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## CHAPTER 7

# Posthumanism as a Spectrum: Reflections on Paul Rekret's Chapter

Robert Cowley

### 1. Introduction

Paul Rekret explicitly intends to 'take a step back to examine the parameters' of posthuman thinking. He challenges the assumption that knowledge generated by posthuman theorising somehow straightforwardly or 'innocently' reflects the contemporary world. Instead, he treats posthumanism as a particular 'story' produced in, and reproduced through, specific circumstances. He proposes that posthumanism might not emancipate us from the dilemmas which it addresses, so much as normalise the conditions of their production.

In order to establish a critical distance from posthumanism, then, Rekret emphasises its contingency. There is good reason to suppose that his analysis will resonate with those already uncomfortable with broader tendencies towards 'hybrid thinking.' We might hypothesise, however, that Rekret will be less likely to provoke dialogue with posthumanist thinkers themselves, for whom

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‘critical distance’ is more a problem to be overcome than a useful diagnostic strategy, and contingency is an explicitly celebrated virtue.

In what follows, I suggest that this problem of incompatibility need not be construed in such stark terms. To reach this conclusion, I first reflect further on the reasons for, but also question the extent of, posthumanism’s appeal. Relatedly, I go on to propose that posthumanism may more usefully be thought of as a spectrum, than a discrete mode of thinking.

## 2. Situating the Appeal of Posthumanism

It has become clichéd to observe that Donna Haraway’s (1985) famous image of the cyborg has only gained resonance over time. It is surely in large part due to the wide spread of digital technology that Haraway’s vision, of the tendency for contemporary scientific and technological developments to blur the edges of the human, strikes us as so prescient. The digital is no longer the direct concern only of distant corporate technicians; its presence in everyday life no longer seems optional. Rather, it seems uncontroversial – even banal – to suggest that we have become reflexively aware that our actions, from the moment we wake up, are digitally mediated. This change is one of several contemporary conditions which collectively shape a ‘posthuman’ sensibility, on which Rekret reflects critically in his chapter.

This sensibility, in Rekret’s definition, is characterised primarily by an ontological privileging of ‘hybridity’. And, for those who follow contemporary theorising in the humanities or social sciences, it is difficult to ignore the spread of various forms of hybrid thinking. The desire to decentre human agency seems widespread. Some random examples might include: the recent embrace of assemblage theory in urban theory; the growing enthusiasm for placing objects at the centre of historical research; and the trend even for anthropologists to speculate on the social agency of plants, fungi and microbes (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). The primacy of human ability to think rationally ‘about’ and act ‘on’ the world has been eroded by notions of the entanglement of cognitive processes, and expectations of variously dispersed agency. As Timothy Morton puts it, there is a growing understanding that humans are ‘no longer in the centre of the universe, but we are not in the VIP box beyond the edge, either’ (Morton 2013, 13). Potentially, then, posthumanism not only describes the written output of a certain set of scholarly writers, but also the wider appeal of a certain ontological orientation across the academy, and perhaps beyond.

To understand this appeal, it may be helpful to think of posthumanism as performing three inter-related roles:

- (1) it draws on and reverberates with an existing, dispiriting story relating to the end of modernity;
- (2) it reframes this story in optimistic terms;
- (3) it thereby offers the prospect of a hopeful way forwards.

The end of modernity is dramatised most conspicuously in widespread expectations of global climate changes, mocking the idea that humans are, or can be, in control of the world. The 'anthropocene' presents us with both the 'bizarre situation, in which we have become potent enough to change the course of the Earth yet seem unable to regulate ourselves' (Hamilton 2017, vii–viii), and the unsettling prospect that 'over this century humans will, in full knowledge of what we are doing, irreparably degrade the conditions of life on our home planet' (ibid, 37). And yet, this dispiriting dilemma is inherited from postmodern theories *about* the world – a mode of thinking from which posthumanism claims to distance itself. Rosi Braidotti, for example, specifically opposes the use of theory 'as a tool to apprehend and represent reality' (Braidotti 2013, 5). The ideal of cognitive distance is devalued when 'The boundaries between the categories of the natural and the cultural have been displaced and to a large extent blurred' (Braidotti 2013, 3). Thus, while posthumanism reverberates with existing narratives of loss, to articulate a widespread sense of confusion, it does not pose as a set of detached observations: its stories are presented as emerging from the world.

In its diagnostic mode, then, posthumanism does not aim to impose an analytical framework on the world, but instead to relate what the world seems to be telling us. Simultaneously, however, this reframing of our understanding adopts a celebratory register (Chandler 2018), which invigorates what Rekret calls an affirmative 'ethico-political' argument. Thus, Haraway's cyborg was presented in a playful 'manifesto'. For Braidotti, the 'posthuman predicament' is 'an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation' (Braidotti 2013, 12). Jane Bennett's influential book ends indicatively with 'a litany, a kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists' (Bennett 2010, 122). The broader celebratory project here is captured well by the goal of Kohn's 'anthropology of life': 'neither to do away with the human nor to reinscribe it but to open it' (Kohn 2013, 6). In short, posthuman hybrid thinking reworks existing critiques of human exceptionalism into an optimistic sense of expanded agency, and then dwells on the generative ethical and political implications of this sensibility.

### 3. Questioning the Appeal of Posthumanism

Rekret's response is to treat posthumanism, in effect, as a contingent discourse – even if he shies away from that term. In mobilising the discursive category of the 'posthuman', he might be accused of conflating a variety of bodies of theory which in fact proceed as much in contestation as in concert. However, his definition does not rest on a delineation of the *boundaries* of this field: his intention is not to specify which thinkers do and do not fall into this category. Rather, his definition relates to certain tendencies present across a broad range of current thinkers – whether or not they self-identify as posthumanists. This

is an uncontroversial mode of definition: the mutual debts among relevant authors have been mapped out elsewhere – both by sceptical commentators (see, for example: van Ingen, 2016), and explicitly in the texts themselves.

More problematically, a strategy that involves defining and labelling discursive trends may not be the best way to win friends. It implies a certain distancing; it performatively positions the labeller outside the body of discourse in question. This move may seem threatening to those living through a given discourse, who feel they are narrating their condition in a neutral way. Those who have been the victims of injustice, illness, or climate change, may feel bemused, or significantly offended, by commentaries treating the resulting afflictions as socially constructed ‘stories’ (Hacking 2000). Indeed, from a posthumanist perspective, Rekret’s ‘retreat’ into discourse may seem irresponsibly relativistic, and indicative of poststructuralist tendencies, which – as Rekret notes – are precisely what posthumanism is attempting to go beyond. Braidotti, for example, clearly asserts that ‘The posthuman subject is not ... poststructuralist, because it does not function within the linguistic turn or other forms of deconstruction’ (Braidotti 2013, 188). In parallel, as if to preempt the charge that posthumanism’s generative potential is constrained by the specificity of the conditions of its emergence, Braidotti insists only on its relevance to the contemporary world. Posthumanism inoculates itself by transforming contingency into a positive attribute, in rejection of universalist aspirations. One might, then, conclude that there is little possibility of Rekret’s critique speaking to posthumanists themselves, since it depends on such an alienating method.

At the same time, the reach of posthumanist thinking should not be exaggerated. Although it responds to a contemporary dilemma, the sensibility of this dilemma is inevitably uneven. This reflection began by rehearsing the idea that we have come increasingly to ‘see like a cyborg’ in our post-modern, digitally mediated, anthropocenic era. But who is this ‘we’? Certainly, for the educated and affluent, who are more likely to follow technological developments in the media, it would seem difficult to be unaware of a wider set of concurrent advances in robotics, artificial intelligence, big data, genetic engineering, and other fields, which collectively disrupt received notions of the boundaries of the ‘human’ and, by extension, previous assumptions about human agency. However, those on the prosperous side of the ‘digital divide’ may forget the specificity of their own conditions. ‘We’ might be surprised that, even in a wealthy country such as the UK, 13% of adults have never used the internet (Office for National Statistics 2014). Furthermore, if it is permissible to view posthumanism in discursive terms, as tending to frame and represent reality in certain ways, there is no reason to suppose that its stories will always be ‘decoded’ (Hall, 1992) in the same way. Thinking about the triple appeal of posthumanism, as I have proposed above, already opens up several positions on a spectrum of possible responses. This is the case even after we exclude those ‘aggressive nihilists’ (Connolly 2017) who, for personal gain, cynically refute the significance of the dilemmas which posthumanism addresses.

First, at one end of this spectrum, sit a range of actors not afflicted with a sense of loss of the modern. Some of this group are 'still' premodern; for others, the dualisms of modernity are comfortably in place. This need not imply naivety on their part: engineers and technology innovators, for example, generally seem happy to acknowledge that solutions often have unexpected consequences, yet retain faith in the possibility of learning lessons and improving techniques over time. Policy-makers seem fully aware that plans can rarely be enacted in a linear way (van Assche and Verschraegen 2008), but still presume that a process of approximate societal steering is better than none at all. Belief in 'progress' more generally is still widespread, and may more typically be understood in incremental, iterative terms, rather than as megalomaniac ambition. For this group, there is no strong sense of disillusionment with which posthuman thinking can reverberate. The 'we' that frets over the demise of human exceptionalism might be a smaller constituency than its inhabitants imagine.

A more ambiguous middle position might be imagined. Here, posthumanism's diagnostic role is positively received, but a pragmatic choice is made to proceed in traditional ways regardless. For those who act within particular disciplinary spheres, engaging with posthumanism may make little sense at the level of everyday practice. Natural scientists may be fully aware of – and even enthusiastically curious about – new discoveries which fundamentally call modernist assumptions into question, even while the 'cultural performances' of their day jobs depend on 'a strong view of the human agent and of nature as consisting of nonagentic objects of understanding' (Connolly 2017, 100). Thus, in Rekret's terms, it seems quite feasible to buy into posthumanism's 'speculative ontology' without embracing its 'ethico-political project'.

It is the third position, however, which would seem to be in Rekret's main line of fire. This describes a more active embrace of this project: here, an awareness of the world's hybridity becomes a source of optimism, and is translated somehow into action or new frameworks for everyday thinking.

#### 4. Conclusion

Is it likely, then, that Rekret's argument will tend to fall on deaf ears among those who most actively embrace the logics which he critiques? While he proceeds by emphasising the contingency of the conditions giving rise to posthuman thinking, posthumanists themselves acknowledge and celebrate contingency. The possibility of 'stepping back' from the subject matter, furthermore, is epistemologically excluded from posthumanist theorising, insofar as the latter refuses to view the world from a cognitive distance. If this means taking sides, then the force of Rekret's argument might be expected to diminish precisely as the appeal of posthuman 'hybridity' spreads.

This incompatibility invokes a wider set of questions around the relevance of critique to 'non-representational' thinking of different types. And yet, I have

suggested here not only that the prevalence of the posthuman sensibility is uneven (and limited), but that we should expect its reception – even among sympathetic audiences – to vary significantly. And perhaps the audience of ‘third position’ posthumanists is somewhat chimerical: posthuman writers themselves are not so arrogant as to position their own ethico-political proposals as definitive; their real-world acolytes no doubt display reflexivity to varying degrees. To point to this variety and unevenness is not to undermine Rekret’s ‘method’: he does not define posthumanism as a discrete body of thought, but rather mobilises some of its common tendencies for heuristic purposes. Rather, it opens up the possibility – which Rekret does not explicitly deny – that more satisfactorily reflexive forms of ‘hybrid thinking’ might be developed in future.

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