Is the Post- in Posthuman the Post- in Postmodern? Or, What Can the ~~Human~~ Be?

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Abstract

In this article, I address the multiplicity of "posthumanisms" including posthumanism as a periodizing gesture, a description of what follows humanism; as a *problematique* or "predicament"; and as a move that heralds something else—a "critical" posthumanism, a "technophilic" or "animaphilic" decentering of the human into a networked entanglement of substances, or a "posthumous" *post*-posthumanism. Comparing posthumanism to previous "posts" including postmodernism, I argue that its nature as a "post" means that posthumanism cannot avoid the "postal system" described by Jacques Derrida, whereby discursively constituted goals fail to reach their intended destinations. Drawing upon a process-relational conception of the human (and of the cosmos), I argue that the human has never *been* human such that it can be overcome or transcended. Our humanity is always ever in process, which means that any posthumanity will always be unstable and always tied to the realm of "alternative humanisms." There is, however, one form of ~~posthumanism~~ that is worth conceiving as such: this is posthumanism, the "close encounter of the third kind" where-

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by we humans contend with our ultimate erasure, that of extinction.

Posthumanism and the notion of the posthuman (or "post-human") have become regular characters on the stage of contemporary cultural theory. Yet there is not a single posthuman, but many of them, wearing different costumes and presenting different appeals to varying audiences. This constitutes a problem that needs more consideration than it has gotten.

Within environmental or ecological cultural theory (the fields I primarily work in), posthumanism has largely alternated between two quite different variants. The first of these, a "technophilic" posthumanism, is connected to the emergence of cybernetics and systems theory, cyborg theory and cyborg studies, transhumanism, and related possibilities of transcending the human technologically, informationally, or prosthetically. The second, an "animaphilic" posthumanism, is related to critical animal studies and, more broadly, to ecologically informed decenterings of the human within its physico-material and biological matrices. If Cary Wolfe, in his 2010 overview of posthumanism, could describe the term as referring to "the decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates" (xvi), then by 2020 the latter list must at least be supplemented with the coordinates of geology and extinction (Colebrook; Yusoff), biophilic plant studies (Kessler; Marder; Nealon), disability (Goodley, Lawthom, and Cole), zombies (Vint), and the "Plasticene" (*New York Times*).

All of these have contributed to the rich discourse of thinking about the current world situation, even as they arose in disparate disciplines. Pramod Nayar offers a useful distillation of the critical potential of some, if not all, posthumanist theory. Nayar defines *critical* posthumanism as "the radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (11). "In a radical reworking of human-

ism," he continues,

> critical posthumanism seeks to move beyond the traditional humanist ways of thinking about the autonomous, self-willed individual agent in order to treat the human itself as an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology. It rejects the view of the human as exceptional, separate from other life forms and usually dominant/dominating over these other forms. (13)

In the place of such human exceptionalism and of its positing of the human "as the centre of all things," critical posthumanism "sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life" (14). This "critical" posthumanism, with its "radical" reworkings and decenterings of humanist tropes, is a project I find myself in deep agreement with. At the same time, I wish to query its basic terms by posing a question that echoes the question raised in Bruno Latour's classic text *We Have Never Been Modern*. The question is: have we *ever been* the humans that posthumanism proposes to move beyond?[1]

My intent here is not to make an empirical, historical case about what we humans have or have not been. It is, rather, to question the conceptual coordinates within which our thinking of the "posthuman" takes place. In what follows, I will address the claim that the post- in posthuman refers to a transcendence or overcoming of that which is, or claims to be, fundamentally *human*, and, secondly, that it refers to a transcendence or movement beyond *humanism*, defined in one or another way (for instance, as modern, liberal, secular humanism, as the humanism of universalist Enlightenment discourses, as anthropocentric humanism or "speciesism," or as some other set of assumptions about the essence of "the human"). I will propose a process-relational ontological conception to argue that the human is never complete, but always in process; and that, by extension, any humanism can only ever be partial, and in time will always be inadequate. If the posthuman is *post-* to the human, but the human is never finished, never a *fait accompli*, then there will always be another form for the human to take, which will expand the horizon of what the human is capable of, what its "essence" consists of, and how its horizons or boundaries both constrain and enable its realization. Conversely, if the posthuman is *post-* to humanism, then it is by its nature unstable since no humanism can ever be exhaustive. It is sufficient to show how any humanism is inadequate, but this will never conclusively move outside the realm

of potential "alternative humanisms."

My argument is not intended to decry the more politically cogent possibilities envisioned by posthumanists. It arises instead from the situation I described at the outset, that of the multiplicity of posthumanisms, a multiplicity that necessitates that any critical project surrounding any one of them qualify and tether itself to a *specific subset* of posthumanisms. This is why an increasing number of theorists have called for a "critical posthumanism" (Herbrechter; Nayar; Braidotti 2019), with some even advocating a "posthumous" push "beyond the posthuman" toward something else (Weinstein and Colebrook). If we have hardly become posthuman yet are already needing to move beyond it, then could it not be that there is something inadequate in the very concept? If posthumanism is simply intended as a periodizing gesture, a claim that certain notions of the human no longer hold sway as broadly as they once seemed to, then it leaves various questions on the table: which notions, whom did they hold in their thrall, and what of all the others (humans, cultures, classes, civilizations) who may have eluded them altogether? If, on the other hand, posthumanism is considered a *problematique* or "predicament" (Braidotti and Hlavajova 1)—an array of questions or dilemmas facing a more or less unified humanity—it still leaves open the questions of how unified we are under this banner, and how to work our way through or out of its predicament.

The problem, as I see it, is twofold. It is, first, that the "post" in posthumanism is in itself insufficient to answer the questions that it raises, and, second, that its nature as a "post"—an effort to transcend, push beyond, and temporally overcome some or all forms of humanism—can never avoid something like the "postal system" described by Jacques Derrida, according to which discursively constituted goals may never reach their intended destinations. I will refer below to two senses of how we might understand this "postal system." The broader point, however, will be that the human has never *been* human because "we" have never been unified, and this lack of unity—biological, political, cultural, and ecological lack of unity—is constitutive of any efforts to describe the human. If this is the case, I suggest, it may be better to re-open the human(isms) the posthuman is intended to overcome.

In the end, however, I will also acknowledge that there is one form of posthumanism that is worth conceiving as such in our circumstances. It is more accurately described as a ~~humanism~~, a humanism-under-erasure, for which the human

is never circumscribed or epistemically encompassed. This is a posthumanism not *for* us humans, but *without* us. This ~~humanism~~ is a more radical posthumanism which acknowledges its own incapacity to ever reach its goal. I will end by proposing how we can most adequately conceive of such a ~~humanism~~ for the present.

1. One Post After Another: Or, the Postal System of Modernity

The question posed in the title of this paper echoes the titular questions posed in several previous papers, all of which asked if the "post-" in one term was the same as the "post-" in another: "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial" (Appiah), "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?" (Moore), "Is the Post- in Postsecular the Post- in Postcolonial?" (Huggan), "Is the Post in Posthuman the Post in Postmedieval?" (Bartolovitch), "Is the *Post* in Postsocialism the *Post* in Posthumanism?" (Shi), and so on. Whatever else these authors argued, their rhetorical questions point to a pattern that is easily recognizable in literary and critical studies of the past several decades. This is the pattern by which discourses emerge as critiques of previous discourses whilst tethering their critiques to historicist assumptions about the new being more advanced than the old. The "post" in each of these instances is configured as necessary to overcoming the limitations of what it is "post" to, even if not all "posts" are concurrent or equivalent.

This pattern is of course part of what many have taken to be the hallmark of modernity, or at least of modernism: a perpetual drive to overcome, to push beyond, to lay out a vanguard that is more progressive, more transcendent, or more *of* the present and/or future than that which it is seeking to relegate to the past. It is this modernism, in part, that Bruno Latour famously relegated to a never-has-been-past in *We Have Never Been Modern*. Modernity, for Latour, has always been more about rhetoric than practice, with the latter being more hybrid, messy, and entangled than anything proposed by the conceptual apparatus articulated by "the moderns" (and see Latour, *An Inquiry*). Posthumanism, like postmodernism, remains tethered to this vanguardist trajectory by which one discourse overcomes another, only to be overcome by yet another. It is part of what we may call the "postal system" of modernity, which is a series of eviction notices announcing

that "*Your* time is up" and that "*Our* time is now."

Like postmodernism, posthumanism cannot escape this movement, which means it will both itself be overcome *and* remain perpetually caught within a modernist gestural economy that is its own undoing, because it has always been an illusion, as we have never truly *been* modern. Any such post including the posthuman is therefore caught within its own "posts" (which act as goalposts, as it were), remaining bound by the rules of the larger game. In the following, I want to suggest at least two ways out of this game. One will take up a slightly different definition of the "post," which is not the post that comes after, but the post that sends forward—the postal service that relays messages from one place to another, with the messages sometimes but not always, and never predictably, arriving at their intended destination. The second is a postal determination that is fully binding and fully bounding: the end of the postal system of human determinations.

2. The Post Beyond the Posts: Or, the Process-Relational Postal System

The postman delivers the news, the letter, the report, the postcard bearing the imprint "Wish you were here," even as the sender knows you were not. The news is already dated by the time it arrives; it is always an afterthought from the moment of its thinking, of its presence (which was always a reaching out to an absent receiver, a sending that may never arrive, from a present to a future, from a past to a present). The postman brings the news of what has been posted, what has been replaced, as "post-9/11" comes after 9/11, and postmodernity after modernity. Only "A.D.," *Anno Domini*, the Year of Our Lord, comes to us unposted, as if eternal; the secular, "post-Christian" West in turn rejects its eternity, re-emplacing the Lord in the time of postal notices and postponements, the time of the "Current Era," "C.E."

To "post" is to place (as in a position), to station, to pose, to send (as with the mail), to post one's property as private ("Posted: Keep Out"), to post the goal posts of a sporting target. As Derrida averred in *The Post Card,* the postal system that creates identity is premised on non-identity, on deferral, on transmission through a system that must already know the proper addresses of its senders and receivers, but also on the endless possibility of non-arrival. The post card trans-

gresses the bounds between public and private, between mass produced (as most post cards are) and personal (addressed as it is to a specific recipient). It is liable to be read by anyone along the way, but is intended for its final reader some days hence, and often after the sender has himself arrived at his home to which he may be sending.

To better understand this postal system, let us break it down. There are two active moments in it: the moment of sending, and the moment of receiving; and then there is the system itself, which is the system of connections and relays that makes them possible. For Derrida, it is that system, that *arche-writing*, that undermines the premise of the sender's agency and the receiver's passivity. The system must always already be in place for writing, sending, receiving, and "posting" to be possible. And yet it is a system that can always miss its connection, a train that might fail to arrive, a letter that might arrive at the wrong destination. In that, it is found to deconstruct itself.

I wish to complicate this system ontologically, by thinking of it not merely as the system of language, but also as the system of reality as such. This move, as others have pointed out (e.g., Burik et al.; Park), is what happens when Derridean deconstruction is brought to certain Asian philosophies, especially to Buddhism, and to the tradition of process-relational metaphysics. Such an ontologizing move is not unusual within the posthumanist spectrum; it can be found in work espousing one or another form of "new materialism," "vibrant matter," "trans-corporeality," "agential realism," or some other processual or relational ontologies (see Braidotti and Hlavajova; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin). All of these focus not on language but on the ongoing production of the relations that constitute the world, a world that consists of networked interdependencies that work to deconstruct (and simultaneously construct) any stable identities, including that of "Man" or "the Human," that might emerge in their midst.

The term "process-relational ontology" emerged in reference to the metaphysical system developed by Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920s and 1930s, but it can be loosely applied to a much broader swath of philosophy dealing with the nature of things (Ivakhiv, "Contemporary"; see also Browning and Myers; Rescher, "The Promise"; Rescher, *Process Metaphysics*; Whitehead). As an event-based ontology (McHenry; Shaw), process-relational thought asserts that things are always in motion, in process, that the processes are always relational, and that they both describe and help to produce an emergent universe, one that

neither stands still nor stands apart from that movement. This general sensibility is shared by numerous strands of centuries-old philosophy from the East (Japan, China, India) to the West (ancient Greece, Europe, Africa, and Indigenous North America) (see Berthrong; Maffie; Zie, Wang, and Berthrong). As developed more recently in the work of Whiteheadians (Ivakhiv, "Contemporary"), pragmatists (following Peirce, James, and Dewey), and Deleuzians (e.g., Braidotti's process ontology, Massumi's speculative pragmatism), process-relational ontology puts a particular premium on the open-endedness of becoming over being.

Process-relational ontology bears a resemblance to the postal system described above, with its endless deferrals and discontinuities, with one overriding difference: this is that the system it conceives is always posting forward, never past (Kakol, Odin). It is a postal system that differs and defers not in an endless *lateral* movement, a deferral of meanings across a synchronic system of linguistic traces (as per Derrida and other structuralist and poststructuralist forms of linguistic indeterminacy), but rather in a difference and deferral *forward* through the ongoing production of *world-as-becoming*.[2]

In my own work, I have characterized the world's becomings in three dimensions—the geological, biological, and anthropological—recognizing that these three neither circumscribe nor exhaust the possibilities of becoming (Ivakhiv, *Ecologies*). In a world that is constantly coming into being, constantly "morphing" into form, I posited *geomorphism* as the coming into being of geological or geographic form, the form of that which is taken as given; *biomorphism* as the coming into being of biological, living form, the form of that which is taken as alive and interacting with one indirectly or, we might say, "improperly"; and *anthropomorphism* as the coming into being of the category of those with whom we interact directly, socially, "properly," through direct address and utilizing proper names (including our own). The "anthropomorphic" is not, in this case, a claim about what humans are or how they differ from nonhumans. It is simply a placeholder, in the same way that dogs, if they had this same conversation, could speak of their *canomorphism*, crows of their *corvomorphism*, and cyborgs of their *cyborgmorphism*. I intended with these terms to address something within the milieu of human experience (initially, cinema, though later extended to other things). They were not intended to be ontological claims so much as they were intended to serve as epistemological hooks or crutches, helpful in describing the worlds in which we live so that we may live in them a little bit better.

If an antecedent was needed for this way of thinking about form, Bruno Latour's *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* suggests it in embryo.[3] Following an excursus on anthropomorphism, technomorphism, and zoomorphism, Latour writes:

> Let us say that, in their workshop as everywhere else, *form* is in question, that there is never any projection onto real behavior, that the capabilities to be distributed form an open and potentially infinite list, and that it is better to speak of *(x)-morphism* instead of becoming indignant when humans are treated as nonhumans or vice versa. The human form is as unknown to us as the nonhuman. (227, italics in original)

In other words, things take on forms, they grow into them, but these are an actualization of one among an array of potentials whose scope and horizons are unknowable. Among the forms that are open-endedly produced in the continual generation of the world are the forms we today may recognize as "the human." But these are never self-sufficient, definitive, nor even particularly stable, and their naming as "human" is never more than a gesture limited by the terminology that is available. There is no utopianism here—no suggestion that humans are capable of wonders we have never yet dreamed—not a tragic dystopianism, which would take us to be destroyers of ourselves and our world by our very nature. There is simply the acknowledgment of a reality that eludes our efforts to name it.

3. The Meta-Humanist Temptation

Latour's argument that we have never been modern is in part a historical argument about how the ideals of the moderns have never been truly lived up to. A more anthropologically nuanced argument about modernity is that which claims that modernity itself can only be plural, a range of developments that share some features in common but depart from any essential nature, such that countries or cultures are reaching their own "alternative modernities" (Gaonkar), all of them situated somewhere along a series of vectors encompassing colonialism and post- or de-coloniality, capitalism and postcapitalism, and development or post-development, and so on (Gibson-Graham; Mignolo; Ziai).

There is a temptation that needs to be mentioned here, which we might call

the *re*-humanist or *meta*-humanist temptation. Like the alternative modernities which presumably continue to advance all around, there is the possibility that all forms of the human are reaching their own forms of humanity, but that any final attainment remains elusive precisely *because* it is in the nature of the human to be indeterminate. As Christopher Howard puts it,

> What a posthuman anthropology sensitizes us to is that *we already are Other* than what we think we are. Yet paradoxically, recognizing our more than humanness from our eccentric position means we are nothing but human. Human nature is thus not an unchanging essence, but a *capacity for going beyond*. (n.p., italics in original)

The human, in this rendering, is that thing that *in its essence has no essence*. The species-being of the human, according to this temptation, is defined as open and malleable and, in this, as being unlike anything else in the universe (save perhaps the God that Descartes and others have imagined us to be modeled after). This is of course a paradigmatic example of the "human exceptionalism" or "human exemptionalism" (Riley and Catton) that some variants of posthumanism detest.

Logically, no notion of the posthuman can ever be coherent without some notion of the human; otherwise the term simply loses its meaning. And if every notion of the human is considered incomplete and in some sense rhetorical—not a finished product but, at best, a symbolic gesture intended to rally consideration around something or other—then no notion of the posthuman will ever be stable. At the same time, relying on a human exemptionalist notion of the human for one's definition of the *post*human makes that posthuman all the more "humanist," if not "ultra-humanist." The only exception to this is if that definition of the human is not exclusive to humans, but is in fact shared by all things. That is, we require an ontology that is non-essentialist, even anti-essentialist, at its outset. That is what the process-relational ontological move accomplishes for us.

4. The Post That *Will* Fail to Reach Its Destination: Or, the ~~Posthuman~~

If Latour's argument that "we have never been modern" is accepted now in some circles (and with caveats), then the proposition that "we have never been *human*" might not be far behind it. We have always been *becoming* human, in

so many ways that may claim to be definitive but that never quite arrive there. In this sense, Michel Foucault's claim at the end of *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*) that, with a fundamental rearrangement of knowledge, "man" could be "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea," becomes something more like its opposite: despite so many efforts, so many faces drawn in so many sands, the face of "man" has never been more than the sum of these efforts. If anything, it has always been both less, because all are fated to be washed away, and more, because more are bound to come. It has never been a singular face itself.

There is a point at which the *less* overcomes the *more*, and it is there that we find a posthumanism that may be worthy of the title of the "postal" sign——that is, of recognition as the inevitable *next*, the epochal follower of any *humanism* or any *human* we may be able to conceive of. If we live today in the era of the Human, the Anthropocene, where humanity has become the defining and limiting factor of all production, reproduction, and imagination of possibility (however problematic this notion), then a genuine posthumanism could only arise if it were one that framed any and all humanization——that is, the entirety of human ambition and understanding and its capacity to assimilate anything——within its own negation. The only possible negation of this Anthropocene is the one that the Anthropocene itself admits: if the Anthropocene is a geological era, one in which human activities are definitively central, then the next era will be one in which they are no longer that because the human has gone away——has effectively gone extinct, as species do.

The extinction of the human is in this sense conceivable but inassimilable, in that there will be no human left to assimilate it. The posthuman is in this sense the *extinct* human. To indicate it as the eventuality that it is, we can only ever point to it, not encompass it. We can only write it under erasure, *sous rature*, as the sublime event that it is for us, situated in its advance. We can only ever grasp it as a posthuman under erasure, a ~~posthuman~~.

The risk here is that of overdoing the significance and singularity of the human that is to be "posted." This human has never been singular, as indeed we have never been truly human; we have always only been getting there, in progress, in becoming. The paradox is that we will never have completely arrived, and yet we *will* be completely extinguished. T. S. Eliot may therefore be entirely wrong, when he writes that

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time. ("Little Gidding," 208)

There is no such guarantee that we will know the place at all. We may choose to believe in a rapture or redemption of some kind—*Parousia*, deliverance, salvation, nirvana, some final communion with ancestors or deities or the universe as one—but this will always be a leap of faith against the better judgment that humanity as such will be extinguished, like the dinosaurs, the passenger pigeons, and so many others who have come before us. It is this nothingness, this ultimate falling away of our humanistic ideals and crutches, our devotion to humanity as a project, that stares us in the face when we dare look upon it.

There is, of course, our personal death, which gives meaning to our existence. The humanism that can and will be "posted" is the humanism that assumes there is something more that continues beyond us *and that it is humanity*. That, too, will pass. The take-away from this form of posthumanism is that we can no longer defer our own death, our own nothingness, onto a humanity that will survive us.

~~Posthumanism~~ rethought this way, then, is a matter of deferral. We individuals will face our death, but we humanists believe humanity does not. ~~Posthumanism~~ insists that humanity will face its end as well. Most forms of "actually existing posthumanism" (like "actually existing socialism"?) do not go quite this far, and at the same time they go beyond it. In gesturing to the continuities between humans and nonhumans, inhumans, infrahumans, all the living and non-living forces, events, assemblages, biotic networks and relationships within which we are enmeshed and to which we both now and in the end must defer, posthumanisms suggest something less tragic and eventful, which is simply a recognition of what we already know but that some of us are only beginning to acknowledge today. This is that the human is always already prehuman, posthuman, nonhuman, inhuman, infrahuman, and something entirely sideways to the human. We are already enmeshed within the solidarity of all those who arise and find themselves here alongside us—humans and others in the making, many if not most of whom make themselves outside of any human reference points whatsoever. It is those reference points, whatever forms they take, that will go away in the (posthuman) end.

If the only genuine posthumanism is the one that entails the extinction of the human, then posthumanism is not only possible, but inevitable. And the only possible encounter that we, who are always becoming human, could possibly have with it is a kind of "close encounter of the third kind"—an encounter with something that is utterly alien to us because it requires our absolute and complete disappearance. This is the kind of impossible event that I have elsewhere called an Event (*Shadowing*), as it cannot possibly happen to us or for us. It can, and will, only happen without us. This is the only posthumanism worth the name, a name that will wash itself out like Foucault's face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. Or, rather, like ~~Foucault's face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea~~. But even that, sobering as it may be, leaves us back where we started, not "knowing the place for the first time," as T. S. Eliot would have it, but still scratching our heads at how to live with ourselves and with our others today. Posthuman? Or still becoming human?

Notes

1   This question has already been asked by media theorist Sean Cubitt in his 2014 talk "We Have Never Been Human."

2   Elsewhere, drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce, I suggest it is an endless production of *signs*, but that becomes confusing when signs are taken to be mere representations and not the fully ontologized, triadic events of semiosis that Peirce intended. See Ivakhiv, *Shadowing* and *Ecologies*.

3   The original idea for it came to me not from Latour, but from two of my mentors, Canadian ecophilosophers John Livingston and Neil Evernden, in the late 1980s. Fredrik Karlsson provides a variation of the argument in "Anthropomorphism and Mechanomorphism."

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