

Posthumanism: A Fickle Philosophy?

Steven Umbrello

Correspondance: steve@ieet.org

Steven Umbrello is the Managing Director of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies and a researcher at the Global Catastrophic Risk Institute with research interests in explorative nanophilosophy, the design psychology of emerging technologies and the general philosophy of science and technology.

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Abstract: Defining posthumanism as a single, well-oriented philosophy is a difficult if not impossible endeavour. Part of the reason for this difficulty is accounted by posthumanism's illusive origins and its perpetually changing hermeneutics. This short paper gives a brief account of the ecological trend in contemporary posthumanism and provides a short prescription for the future of posthumanist literature and potential research avenues.

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1. Introduction

Posthumanism is a fickle philosophy, mostly due to its illusive origins and more so as a result of its multiple instantiations and interpretations (Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism"). In general, it can be diluted to the decentering of the 'human' from the privileged place that classical theology and the long philosophical history handed down from Plato has traditionally positioned it (Sorgner, "Pedigrees"; Sapp, *Genesis*).

This paper, however, does not seek to explicate exactly what posthumanism is, what characterizes its many interpretations, or how and why it has emerged. There have been a great many scholars who have already undertaken this task and have consequentially provided thorough, albeit sometimes obtuse, studies. In staying with the theme of this journals special issue this short paper instead seeks to look at what the current state of scholarship actually is, with the hopes of showing the reader some initial indications of where posthumanist scholarship is trending towards, and perhaps even give a normative account of where scholarship *should* go.

2. Where We Have Been and Where We Are

Nailing down precisely what posthumanism is a difficult, if not foolhardy endeavour. Because the term has been appropriated by various fields including critical studies, philosophy, anthropology and sociology—among others—the various instantiations for which the term has been used similarly differs. Not only this, but it has and still does change over time. As such, proponents of the term, as well as detractors (Fuller "Preparing for Life"), have disseminated its various meanings by providing genealogical accounts of its origin,¹ adjudications of its theoretical strength,² applications to various

¹ See Wolfe 2009; Sorgner 2014; Franssen 2014.

² See Ferrando 2013; Herbrechter 2013; Hook 2004.

fields,³ and themes and means by which it can be bolstered against attack.⁴

As such, the majority of these works are explicative, aiming to clarify its meaning and usually providing an initial attempt to illustrate the societal, cultural, technological, etc. implications that the adoption of a posthumanist philosophy can entail. The structure of these works take similar strides in that they typically begin with a critique of humanism and the influence post-Kantian philosophy with particular emphasis to explicate the concept of ‘correlationism’ that was coined by Quentin Meillassoux in his ground-breaking, and highly critiqued treatise *After Finitude: an Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (Meillassoux). Unlike these topical texts, I will detract and not provide the typical account of correlationism and instead allow the reader to explore the topic on their own.

The theoretical foundation of posthumanism—particularly that of contemporary posthumanism—although confusing and clouded in jargon and obscurantism entails what has been called ‘ecological thinking’ and the ground-breaking philosophical move of flattening ontology (Morton *Humankind*; Morton *The Ecological Thought*; Latour *Facing Gaia*; Latour *We Have Never Been Postmodern*; Haraway *Staying with the Trouble*). What exactly does this mean? It means that ‘humanity’ as such is a fragile concept—or even one that is illusory—built upon false notions of the necessity of human cognitive superiority. When humanity is decentered, both from the universe’s centre (as Copernicus suggested) and from the biosphere (as Darwin argued) then the special place that humanity endowed itself becomes tender and easy to bruise (Caffo *Fragile Umanità*).

Ecological thinking becomes the natural consequence of this decentering, this movement towards the fringes of thought. Nonhuman animals and other forms of life come into the fold on an equal ontological basis as a consequence of the removal of the human ontological pedestal. Speciesism becomes nothing other than a tool of economy that drives the humanistic conceits embedded in the hypocritical infrastructures and techniques, and is thus an ethical choice. The inconvenient truths that there no longer exist any good reasons to massacre millions of animals becomes apparent and imminent. As such, the most authentic starting point for ontology is a flattened one, one in which animality is equal for all life forms, not one that begins with human superiority. Thus, what it entails is the reclamation of animality, not the creation of it.

3. Living on the Edge Together

Otherness and strangeness become the norm in this philosophical revision. As the anthropocentric organization of space and being-centre is abandoned, because of it is *a priori* non-existence, then the ontology of everything exists in a de-centred and peripheral way. This feeling of estrangement becomes the foundation for contemporary posthumanism. The centre is necessarily empty, and the periphery, the edge, becomes crowded with a multitude of life and phenomenologies.

It is here, on the fringes that the ecological thought is born, one where the understanding and assembly of non-anthropocentric space can be undertaken, one with biodiversity as a central tenet. This peripheral-being is one that is necessarily connected and enmeshed in ecosystems that are greater than the whole (Morton *Dark Ecology*). This means that the current trend towards posthumanism in the ecological thought is one of a story of rebirth, a rebirth in which the human form itself changes as a necessary step of moving from the inside of the circle to the outside, it is the

³ See Welsch 2017; Bendle 2002; Gray 2001.

⁴ See Sorgner 2014; Umbrello 2018.

only way to survive the self-induced ecological crisis.

We as humans can change our substantial forms; we do not have a particular relation to *being* nor does *being belong* to us. This means that humanity must abandon Western absolutism in favour of a new role, a role *among* many, one in the fringe; it is here where humans can continuously change their role. As such, temptations to create a new circle in the fringes must be abated in exchange for an understanding of the infinite connections among peripheral beings (Haraway, "Manifesto").

Anthropocentric morality must likewise be abandoned. Our new habitat on the fringes is one with clear sight of a damaged planet, one in ecological crises. This truth becomes remarkably apparent when a species (humans in this case) radically destabilize its own survival. This crisis provides a fermentation ground for the posthumanist to be birthed. Body-Oriented ethics becomes the most obvious here, one in which the subject does not exceed the limits and rights of the body of other, without consent, except when this excessiveness is necessary (i.e., self-preservation).

Similar to the philosophies of Singer and Deleuze, the body becomes the boundary of inviolability of moral actions (Singer *The Expanding Circle*; Singer *On Comparing the Value*; Deleuze *Spinoza*). The environment that houses humans is in crisis as a result of an ethics that is blind to the bodies of others. A posthumanist understanding of this does not discriminate sex, ethnicity, or the preference of the individual. Being-in-the-world naturally, and always, potentially implicates a certain level of violence. As such, this implicates all life-forms as a part of a single painting; an assemblage of systems and nodes.

A body-oriented ethics then is the adaptive mechanisms (to use evolutionary terminology) that posthumanism levies to be-in-the-world with other forms of life and to heal a damaged planet. Other life is incommensurable!

4. Where do we go from here?

This 'opening up' of animality and the ontological continuity with animals and nature, and the 'closing down' of anthropocentrism and human superiority is the pinnacle of current posthumanist scholarship. Strong philosophical, sociological and anthropological arguments are being forwarded and developed to dethrone human superiority from its once privileged place. The implications of this are both critical and vast, but not widely adopted. We have begun to understand the truth of our place, our misguided effects on nonhuman animals and the environment and the self-started road to self-destruction. Yet, we nonetheless continue to traverse this course; we live in a time of self-indulgent hypocrisy.

Posthumanist works are undoubtedly crucial given their foundational nature, but what is also unquestionable is their failure to disseminate these ideas to a popular audience. Posthumanist notions of repair and harmonization are founded on universal struggles towards these desirable futures and away from those that have and are causing devastation. These essential works remain burdened by their overuse of metaphor, narrative and lack of clear and actionable ethics.

The future paradigms of posthumanist research are explicit: how do we make posthumanism, its writings, ideas and implications clear and operable to as many people as possible outside of academe and learned readers? I do not attempt to give an answer about how such an endeavour should be undertaken, that is the goal of further research projects.

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