

Human Precarity and Posthuman Ontology in the Anthropocene

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Abstract: Posthumanism as an ontological philosophy contemplates the nature of reality and existence, and the notions of being and becoming in a techno-modified world. Posthumanism displaces man from his privileged position as the master of his universe and generates multiplicity of interpretations and theoretical perspectives. Technological and evolutionary theories of human enhancement and radical life-extension, constructed around the idea of the posthuman, position man firmly within his material milieu where he co-habits with other non-human life forms. The traditional notion of the human body as a sacrosanct entity has given way to the concept of the human as an embodied and embedded being. Technological posthumanism debilitates the grand narrative of anthropocentrism and celebrates plurality, hybridity and diversity as the defining traits of future humanity. In the age of the Anthropocene, humans have evolved into a geological force directly influencing and determining the fate of millions of non-human species. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of the corporeal frame hastening our march towards the posthuman era as we seek ways to transcend the limitations of our body with the aid of technology. The proposed paper tries to understand how the pandemic has reconstituted traditional notions of the corporeal self, human subjectivity and identity in the age of the Anthropocene. The paper would also consider technology as an ontological manifestation, in the specific context of the pandemic, focusing on its potential to re-engineer 'human' in anticipation of the posthuman future.

Keywords: posthuman, Anthropocene, pandemic, precarity, subjectivity, agency

Posthumanism, as an ontological philosophy subsists at the convergence of post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, remapping the contours of human thought and framing contemporary human existence in relation to the existential prospects of modern technology.

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Enlightenment Humanism, with its commitment to the notion of the centrality of the human, was unequivocally based on the primacy of the human being as an autonomous, intelligent, moral and rational entity bequeathed with a transcendental consciousness. Western modernity is founded on the principles of physical and intellectual perfectibility and moral superiority of the human species perfected by Enlightenment humanism. Poststructuralist and postmodern scholarship is non Anthropocentric and repudiates the humanistic claim of 'Man' as the measure of all things and the pinnacle of God's creation. The cultural and literary theories of the 20th century investigated the nature and scope of the concept of the 'human' placing it in the larger context of the new body politics ushered in by monumental developments in science and technology studies. Emerging technologies, especially in the field of Artificial Intelligence and Biogenetics, have challenged the conception of the human as an exclusive, organic, and autonomous entity. Technological mediation destabilizes the notion of the human, and reconceptualises the human as a hybrid entity which critical posthumanism adopts as its point of departure from Enlightenment humanism.

The twin movements of Transhumanism and Posthumanism arose visibly in the later decades of the 20th century. With its definitive roots in the Enlightenment ideals of the human, Transhumanism seeks a radical transformation of the human condition with the aid of emerging and converging technologies of the time. Posthumanism generated out of postmodernism and recognises human alterities and acknowledges the potential of technology to augment and enhance human capabilities. Rosi Braidotti (2019, xi) in her Preface to *Philosophical Posthumanism* defines the posthuman as a "convergence phenomenon between post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism ... the critique of the universal ideal of the Man of reason on the one hand and the reject of species supremacy on the other". Posthumanism deconstructs the critical dichotomy of the human and the non-human, the organic and the synthetic, the natural and the artificial. "What comes to the fore instead is a human/nonhuman continuum which is consolidated by pervasive technological mediation", remarks Braidotti (Ibid., xiv).

Posthumanism offers a non-hierarchical perspective which negates the primacy of the human. Ferrando (2019, 2) points out that the "onto-epistemological openness of Posthumanism is placed in a hybrid vision of humanity." where alterity is recognized and acknowledged. Advances in cybernetics and biogenetics have influenced posthumanist

enquiry into making critical foray into the realm of the mutable, the configured, the embedded and the embodied. Invasive technology has blurred the distinction between the human and the non-human, as the body is constantly reconfigured to challenge and transcend the limitations of the corporeal frame. As a post-anthropocentric philosophy, posthumanism recognises and acknowledges interspecies interconnectedness and interdependence. It decenters the human in cultural and critical discourses and reflects upon the possibilities of a hybrid identity for the human race concomitant with the technological developments of the current century. It seeks to understand the human in relation to his own species, in relation to other non-human species and entities and also in relation to his environment and the techno-cultural artefacts of his making.

Transhumanism challenges the notion of being embodied as an organic, biological body and investigates the possibilities of multiplicity and diversity in the creation of a true 'posthuman'. With the emergence of speculative technologies like mind uploading, the posthuman era may witness what Ferrando (2019, 28) terms as "hybrid co-emergences of human consciousness and machine assemblages which could not be considered "human" anymore." Transhumanism places faith in the potential of technology to usher in the biological and cognitive enhancement of humanity and considers the 'human' as exceptional and on the verge of a technocentric transcendence of biology. Max More (1998, 1) regards technology as "the natural extension and expression of human intellect and will, of creativity, curiosity, and imagination" and observes that transhumanists take humanism further by investigating the nature of the biological body and challenging the limitations of the human by means of science and technology coupled with critical and innovative thinking. He adds that "transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies" (Ibid). The 'human' is never underrated in transhumanism, but the focus is surely on augmenting the 'human', improving his bodily and mental capabilities to aid his evolution into a posthuman.

Heidegger's ([1953] 1977, 12) ontological reflection on technology as "a way of revealing" is central to the posthumanist perception of technology and its impact on human destiny. The Singularity concept as outlined by Ray Kurzweil (2005) proposes that human evolution would reach a critical point in the near future where the biological

body would become a mutable, morphable projection of human intelligence, and humans as a species would evolve into a software-based extended or augmented version of itself (2005). Kurzweil regards the introduction of technology as a pivotal event not only in the history of the human species, but in the history of the planet as well. In her book *The Visible Human Project: Informatic Bodies and Posthuman Medicine*, Catherine Waldby (2000, 160) suggests that embodied subjectivity must be considered “in terms of its technosocial assemblages”. Human subjectivity and embodiment are constantly refigured through novel forms and methods of technogenesis. The Visible Human Project (VHP) run by the U. S. National Library of Medicine is devoted to the creation and digitisation of cross-sectional photographs of the human anatomy. Waldby claims that the human form has become increasingly susceptible to technological production; death has become uncertain and the borders of life and death have become increasingly unstable and permeable. She argues that the VHP “lends an iconography to the idea of the human as synthetic, not a self-origin but rather the product of inestimable and incremental techno-bio-social processes” (Ibid., 162).

Francesca Ferrando (2019, 35) asserts that the “non-separateness between the human and the techno realm is of key importance to the understanding of the posthuman”. She maintains that posthumanism is post-anthropocentric in that it challenges the notion of human exceptionalism advocated by transhumanism. According to her posthumanism “critically reflects on the notion of the Anthropocene and the anthropocentric habits and discourses sustaining the privilege of the human” (Ibid., 30). The posthuman era corresponds with the geological time of the Anthropocene where the planetary impact of human activities is manifested perceptibly in the form of climate change and disintegration of ecosystems. “Considering these and many other major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ‘Anthropocene’ for the current geological epoch,” states Crutzen & Stoermer (2000, 17).

The Anthropocene has brought unprecedented catastrophes upon the human race of which the current Covid-19 pandemic has had far reaching consequences, transforming daily human life, interactions and material reality in unpredictable ways. Humans have become increasingly dependent on technology during the months of

confinement. The mode of experiencing the natural world changed as man began investigating newer ways of engaging with his material reality. The pandemic has detached humans from his natural world, triggering a search for alternate domains of existence. It has deconstructed the notion of species supremacy, engendering an interspecies perspective aimed at the well-being of human and non-human life forms, which is a stated posthumanist, post anthropocentric concern. Humanity has ventured into a digitized future earlier than anticipated due to the restrictions imposed on interpersonal contact during the pandemic.

According to Judith Butler (2009, 25-26), precarity denotes a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection”. The emergence of newer strains and potential mutations to the virus make the pandemic a contingent and precarious scenario. The pandemic has ushered in what Adam Gearey regards as “viral solidarity”, with the virus regarded as “a threat to human substance in its generality” (see Bartsidis et al. 2002, 85). The pandemic has further destabilized our pride in the human form with the pathogen permeating rather effortlessly into the body. “It has made us aware of the permeability of our bodies to viral contagion and of the fragility of all social bonds” (Newman and Topuzovski 2021, 1). It has forced us “to confront our own mortality and vulnerability – as individuals and as a species – in a radically new way” (Ibid.).

. . . the Anthropocene – born of anthropocentric illusions of our ontological separation from nature – is also an experience of vulnerability and impotence, as we become aware of our dependence on increasingly unstable ecosystems and unpredictable natural forces, and we reap the consequences of our destructive activities. The pandemic is exemplary of this condition, appearing as nature’s retribution for our hubris. (Newman and Topuzovski 2021, 2)

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a new normal where virtual communication replaces all familiar modes of interpersonal communication. The virtualization of human lives has ushered in a sense of alienation and estrangement as human dependency on computer technology increased substantially as a means of connecting with his material milieu. The new normal fashioned by the pandemic

has changed our perception of ourselves in relation to our fellow beings as well as other non-human entities inhabiting our ecosphere. The absence of human agency is conspicuous during the lockdown and subsequent social restrictions. The urban space, as Foucault ([1975] 1995, 195) observes, becomes “segmented, immobile, frozen”.

Posthumanism decenters the human and ushers in a post-dualistic ontology wherein the demarcation between the binaries of man/machine, human/nonhuman and natural/artificial are systemically deconstructed. The notion of the human is reconfigured to incorporate the socio-cultural and technological milieu of which he is a product. Man is regarded as an assemblage of the organic, the nonhuman and the artificial. This imbrication prompts a reevaluation of human embodiment in the context of his embedded existence in various techno-cultural realms. Newman and Topuzovski (2021, 3) regard the pandemic as a “strange *interregnum* between worlds, full of dangers and uncertainties, as well as radical, emancipatory possibilities. ... Like any major global crisis, the pandemic forces a renewed reflection on the limits of the human experience. It undermines our faith in human progress and disturbs our conceptions of human agency and autonomy. It can therefore be seen as an aspect of the posthuman condition”.

The Pandemic has confined and secluded the corporeal body, forcing it into physical and emotional alienation. The shift to the virtual space to fulfil almost all basic needs and functions has resulted in the evolution of human subjectivity beyond the corporal frame. Human identity became distinct from the body, existing simultaneously as a digitised version of the former self in a virtual space alongside other virtual bodies. The increased technologization of personal and social life during the pandemic has led to the creation of virtual identities assuming a hybrid character of its own. Human subjectivity has grown out of the organic form to embrace new forms of selfhood. The pandemic has forced us to think critically about alternate possibilities for expressing the self and critical posthumanism investigates the ontological boundaries that demarcate the human and the non-human. The ‘human’ as the creator of technology and culture has created an identity for himself based on class, race, gender and species. This complex, multiple identities carefully nurtured and established over years of cultural evolution has taken a new turn in the technocultural scape of the late 20th and the 21st centuries. With the spread of the coronavirus and the attendant health emergency, humans

sought newer mediums of connecting with his fellow beings without risk of infection. Personal, professional and customer relationships transcended the materiality of interpersonal contact and adapted itself to the virtual environment that offered greater ease and efficacy in a crisis situation. The proponents of Transhumanism predict a future time when human essence could be uploaded and preserved in virtual space to be downloaded into an immortal body when technology advances enough to master death and bodily degeneration. The present crisis has concentrated scientific research into enquiring possible futures for mankind where disease and death could be eliminated and humanity could prolong longevity or achieve immortality by incorporating bionic and artificial implants. Ferrando (2021, 113-114) asserts: “we need to acknowledge technology fully and existentially, not just as a tool, but as a way of manifestation that is changing the way we are existing. It is changing the ontological realm, the realm of being.”

Firmly located within the Anthropocene, where human manipulation with the genetic materials of human and nonhuman species has jeopardized planetary life, the Covid-19 pandemic has been the source of an existential stirring, forcing humanity to re-evaluate its place in the scheme of things. In the Anthropocene humans have emerged as a geological force determining and influencing the destiny of the entire planet and its life. Davis and Lohm (2020, 120) conceptualize the pandemic experience as “in part an intersection of history (the pandemic event) and biography (one’s life circumstances)”. The “pandemic subjects” are thus “complexly and troublingly positioned” (Ibid.) in a state of vulnerability and are expected to negotiate the contingency of a health crisis. They can no longer exercise autonomy in their individualised subject positions but comply with the tailored, medicalized policies initiated to tide over the health emergency. This exigent scenario thoroughly restructures man’s conception of identity and selfhood as he considers himself and his relations to others in the wake of a microbial threat that introduces another form of precarity. Humanity’s understanding of the pandemic is largely shaped by past experiences and shared memories of similar contingencies as well as immediate responses to its confrontation with the microbe. “The body”, as Hannah Westley (2008, 7) observes, “is the threshold of subjectivity, the point of intersection between the private and public, the personal and political” and hence the vulnerable

human body becomes the site where new meanings are negotiated and new identities are forged.

The novel corona virus pandemic thwarted the notion of species supremacy and autonomy, urging mankind to reconsider his relationship with other life forms and nonhuman entities, like artificial intelligence. The pandemic forces humans to think about themselves in relation to their planet. Posthumanism, even as it speculates on technological augmentation of the human self, also engenders a renewed understanding of the notions of human agency, identity and subjectivity in a post-dualistic, non-hierarchical and inclusive world order ushered in by the pandemic. As an ontological philosophy rooted in a techno-modified cultural scape, posthumanism generates an existential awareness where the human race co-evolves with the technology it has created. It is an inevitable part of man's existential quest, altering the way we perceive ourselves and our world. Selfhood migrates into the virtual space and identity partakes of a hybrid nature during the pandemic with the increased dependence on technology and its infiltration on the mundane aspects of life. The pandemic accentuates the impact of estranging ourselves from our natural world and urges us to seek other domains of existence, underscoring the ontological inevitability of recognising non-human entities. Humans, as Ferrando (2021, 119) observes, "are constantly connecting to a different vibrational range and co-manifesting all these other layers of existence". Human agency and subjectivity are evolving in the wake of the pandemic, assuming a plurality and hybridity, transcending the precincts of class, creed, culture and nation, and embracing novel modes of self-expression in the digital space.

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