant return to the human–virus analogy constitutes a seminal *fil rouge* throughout the book, what remains unclear from his elaboration is how to translate the philosophical understanding of the virus paradigm into the realm of politics. Other posthumanist thinkers have called for a similar ontological conversion, arguing that such a philosophical position should also be a form of praxis (Braidotti, 2019; Ferrando, 2019). Promoting the type of relationality that Marchesini advances using the logic of the virus seems a promising new alternative to addressing the problems that arise from seeing the human as separate from the rest. It is certainly not a mere speculative move, as Marchesini supports his argument with several examples, from biology to the social sciences, but there is still a grey area that remains unexplored. Put differently, the unanswered question about this ontological conversion regards the changes in epistemology and, consequently, on how to effectively enact the virus paradigm in a positive way on a political level, changing the neoliberal drives that contributed to the devastating impact of human activity on Earth, on human as well as non-human entities. Overall, the book almost seems to call for a sequel that starts exactly with this new ontological understanding of the human, applied first to Covid-19 and how governments responded to the pandemic, and then extended to climate change and the social battles that have characterized so far the 21st century.

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