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Posthuman

Nicholas Gane

The posthuman is one of the most important concepts in contemporary literary theory, science studies, political philosophy, the sociology of the body, cultural and film studies, and even art theory. The origin of this concept is hotly disputed, with some tracing it back to the cybernetic movement of the 1940s, and, more specifically, to the writings of Norbert Wiener (Pepperell, 2003: 169). The explosion of this concept in the mid-1990s, however, can be traced to a more recent source: Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). While Haraway does not use the term 'posthuman' explicitly in this work, she calls into question three key boundaries that have helped preserve the sanctity of 'the human' as a self-contained being: those between humans and animals, animal-humans (organisms) and machines, and the realms of the physical and non-physical (Haraway, 1991: 152–3). For Haraway, such boundaries are no longer secure (if indeed they ever were), for they are now breached by an array of new hybrid creatures or *cyborgs*. These creatures, which are both organism *and* machine, are defined as follows:

> hybrid entities made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen 'high-technological' guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled, labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs is machines in their guise, also, as communications systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses. (Haraway, 1991: 1)

This figure of the cyborg proved enormously influential throughout the 1990s, not least because it shifted debate about the *inhuman*, or the negative power of technology and time to constrain and inhabit human life, to analysis of how intelligent machines and new technologies of genetic modification might be used to alter the basis of life in more positive ways.

This age of high technology, in which the human body is no longer tied to 'nature' but open to technological modification, has subsequently been termed *posthuman*: a time in which 'humans are no longer the most important things in the universe', where 'all technological progress of human society is geared towards the transformation of the human species as we know it', and where 'complex machines are an emerging form of life' (Pepperell, 2003: 177). The posthuman, however, is not about 'progress' *per se*, but is rather a new culture of transversalism in which the 'purity' of human nature gives way to new forms of creative evolution that refuse to keep different species, or even machines and humans, apart. The posthuman, then, is a condition of uncertainty (Pepperell, 2003: 167–8) in which the essence of things is far from clear. Halberstam and Livingstone capture the spirit of this condition in the following declaration: 'the "post" of "posthuman" interests us not really insofar as it posits some subsequent developmental state, but as it collapses into *sub-, inter-, infra-, trans-, pre-, anti-*' (1995: viii). Against this backdrop, a key (although not necessarily stable) point of orientation for analysis of posthuman culture and society is the body. Halberstam and Livingstone, for example, treat the posthuman as a series of 'nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect' (1995: 2). Such an approach aims to disrupt cybernetic readings of bodies as information systems (Haraway [1991], for example, reads immune systems in this way), and of information as a probabilistic, bodiless form (as declared in the early work of Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver). Against such readings, critical posthumanism reasserts the embodied nature of information and perhaps even technology, regardless of whether bodies themselves remain 'human'. Catherine Waldby reflects:

> The term 'posthuman' has come to designate a loosely related set of recent attempts to reconceptualise the relationship between the rapidly transforming field of technology and the conditions of human embodiment. These attempts are, generally speaking, a response to the cybernetic turn and the vitalisation of information . . . (2000: 43)

Katherine Hayles (1999) formulates such a response in her key work, *How We Became Post-human*, which starts out with a critique of posthuman separations between information and matter, and mind and body. There are, she says, four main features of this type of informational posthumanism. First, it 'privileges informational pattern over material instantiation' (Hayles, 1999: 2). Second, it downplays the role of consciousness in the formation of human identity. Third, it treats the body as 'the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born' (Hayles, 1999: 3). And finally, the human is configured so that it can be 'seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines' (Hayles, 1999: 3). Taken together, these features add up to the following: 'In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals' (Hayles, 1999: 3). Hayles' response, however, is to configure an alternative reading of the posthuman by contesting the separation of materiality from information – a separation that she traces in great detail through different generations of cybernetic theory, from the work of Wiener, Shannon and Weaver onwards. Her main argument here is that information can never do away with matter or the body, because to exist it must '*always* be instantiated in a medium' (1999: 13, emphasis in original). For this reason, she talks not of computer simulation, hyperreality or of the possibility of downloading mind or consciousness into a machine, but rather of *embodied virtuality*, and of new forms of subjectivity that are born out of the interface between bodies and computer-based technologies. This approach gives rise to an alternative form of posthuman realism: 'my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality' (Hayles, 1999: 5). This vision, in turn, frames Hayles' *Writing Machines* (2002), which considers literary works in light of the inscription technologies through which they are produced. Hayles extends this position by stating that 'computational engines and artificial intelligences' can never be treated simply as virtual or simulated forms for they cannot work without 'sophisticated bases in the real world' (2002: 6). In sum, matter, or more importantly, *embodiment*, are seen to be key features of the so-called virtual age.

The idea of the posthuman has also been prominent in recent debates over the future of liberal democracy. Frances Fukuyama – appointed by George Bush to the President's Bioethics Council in early 2002 – has argued vocally for state regulation of new biotechnologies that threaten to

change the basis of human nature. Fukuyama defines this nature, in the first instance, in statistical terms: it 'is the sum of the behaviour and characteristics that are typical of the human species, arising from genetic rather than environmental factors' (2002: 130), but also prioritizes the uniqueness of human language (2002: 140), consciousness and emotions (2002: 169). This 'stable human essence', he claims, underpins the basis of liberal democracy, and most notably the American constitution:

> The political equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence rests on the empirical fact of natural human equality. We vary greatly as individuals and by culture, but we share a common humanity that allows every human being to potentially communicate with and enter into a moral relationship with every other human being on the planet. (Fukuyama, 2002: 9)

While it is far from clear that 'natural human equality' is indeed an 'empirical fact', Fukuyama's argument about the posthuman is straightforward: if contemporary biotechnology can change the basis of human nature then it threatens also to change that which gives 'stable continuity to our experience as a species' (2002: 7), and upon which all political rights are built: 'the fact of natural equality' (2002: 216). Indeed, he warns that while it might be assumed that the posthuman world (the world of altered human natures) might look like life today – 'free, equal, prosperous, caring, compassionate' (Fukuyama, 2002: 218) – it is likely to be worse than we expect, for the waning of the natural rights of liberal democracy may well be accompanied by new, extreme forms of hierarchy and competition, and 'full of social conflict as a result' (2002: 218).

This presentation of life today as 'free, equal, prosperous, caring, compassionate' glosses over the fierce inequalities of global capitalism in order to protect and conserve the existing state or 'nature' of things. Katherine Hayles, meanwhile, challenges Fukuyama on different grounds, for she argues that his belief that 'humans are special because they have human nature' is not only tautological but is also based on a false separation of human nature from technology. By way of response, she 'disrupts' his position by claiming that

> . . . it must also be 'human nature' to use technology, since from the beginning of the species human beings have always used technology. Moreover, technology has co-evolved throughout millennia with human beings and helped in myriad profound and subtle ways to make human nature what it is. (Hayles, 2005: 144)

For Hayles, then, there can be no easy separation between technology and the contested realm of 'the human'. This, in part, is because advanced computer-based technologies have become a, if not *the*, reference point for defining 'humans' and for measuring their capabilities. This situation marks a reversal of the cybernetic theory of Norbert Wiener, the purpose of which was less to show that man was a machine than to demonstrate that a machine could function like a man' (Hayles, 1999: 7). By contrast, Hayles observes that, today, 'rather than the human being the measure of all things, as the Greeks thought, increasingly the computer is taken as the measure of all things, including humans' (1998). In recent computer science, for example, influential figures such as Ray Kurzweil, Hans Moravec and Rodney Brooks have explored possibilities for the future convergence of humans and machines by downplaying the differences between these entities. At the same time, however, computers are also key reference points for more conservative thinkers such as Fukuyama, who concentrates 'on those aspects of behaviours that machines are least likely to share' (Hayles, 2005: 132), most notably emotions. What unites these positions is that the computational machine is taken as a benchmark for defining and understanding what is 'human'. What separates them is their approach to history, for while Brooks, Kurzweil and Moravec, along with a whole host of science fiction writers, have used the future to question 'the human', Fukuyama, by contrast, anchors human nature in the past, specifically in a 'history of human evolution' (Hayles, 2005: 147) that also allows for the presence of a human soul (Fukuyama, 2002: 170). Hayles, meanwhile, refuses to address the posthuman through either backward-looking conservatism or futurology, but calls instead for 'principled debate' about how to 'achieve the future we want' (2005: 148). In so doing, she reveals her own political preferences:

> What it means to be human finally is not so much about intelligent machines as it is about how to create just societies in a transnational global world that may include in its purview both carbon and silicon citizens. (Hayles, 2005: 148)

This position, in turn, is part of wider contemporary debate over the meaning and future of the human and of nature more generally in an age of rapid technological change. These debates currently range from the basis of cyborg citizenship and the possibility of forging a posthuman democracy through to the politics of nature and the challenge of governing science, and even extend to highly charged exchanges over abortion

and the point at which human life can be recognized as such (Fernández-Armesto, 2004: 148–50). These debates are made ever more pressing by the following paradox:

> Over the last thirty or forty years, we have invested an enormous amount of thought, emotion, treasure, and blood in what we call human values, human rights, the defence of human dignity and of human life. Over the same period, quietly but devastatingly, science and philosophy have combined to undermine our traditional concept of humankind. (Fernández-Armesto, 2004: 1)

It is in this paradox, however, that the value of the concept of the posthuman really lies: in the possibility of *rethinking* what we call human values, human rights and human dignity against the backdrop of fast-developing bio-technologies that open both the idea and the body of the human to reinvention and potential redesign.

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The Inhuman

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The inhuman is perhaps most readily understood as a moral category, designating actions and practices that contravene in the most extreme way the parameters set for acceptable human behaviour. Ironically, however, the inhuman is thus a category that constitutes and saves the human; it upholds the human in its certainty and rectitude, projecting all animality and barbarity outwards. However, there is another inhuman, one that has been most eloquently described by Jean-François Lyotard, and which, while remaining a constitutive outside, constitutes us not in the certainty of our knowledge, practices and moral codes, but undermines our certainty, deposes the subject of knowledge

and questions our ordering of the world. While the inhuman understood as evil reinforces our sense of self and secures our autonomy, this other inhuman, understood as that which escapes and yet animates us, is the moment of both radical disruption and radical dependence. In this regard the inhuman does not serve the human but is a challenge to it.

With regard to the inhuman understood as evil, it is never we who are inhuman; it is always the other. When we kill it is done in the name of freedom and is done *for the sake of* the human. When they kill it is in the name of tyranny or extremism; it is an outrage and is absolutely inhuman. Of course, the eradication of the inhuman, or at least the war against its terror, legitimates the global extension of what is most human, understood today as the pacific beneficence of an invisible economic hand. Thus, despite the supposed processes of decolonization