Traditions of Yoga in Existential Posthuman Praxis

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Introduction

Francesca Ferrando's Philosophical Posthumanism is a wide-ranging book that introduces the foundations for a change of human self-conception in our times. As such it touches on history, epistemology, ontology and praxis. It marshals a vast web of interrelated ideas and thinkers that illumine the field from many directions. My approach in this commentary considers three important chapters in the book, "Antihumanism and the Ubermensch" (45-53), "Technologies of the Self as Posthumanist (Re)Sources (82-84)" and "Posthumanist Perspectivism" (148-157).

"Technologies of the Self" is a phrase attributed to Michel Foucault, as found in his lectures of the 1980s, such as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* in 1981-82 (2005), *Technologies of the Self* in 1982 (1988), *The Government of the Self and Others* in 1983 (2011) and *The Courage of Truth* in 1984 (2012). In the posthumanist context Foucault's use of the term "technology" is interesting, given the transhumanist celebration of technology in the exceeding of the human. That the contemporary escalation to a technological ontology is not unexpected is known to all who have read Heidegger's prescient *Question Concerning Technology*, originally published in 1954 (1982), in which he shows how modernity is characterized by the technological turn. At the same time, in this essay Heidegger explains the essence of technology as a form of revealing equivalent to poiesis (10-13). Foucault's revisionary reappropriation of the term "technology" to refer to subjective self-fashioning is indebted to Heidegger's insight as its inverse correlate (1997, 152). According to Foucault's enlarged definition, all methodical processes leading to a goal may be called technology. Seen thus, he posits four kinds of technology—that of production, that of signification, that of governmentality and that of subject-formation (technologies of the self) (1988, 18). What we normally call technology is restricted to the first of these four. Foucault's earlier work was largely about the relationship of the first three forms of technology in determining the fourth. A major thread in this analysis was the displacement and secular normalization of "technologies of confession" from church practices to institutions of modernity such as schools, factories, hospitals, prisons and states, so as to form subjects through the disciplinary means of creating conscience (1978, 59; 1988, 49).

In the lectures of his last years, he turned his attention to the early practices by which individuals fashioned their subjectivities in Hellenistic Greece or in early Christianity (1988, 19). Historiographically, one may consider the institution of confession in Christianity as a socio-political appropriation of such personal technologies of the self in early Christian

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spirituality, often themselves a displacement of earlier Stoic practices (1988, 44-49). According to Foucault, if his earlier work about subject-making by social institutions refers to subjection, the making of the subject by the self through active practices may be called subjectivation (1990, 28-32). Subjectivation involves a wresting of agency from the technologies of subjection and the creative reinsertion of new horizons and destinies in engagement with modernity. Modernity's subject-making technologies, as displacements of orthodox religion's, are a secularization of the same (1988, 49).

Thus, Ferrando's distinction between spirituality and religion is apposite here in distinguishing between these two. Ferrando describes spirituality as "the tendency to conceive existence more extensively than the ordinary perception of individual beings" (84). She contrasts it with religion, which she sees as "characterized by a set of principles (dogmas), which define its specificities… and empirically sustained by hierarchical structures based on acquired knowledges, needed in order to preserve those teachings through historical changes" (84). She thus sees technologies of the self both in its premodern and modern possibilities as internal practices of liberation within regimes of alien or orthodox subjection. For example, her chapter on "Technologies of the Self" looks at the colonized "others" of the West and by extension at postcolonial subalterns and non-human others (82-84). These peripheries and outsides problematize the hegemonic humanism of modernity by their ex-centric forms of self-making based on alternative cultural histories resistant to the norms of modern humanism. Ferrando refers to oral histories, folk art, performance practice and spiritual praxis in this regard (83-84).

Perspectivism and the Ubermensch are both concepts introduced by Nietzsche. In works such as The Genealogy of Morality (2006) and The Will to Power (1968), Nietzsche rejects the idea of "absolute" or "neutral" knowledge, which may be thought to be an assumption of Enlightenment epistemology and its project of scientific knowledge. Instead, he holds that all knowledge is situated and an interpretation (1968, 267). Such interpretations can either pose as absolute truth, knowledge production as a will to power, which makes for the war of dogmas that has become exacerbated in modernity due to the coexistence of multitudinous cultural histories, ideologies and religions. On the other hand, a divestment from absolute epistemology and acceptance of the relativity of perspectival knowledges opens the path to a world of plural becomings. The right to knowledge-perspectives as forms of related individuation is also linked to the idea of self-exceeding in Nietzsche, an individualized trajectory leading to the Ubermesch or Overman (1982, 197-98). The premise here is that there is no static essence to the human, rather the power of perspectival interpretation at the service of self-making or self-exceeding towards the posthuman telos of the Ubermensch (1982, 126-27).

This view of the human as a transitory being without a fixed essence is also contrary to the assumption of the Enlightenment, which centralized human identity in the rational ego or cogito. Such an assumption pervades the history of modernity, separating the human as subject from the world as object of knowledge, possession, manipulation and enjoyment. The identification of who is properly human is also at stake here, the center of privilege resting on Western White Rational Man, its "others" including non-Western humans, imaginative or otherwise non-rational humans, women, children, animals, plants and non-living things. All these "others" are not acknowledged as fully human and hence objectified as commodities fit for colonization, subordination or exploitation. Nietzsche's perspectivism as well as his notion

of the transience of human identity moving towards the Ubermensch challenges this view and leads to the critique of humanism in postmodern and posthumanist thinking. A good example of such critique is Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* (1993, 217-265), in which he declared himself as antihumanist based on the problems noted above.

In Ferrando's chapter on Posthumanist Perspectivism (148-157), she follows Nietzsche in challenging the definition of epistemology as a seeking for universal and absolute knowledge in favor of a plurally interpreted view of reality. As an example, from a non-Western traditional source, she offers the Jain philosophy of anekāntavāda (148), which extends a fundamental compassion to all beings based on their right to difference. Such a difference is not merely a difference of opinion or knowledge but a difference in the mode of embodiment and a difference in the trajectory of becoming, which leads to its own kind of knowledge.

This brings us to the question of the will to power, also dealt with by Ferrando in this chapter. Ferrando invokes physicist and philosopher Karen Barad in this regard who speaks of a fundamental agential ontology that is omnipresent from the quantum level to the most complex organisms and organizations (155-159). In the chapter on "Antihumanism and the Ubermensch" (45-53), Ferrando introduces this lineage of the posthuman, but eventually rejects Nietzsche's Ubermensch on the ground that he premises it on a derogatory supersession of the "brute" or animal (50). Rather, following Rosi Braidotti's adaptation of Deleuze and Guattari, Ferrando sees the will to power and posthuman perspectivism in terms of a refusal of essentialism and an inter-species transversal bonding, which may be called nomadic. Adapting the language of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, we may call this individuation as relational cosmogenesis.

This constellation of related ideas brings up the Indian field of spiritual praxis known as yoga. The term yoga has today entered the contemporary English lexicon, but like the term avatar and many others, this entry is a reduction and hegemonic appropriation that belongs to a semiotic of capitalization and not an engagement. In India, the region of its origin, yoga has plural meanings spread over a field that may best be characterized as "technologies of the self" in the Foucauldian sense. The earliest usage of the term may be traced to the Katha Upanishad, around 5th century B.C.E. where it refers to a "yoking" of heterogeneous faculties in order to achieve a transcendental goal of becoming.[2] This general meaning of yoga persists through its varieties over the centuries, yogas differing according to their goal and the faculties and means employed for their achievement, thought of as a coming into union with a state of being. It thus consists in a refusal to accept the given constitution of the individual as fixed and an identification of elements and methods leading to a new state of being, or new "non-human" individuation. This field of praxis may be identified in texts and other forms of evidence long before the appearance of the term in the Katha Upanishad, going back perhaps to the Indus Valley (c. 2700 BCE) and the Rig Veda (c. 1800 BCE).

Perhaps around the 2nd century BCE, yoga developed a specialized meaning as the name of an eclectic school of praxis, which co-existed with its general meaning as a technology of cosmic individuation. In the Bhagavad Gita, thought to have been formalized between the 2nd century B.C.E. - 1st century C.E., both these meanings co-exist, each chapter of the Gita

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[2] The term yoga is explicitly used in Katha Upanishad I.2.12 in the context of union of Self (atman) with the immanent (*gudamanupravistam*) Divine (deva). It is also used in the form *yuktam* (yoked) in Katha Upanishad 1.3.4 to refer to the union of body, intelligence, sense-mind, senses and Self (atman) at the service of the Enjoyer (*bhoktā*). See Aurobindo (2001, 110, 114).

referring to itself to as a specific yoga, while the text refers in many places to the specialized system of Yoga in a comparative frame with another system known as Sankhya. Patanjali's yoga sutra, a text believed to have been codified around the 4th century C.E., is a later version of this specialized praxis which the Bhagavad Gita equates with its own "karma yoga" or dynamic praxis of works. Without laboring the point, for our purposes it is clear that this general field of praxis, of reconstituting heterogeneous psychological elements into new forms of cosmic and transcendental (trans)individuation can be assimilated both to Foucault's technologies of the self and to Nietzsche's embodied and existential posthuman perspectivism and will to power as self-exceeding, leading to an Overhuman, albeit not a rejection of the animal but a cosmicity inclusive of all beings. Ferrando's discussion in these chapters opens the possibility of including this non-Western field of praxis within the purview of posthumanism. Given that the post in posthumanism indicates an exceeding of the Eurocentric definition of human arising in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the inclusion of these non-Western cultural histories of plural perspectival praxis leading to new goals of becoming could offer a salutary extension to the Western discourse of posthumanism.

Karl Jaspers (1962), in his astute short introduction to the Buddha in his *Great Philosophers* series, Volume 1, draws attention to the difference between the place of thought in western philosophy and in yoga. Referring to the Buddha, but in a manner common to the general field of yoga, he says:

> Logical ideas create space by freeing us from our bonds with the finite. But it is only by meditation that truths are reinforced and established, that full certainty is attained. It cannot be said that one is primary, the other a mere consequence. One is, rather, the confirmation and guarantee of the other. Each in its own way prepares us for the truth… In speculation, meditation and ethos alike, it is the human will that sets the goal and attains it… That is why Buddha is forever calling for an effort of the will. All a man's powers must be engaged (37).

He concludes his introduction by drawing a central lesson from the Buddha's life. He says, "[i]t points to the questionable essence of man. A man is not what he just happens to be; he is open. For him there is no one correct solution" (50).

It is clear from these quotes that, as with Nietzsche, Bergson or Deleuze, Jaspers sees the place of thought not as an activity for establishing a static and absolute Truth but as a servant of the will which is central to life seen as a problem of becoming. It is also important to note from these remarkable passages how close Jasper's depiction of the Buddha is to what Ferrando would, I feel, equate to posthuman perspectivism.

Returning to technologies of the self, seen as a response to the hegemony of normative humanism, it may be of interest to note that what is called yoga in the West today, a regime of physical posture and breathing at the service of the fitness industry and stress-free capitalism, took its rebirth in modern times as a technology of anticolonial biopolitical resistance in India. Several of the popularizers of modern physical yoga (hatha yoga, asana yoga) in India combined traditional postures and breath control with scientific exercise regimes, as a way of exceeding normal physical capacity in response to colonial physical

punishment.[3] Further, when Vivekananda introduced "yoga" in his lectures at the Parliament of World Religions at the turn of the 19th/20th century, it is exactly as an alternative and plural telos of human becoming to the static image of the human, and of human becoming as the acquisition of absolute knowledge and cosmic control which characterizes modernity (Sherma, 2021). One can read this too as a form of anticolonial resistance, of an epistemological revolution in alignment with Nietzsche's and Jasper's existentialism and contemporary philosophical posthumanism.

This revisionary view, both of epistemology and of yoga, made one with contemporary posthumanism, can offer a much-needed praxeological toolbox for a participatory science of relational cosmogenesis in which individuals approach the problems of global co-existence as plural collective problems of becoming. Perhaps yoga, seen in this light, can be the sequel to Ferrando's philosophical posthumanism, opening the technologies of the self towards Nietzsche's overhuman, seen not as a rejection of the animal, but a deep identity through relationality with all the beings of earth and world.

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[3] For the influence of Western exercises on modern asana practice, see Singleton (2010). Examples of pioneers of modern hatha yoga in India who were nationalists, include Swami Kuvalayananda (1883-1966) in Western India (Gujarat and Maharashtra) and Binshu Charan Ghosh (1903-1970) in Eastern India (Bengal). Kuvalayananda taught and influenced several of the later popularizers of asana practice in India and the West, such as South Indian yoga guru Krishnamacharya. He also promoted scientific research into posture practice at his institute in Lonavala. Ghosh organized demonstrations of seemingly superhuman physical feats across Eastern India, boosting the physical self-confidence of nationalists and others. Bikram Choudhury, a very influential yoga studio franchise holder in the US (presently in exile), is a student of Bishnu Ghosh.
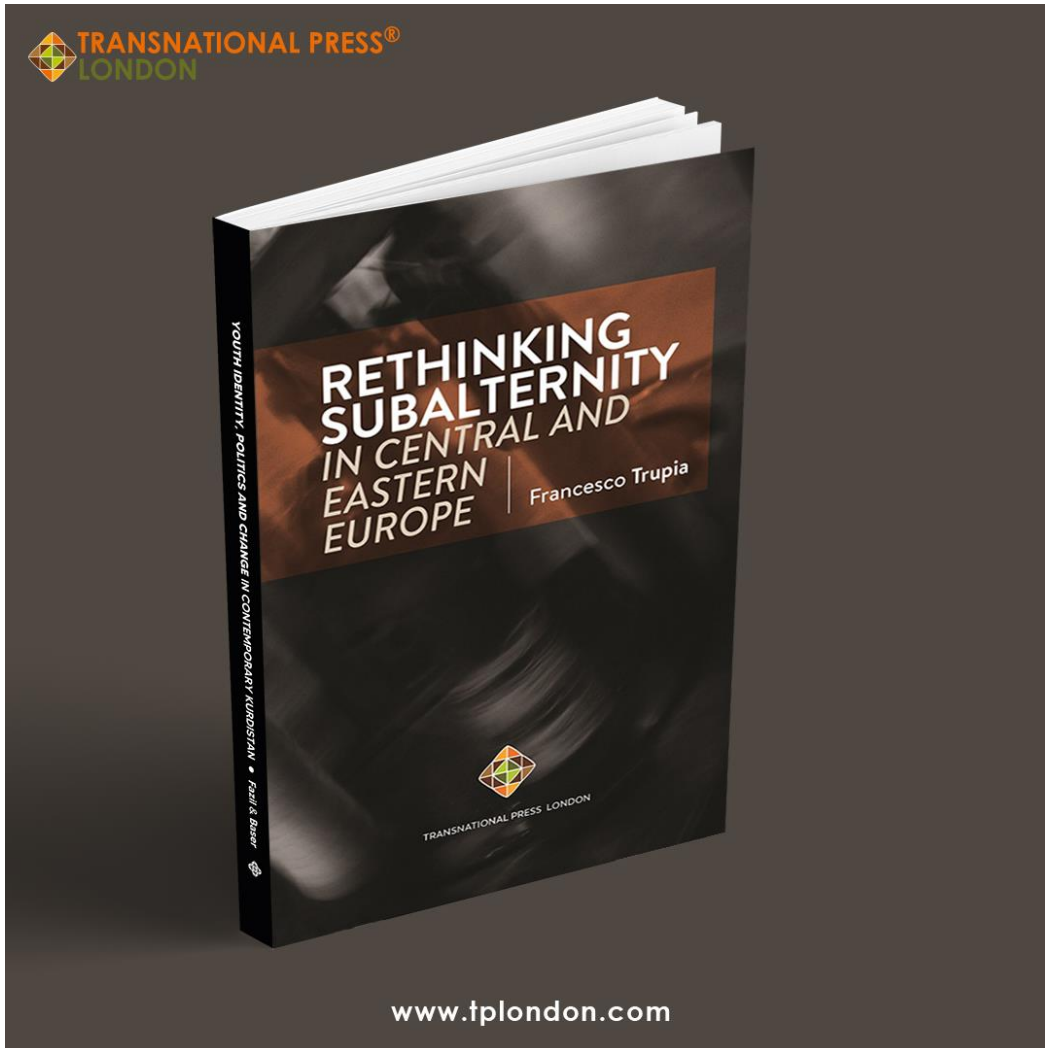
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