Journal of Posthumanism
May 2021
Volume: 1, No: 1, pp. 107 –120
ISSN: 2634-3576 (Print) | ISSN 2634-3584 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/jp

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 17 December 2020 Accepted: 1 April 2021
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i1.1281

Dialogue on Posthuman Life, Death and COVID-19

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This dialogue between Francesca Ferrando (NYU) and Asijit Datta (University of Calcutta) is based on the conference "Literature, Disease and Mind", organized by the Heritage College, University of Calcutta, India, which took place online, on June 5th, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legenda

AD: Asijit Datta

FF: Francesca Ferrando

AD: Good evening to Dr. Ferrando, and a Happy Environment Day. I think we have chosen an appropriate date for this event. What I want to begin with is where do you place disease in the immediacy of the Anthropocene epoch? How important is disease in this epoch?

FF: Thank you for this question. You're right, what we are experiencing is part of a process that can and should be definitely located in a wider picture. The wider picture, in geological terms, can be defined as the Anthropocene—the era in which humans are recognized not only as part of the whole picture but more importantly, as a geological force, as a species that has a direct impact on many other species on planet Earth. For instance, we are at the moment in a sixth mass extinction where thousands of species get extinct every year because of human action. It's very important to locate these conditions that we are experiencing with COVID-19. This is not the only challenge we are going to face. There is a lot going on, and we can no longer see humans as victims of diseases, of other species, or of the grandiose energy of planet Earth. We are part of this, and a lot of diseases that we are seeing—a lot of the viruses that we are experiencing in the twenty-first century—are connected directly to human actions in relation to non-human species and non-human animals. For instance, one of the theories about COVID-19 is connected to the wet market. There are other theories out there, but this is just one of many other viruses that were introduced to the human species because of human behavior. So, I think it's very important to really locate, as you mentioned, these crises in their global terms and in relation to the Anthropocene, because if we do not, we are just going to see more crises not only related to viruses and diseases, but also to climate change, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, etc. In this sense, Posthumanism really comes along as a philosophy that is not just something you write about or do in academia. It is absolutely fundamental not

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to see these crises as the exception of a flourishing twenty-first century, full of technological hope, which is sometimes the type of narrative that we find in Transhumanism, but as one of the marks of the Anthropocene. We are playing a key role in the development of outcomes resulting from human interactions with non-human others in the biosphere, in ways that have to be readdressed. I think there is a lot of trauma and tragedy coming with COVID-19, but there is also an existential element, pushing us to face who we are, not only on an individual level, but also on a species level. When this started to happen, I really had to do that. I did a lot of meditation and really had to stop and silence myself, realizing that we were getting into a schizophrenic society where there was never enough—not enough work, jobs, trips, journeys, conferences. Nothing was enough. We were in this race against death, but eventually, we are all going to die anyway, apart from COVID-19. This crisis that we are facing is also an existential awakening, and we really need to reconsider not only our individual location, but also our role as a species. Beyond boundaries and nations, as a species, what are we doing here? This is a fundamental, political, philosophical, ethical, and existential question.

AD: Thank you for your response, Dr. Ferrando. Now that you've mentioned the Chinese open market, and since the virus has come from the animals, do you think that respecting the space between ourselves and non-human others is perhaps the only solution now? You are related, and, therefore, you leave them alone, whereas Posthumanism always tells us to include. Do you think respecting distance or leaving them as they are is perhaps the better solution?

FF: That's a wonderful question. I have to say yes. I think that, as a species, we need to think of ourselves in relation to the planet. We need to see how much land we have taken, how many trees we have cut, how many species are getting extinct because of our actions. We need to realize how much more we need because it is never enough. We can cut all the trees of the world and kill all non-human life to then find that we can no longer survive on this planet as a species. The other species are allowing us to survive. The trees give us oxygen. The bees pollinate the plants. That's why we're alive and can breathe, and eat, and be healthy. At this point, we need to think of Posthumanism in design terms—in engineering, architectural, and technological terms. I think we have taken enough land and polluted enough spaces. I believe at this point we can go to the places that have been polluted due to human actions and bring them back to livable conditions. But I absolutely think the places we have not touched yet should be considered as World Parks and National Parks—no humans, just space for other species. I also believe we can learn a lot from indigenous communities on how to respect the land and be guardians, instead of destroyers. I get more and more cynical when I see people trying to create an "ecological community" and then go into wild areas and cut down more trees for more buildings. Enough! If we want to build an ecological community, let's go to a place that has already been polluted by human action and cleanse that area. There have been a lot of studies done on this, by engineers, for instance, trying to discover how to create an ecological balance in places that have been contaminated by humans, because we have been the ones polluting the planet the most in the last few centuries. This is not just an ethical stand, but a political one. We need to have governments understand that we cannot allow trees to be cut down anymore, and that development at this point means ecological balance. For me, this is fundamental. We will begin to realize how much damage we are doing not only to others but to ourselves. At the core of the whole issue, we are not separated from others—we are related. For instance, like you mentioned, many of these diseases are coming from non-human animals, and this is because we have invaded their areas. We are eating them. We are

killing them. We are torturing them. So, I think that a very important point that has to be understood with kindness, including by politicians, is that the best thing we can do at this point, if we are really talking about development, is to not allow more areas to be cut down and developed, which would just be an ecological tragedy. Tacitus, who was a historian in Ancient Rome, used to say *ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant,* which means, "where they create a desert, they call it peace". And he was talking about humans—Romans, specifically—who were going around killing in the name of "peace". That was not peace; they were just massacring others. But now we can use this idea for non-human others as well. Development can no longer be thought of as going into an area that was thriving with non-human life, killing all the animals, destroying their habitats, and developing buildings for humans when we have a lot of space that we can restore. Of course, there are humans who still need houses, and that is very important to keep in mind. In Italy, for instance, there are beautiful, vacant areas that have been dismissed because people want to go and live in the cities. Now that might change due to COVID-19. But a lot of beautiful little towns, all made of stone and ancient materials, are completely abandoned. These places should be the centre of our attention, not cutting down more trees, using up more land, and destroying more ecological resources. The "selfish" nature of humans can actually be of help in making the change. Ecological imbalance is highly detrimental for us. Think of the high rates of cancer. When I was a child, if someone had cancer, it was a tragedy. Now, it's so not unusual for people to have cancer. This ecological devastation is also affecting human health. Think of skin cancer, for instance, which is often the result of changes in global climate. Going back to your question, I think you are absolutely right. This is a serious issue, not just something we can theorize about. That's why this is a wakeup call for all of us at this point. Academics cannot just write about this. We need to bring this awareness to the public, and do that with kindness, not with anger. I don't believe in anger as an effective tool; in fact, it may work in the short term, but in the long run its damaging effects are going to bring even more devastation. In this regard, I think that India as a nation brought so much insight to this world, embracing the Gandhian satyagraha movement. The fact that India won independence from England in a peaceful and non-violent way is a great lesson for all of us, and to all humans who are going to come into this world. So, I'm not talking about anger, but we have to be very clear about these things because it is not just something we are writing about. This has to do with our life, our existence, and our Earth. So, thank you for this question.

AD: Thank you for your response. For those of you who do not know, Dr. Ferrando has written a brilliant book you should read called *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2020). In it, there is a fascinating portion where you write about the genetic mutation in human beings over the ages due to consumption of non-human milk, which of course led to the domestication of animals and dairy farming. Do you feel the same way about meat consumption? Where do we draw the line then? Excessive animal consumption is perhaps responsible for the COVID-19 disaster, and one of the highly affected zones in the U.S. has been the meatpacking factories. So, do you feel that, as with the case of milk, we are also manipulated by meat consumption?

FF: My first reaction to your question would be absolutely yes, but maybe I should not say "absolutely". I have been a vegetarian for ethical reasons since I was a teenager; I started around the age of twelve and then at fifteen, I fully adopted vegetarianism. A lot of people in the posthuman community are not vegetarians. I have been thinking about this question, in relation to rights for non-humans. If you are talking about non-human animals as persons, how could anyone eat a piece of steak or meat at a restaurant after a conference on ecological

crises, without seeing the ethical conflict? That is a question I've been asking myself for a long time because I could not see how people could write about non-human persons, and then go to the nearby restaurant and order meat for everyone. So, I came to this understanding of the movement and also of my location in this: Posthumanism, as a philosophy, can be addressed in many different ways. Before we delve into this point, let's take a step back and ask the question: what is philosophy? When you look at Indian philosophy, for instance, you are looking at many traditions focusing on the question: "who am I?" In the process of getting to understand existence, you realize that you are not separated, but are part of the divine. This was also the case in many other traditions. In Ancient Greece, for instance, philosophy often did not just involve teaching your students. It was certainly about what you could become because philosophy would change the way you exist. Philosophy itself is a Greek notion which means "the love for wisdom", or as some people prefer to say, "the wisdom of love". We are thinking about something that should not just be a job. Eventually, philosophy became something that is taught, which is great; it became a part of academic tradition, which is also great, but, in that, it also became something that can just be taught. So, you can be a philosopher and just teach philosophy, but not apply those principles to your own life. In that sense, I would say that within the posthumanist community, some people have taken philosophy and Posthumanism more as something that they teach, write, and think about, but it is not something that necessarily changes their lives. I am of another school of thought according to which Posthumanism is changing our life; it is an existential approach—existential Posthumanism. And in that sense, it allows you to ask questions about your daily routine. What about the food you eat? What about the thoughts you have? What about your interactions with others? In that sense, I think meat consumption should, of course, be addressed by the posthumanist community. First of all, is it ethical? Of course, some people have particular reasons for eating meat (some may have specific needs; some may be starving, I'm not talking about exceptions). But in general, if you could eat any other source of protein that does not involve killing some type of life, would you or should you still do it? My answer to this question is no. I think that posthumanists should really reconsider their diet. One of the causes of ecological dearth, especially in the Amazon, for instance, is cutting down a lot of trees to lay pastures for cows for McDonald's that will eventually be slaughtered and eaten in very unhealthy ways. So, I think that this question is at the core of our discussion. But again, I would also like to clarify that I'm not generalizing my stand on Posthumanism for everyone. I know that for some people, Posthumanism is just something that they enjoy intellectually, but that is not the case for me. I think that my intellect, if separated from the way I live, is not very helpful, because ideas alone cannot bring ontological change if they are not applied. So, in that sense, I reached the conclusion through years of reflecting that Posthumanism is a way of existing. But, again, just to clarify, not everyone in the Posthumanist community thinks this way, and this is fine! I love plurality and diversity; I love plurilogues even more than dialogues, and this is why I would like to recognize all these other positions. But I also have to be respectfully loyal to what I stand for, and from my perspective, at this point, Posthumanism is not just something that you write about: it has to change your life, especially now with COVID-19 and all the crises that we are facing as a human species. We as academics have to turn, from caterpillars, into butterflies, into public intellectuals. We need to embrace this change. It is not enough anymore to just write academic papers. This is what I feel, and I have to be loyal to my existential understanding.

AD: Thank you Professor Ferrando. You also mentioned in your book the compulsive separation between humans and non-human animals. To me, the animalization of humans, inducing the non-human within humans, is another sort of diseasing. I am using disease in its verb form here. This compulsory separation from non-human others and the human others prescribed by the humanizing process is uncannily too explicit now due to the Coronavirus. Especially in a country like India, we suddenly find the 'animalized' others as migrant laborers out on the streets. They are returning home because there is not enough care where they used to work, and the government there is asking them to return home. On the other hand, those living where they are going refuse to acknowledge their existence. Sight itself has become a problem, as if the animal is suddenly out of the zoo. And one asks oneself, "is it because of 'them' that we have the virus?" Is this an example of the classic instance of demonization and diseasing that we always use the virus as a sort of modus operandi, as a sort of operating factor for dominating the other?

FF: Thank you for asking this important question. I am going to address this topic in a wide frame because we need to think about this deeply and in great detail. When we talk about Posthumanism, I eventually had to come to a clear understanding about what, exactly, it was. On the one side, we have Transhumanism, a different movement, which explicitly wants human enhancement. Being in this field for a long time, I started to notice that people knew what Transhumanism was about, but when you talked about Posthumanism, there was a lot of confusion. What is Posthumanism? Why is it relevant? What do people want? We eventually came up with three clear layers that will answer your question. The first one is post-humanism, which denotes a real, sincere understanding and acknowledgement of humanity as a plurality. The human is not a singular notion that can be concentrated or clarified as one specific type of human, which, historically—if you think of the history of sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, colonialism—has been white, male, Western, Northern, European, etc. In that sense, through this first layer, we understand that the human, as a category, has never been one. The "human" can be seen as a process of humanization, and in this process, some humans have not been considered human at all. There are many cases involving different types of crises—economic, biological, ecological, or disease-related—where you immediately see a long, ancient tradition of racism, ethnocentrism, and classism coming in, and this trend is global. The "foreign" becomes the evil one. The one that is not directly connected to you becomes the issue or the scapegoat, the cause of the problem. And this is not just in India; this is everywhere: in Italy, Italians with non-Italians; Europeans with Italians; in the United States, with people from Asia, for instance. Wherever you are not the norm, you become someone who becomes the scapegoat. I have seen this globally with COVID-19, but this is something we have seen in history over and over again. And I think this issue is very ancient. It can be traced to the beginning of cities when people started to define themselves in relation to a stable group. In this sense, I really think that the problem is in the process of "humanizing", and in teaching humans to identify in strict categories. As a young child, you don't have an identity; you are everything. You ask a young child what they want, this or that, they say both. They don't know the answer to who they are because they see themselves in everything. Then, especially through socialization and what we are taught in society, is when we learn to categorize ourselves very clearly. Are you a female, male, black, white, hetero, gay, Indian, non-Indian? All these dichotomic categories become something you need to embrace on some level and choose from, or rather accept. This is where deep work is to be done in philosophical and educational terms, where we teach young children from day one about their

relation to diversity, which includes their own diversity. If you think of yourself when you were a young child versus yourself now, you are different. There is also a relation between you and all the other humans out there. Your question is very important because it is addressing the very first layer of Posthumanism. Some people like a more "exotic" element of Posthumanism. They jump to artificial intelligence and the non-human without realizing that there is no way you can jump to non-human diversity if you do not address human diversity first and acknowledge diversity as a crucial aspect of evolution. This is an evolving species that is constantly changing. So, the first layer of Posthumanism I would address is post-humanism: viewing humanity as a plurality in which we understand that we are all different, and where we acknowledge diversity with a deep respect and understanding of the fact that we are part of this. And of course, it is deeper than that because if you think of perspectivism—your own location, the way you are looking at this screen right now—we are still in this together, but we are also different, as Rosi Braidotti often remarks. We are manifesting this moment with all these people with us right now. And everyone will have a different but related experience of this moment. So, in that sense, we need to address the human as a plural notion: humans. Only then can we address post-anthropocentrism. Enough of seeing the human as the most exceptional or the most intelligent. Enough of all these grand narratives implying that Anthropocentrism is fine. It is not. Human-centrism is as deleterious for humans as racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism. So, that's the second layer. They are not in a hierarchical order, but they have to be present at the same time to really have a posthumanist approach. The third layer is post-dualism, on which India has much to teach, considering all the non-dualistic philosophies that have developed there. On one level, if you go beyond racism, ethnocentrism, classism, etc., and still keep a rigid dualistic approach in your mind (I am not referring to the fluid dualism of the Dao), then you are going to have the same issues. The future may involve artificial intelligence (AI) versus humans: you are always going to face these dualistic approaches. You need to build a core of how we teach humans to become humans. And I think identity has to be a reoriented vision. We can be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or atheist—whatever it is—but we need to understand that these perspectives are part of a big picture. They can function as important sites of personal inspiration but cannot be "universalized": we need to consider them collectively as well, as specific perspectives in relation to other perspectives, enriching each other. In that sense, post-dualism is really important: not seeing the other as the enemy or as the absolute other; in fact, rigid dichotomies in human history often end in tragic ways, with systemic violence eventually escalating to genocides. Instead, we should learn, as members of the human species, to see the others as enriching our perspective, even if their views are radically different than ours. Through diversity, you can really expand and understand more deeply who you are, which is a rare ontological gift since you are all the people, colors, genders, and nations, and all the diversity that is flourishing through the manifestation of existence.

AD: Let us shift to technology for a bit. The way I understand Posthumanism, it's a very sensitive balance between technology and ethics. In Transhumanism, technology seems to always come with "advancements". Are the posthumanist scholars also asking for a check on technological growth? History shows that "responsible" or effective use of technology is far too utopian. I understand interconnectedness, but hasn't technology always been about extraction and appropriation rather than being cohabitational? How do you negotiate between biowar and bioethics?

FF: Thanks for this question. Let me connect it to our previous discussion. I mentioned that one way to make Posthumanism clear was to focus on three important layers: post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism. I have also adopted another description that I use to make it more transparent, especially to those who don't come from academia—and there is a lot of interest in this topic from everyone. Anyone might ask what Posthumanism is, not solely intellectuals or scholars. So, I also describe Posthumanism as an open way to understand the human in relation, for instance, to ecology and technology. On one side, we are relocating the human on planet Earth, as we mentioned in the first question. We are part of a species, a planet, and an era. On the other side, we are talking in material terms of the human in relation to technology. Of course, the question here is how you define technology, because some technologies have been used in human-centered or anthropocentric ways, often contributing to the devastation of ecological areas. In this sense, I would like to mention the brilliant philosopher, but rather immoral human being, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), according to whom technology (derived from the Greek term *techne* and related to the two notions of *episteme* and *poiesis*) is "a way of revealing". I would like to explore this notion in existential terms. I like to think of technology not just as our computers, cell phones, laptops etc., but really as anything that allows us to manifest existence in different ways. Some people even say that fire is technology, and, with fire comes cooking. Cooking was at the core of the development of technology. In that sense, it depends on how you define technology. But I do not want to regard technology as something we are using, something akin to a tool, because as a tool, it only reflects human biases. We have already been behaving in anthropocentric ways, and technology is also often used in the same way. Now, if we do not see technology as a tool, but as a way of revealing, as a manifestation of existence—*Brahman* (taking from the Hindu tradition)—it becomes something that goes beyond the human, something we need to fully recognize, dignify, and acknowledge with existential dignity. In this sense, I like to think of technology, including AI, as partaking in existential quests. I would also like to discuss eco-technology, because technology has to be thought of in ecological terms as well. Most laptops come with minerals extracted, for instance, from the Republic of Congo, and mined in rebel-controlled areas, causing destruction to human and non-human life, in addition to natural resources. When we think of technology, I would not separate it from ecology, because all the material that we use to create technology comes from planet Earth. But I would also not define technology in separation from the human, not so much because it is a tool of the human, but because it is co-creating existence. Even the ways in which we think of ourselves in the twenty-first century differ from the ways people were thinking of themselves one hundred years ago. Many years ago, for instance, I tried a flying simulation in the online virtual world *Second Life.* This was very revealing because I was not physically flying, but nonetheless experienced something I had never experienced before—or perhaps, just in my dreams. This experience helps illustrate that consciousness—going back to the Hindu tradition—is not merely present when we are awake but is related to all that we experience: in our physical realities, dreams, sleep states, and even in our virtual worlds. These are all going to become part of our consciousness. So, there is no way in which we can think of technology solely as a tool because this tool is changing the existence of the world we see, the way we relate to existence, and the way existence itself is unfolding, because technology is a manifestation of *Brahman,* or existence. To conclude, technology can be used in anthropocentric ways, but that issue comes with the human perspective, the human habit of taking the anthropocentric worldview for granted. We need to reflect upon and change our habits of existence in order to see different ways in which we can embrace technology. But 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.

AD: Since you mentioned the *Brahman*, let's shift to spiritualism. You have mentioned that spiritualism, in a non-religious sense, can be used as resistance in contexts where essentialism configures hierarchical categories. Are you proposing a broader culture of spiritualism to replace religion in our present times? Do you consider Posthumanism to be a kind of spirituality which upholds the interrelation of inner and outer worlds? Also, do you assign a superior function to literature, or any of the arts, that can show collaboration with spiritualism and be used by Posthumanism?

FF: Thank you for another wonderful question. I have an article entitled "Humans Have Always Been Posthuman" (2016) which explores a spiritual genealogy of the posthuman. I think there is a strong connection here, which we may or may not want to underline. The academic tradition regards spirituality with some uneasiness. The reason for this is that many people think of spirituality as a synonym for religion, and that is not correct. There is nothing wrong with religion, but they are two different things. If we look at the history of spirituality, which transcends any specific group, we find all kinds of human groups having spiritual experiences. If you look with this perspective, humans on such a level have always been posthuman because the spiritual approach is when you truly realize that there are no rigid dichotomies in existence. There may be some kind of dualism or duality; if you think of the *Vedas* or the *Upanishads*, for instance, duality is mentioned in a fluid-like form. But in most cases, you are thinking of a continuous evolution of diversity. Think of the biological realm itself and how evolution works; we're constantly changing. Evolution does not move towards complexity, but towards diversification. So, it's not that we are getting better, we are just constantly diversifying because we are constantly adjusting to the environment, and the environment, in turn, is constantly adjusting to us. We are entangled and partake in a fluid relation that makes us who we are. I do believe that spirituality brings a lot to the conversation, and this is why we need to acknowledge it. Additionally, spirituality has been the only tool that some humans have had in their relation with society. Think, for instance, about slavery. There have been many instances of slavery in human history. A more modern example would be chattel slavery in the United States. African-Americans relied on spirituality to reconnect to their inner selves despite having to live in a society in which they were dehumanized. They were murdered, tortured, and discriminated against. This idea of being connected helped them sustain the desire to exist. The understanding that you can be imprisoned, tortured, or captured, but nobody can touch your inner self, is very important, because you are the only one who has access to your soul. Still, because Posthumanism is being developed at the moment in academia, I would suggest being aware of the fact that some people do see spirituality as a synonym for religion and are thus skeptical. I have nothing against religion; it may come with a set of dogmas ("I am the truth and the other isn't", etc.), but it doesn't have to be that way. There is a lot of interfaith dialogue at the moment, which is very important. But some people see religion as the ultimate truth and their religion as the only truth. That's where the problem arises, because it is one thing to find truth in a specific religion, and another to think that your religion is the only truth. Consequently, if you force others to believe in what you believe, that is an issue. We need to recognize diversity and that the divine can be experienced in various ways. Even the way in which we imagine and see the divine is a personal experience that comes from our background and our experience of existence, which is all very different. If people want to look more into spirituality, I would certainly urge them to. It is a

revealing journey: you are going to find insights and inspiration. Spirituality is deeply related to post-dualism, and we can learn so much from this realm of inquiry. On the other hand, we should also acknowledge the fact that spirituality, on some level, is an experience that has been historically connected to certain religious traditions. That is fine, but we must make sure that we come from an understanding that we are all in this together; we are manifesting in this dimension together. In that sense, we all partake in this spiritual and existential enlightenment through our lives. I would love to look more into the realm of spirituality to understand more of post-dualism. However, I am also writing my second book, in which I am going to use the term "existential" to avoid confusion in people who come from different traditions more connected to, for instance, academic philosophy. So, I think this term can also help. In general, I may want to use the word "existential"—not so much "existentialist", which refers to a specific tradition of the 1950s in Europe. For instance, if you look at it through an existential perspective, the *Upanishads* are quite philosophical. Of course, they are also spiritual, as they use a language that can be understood universally.

AD: Thank you Professor Ferrando. Now let's shift to fatalism. Do you support Donna Haraway's assertion that we must see ourselves as posthuman compost, as "Humus, nourishing the Earth"? Is this too fatalistic a view? Though life and death are seen as interconnected categories, are we ready to see ourselves as decaying matter assisting the plant world?

FF: This is a very important question. In order to answer to it, I will take a step back and begin with Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto,* which was published in 1985. This was very important in the '90s because it acknowledged technology as something that we are already, and also acknowledged ourselves as hybrids. Vandana Shiva, an excellent Indian scholar, had some interesting criticisms of the cyborg as well. Once you are a cyborg, everything is mixed, but what about non-human others? Can they be respected without allowing the notion of the hybrid, and of the cyborg, legitimate various bio-technological practices that are not only ethically challenging, but also socio-politically problematic, such as, for instance, GMOs? This was a very important criticism from Shiva. Haraway eventually developed her discourse through the field of Animal Studies, and recently, as an alternative to the linear notion of the Anthropocene, she coined the term *Chthulucene*, emphasizing that we are humus and should see ourselves as compost. She is also critical of the notion of the posthuman because she views it as a disruption from the notion of the earthly human. I would say that the two things are not at war with each other. I can see myself as compost because I will eventually return to the Earth, although this process has certainly changed over time due to hygienic reasons. Nevertheless, I would love the idea of being fully composted after I pass. In the past, when someone died, they had the opportunity to return to the bare Earth, nourishing and giving life to others (worms and plants), which is in tune with the cycles of life on Earth. On one side, it is very important, from a materialistic standpoint, to see ourselves in that light, and that also helps us honestly address death. There is an issue in some countries, such as the United States, where death is taboo; nobody wants to talk about it. But now, with COVID-19, this taboo has been disrupted because people you know are dying, and you are made aware of your own mortality. This should always be a part of our existential worldview. I think of Heidegger, who said that death gives meaning to life, because the fact that we are dying allows us to make life our own project. As a young person, before learning about Heidegger, when I wasn't sure what to do in life, I would think, "What if I die tomorrow?" I asked myself, standing in front of the mirror, "What is the thing that I should have done, but didn't do?

What stopped me?" The notion of death really helped me to always be authentic to myself and my vision and allowed me to better understand what my vision was. When COVID-19 started, I had friends and family members who contracted the virus and I realized that someone I love could die, and that I could die. But this helped me reach a deep understanding. I realized that we need to be fully loyal to our existence and life. We do not have an infinite amount of time; we could die anytime, anywhere. The notion of death should always be present in us, but in a generative way—not to scare us, but to push us to flourish as the existential being we are. It is not easy to be born. Think of the complexity of being generated, to be brought to life and be here today; this is not an easy process. The fact that we are here is very precious, so what are we going to do with this opportunity? We are the only ones who truly know what we can do with this life; we are the only ones who have access to our inner voice. Death is that push for us to realize what our purpose is, to understand what is really relevant. We are indeed compost, but not only compost, and even though this idea is true, it doesn't mean that viewing oneself as compost and posthuman cannot coexist. Yes, I am compost, but I am also so much more, and much less. I believe that I am an open notion, which includes compost.

AD: Thank you Professor Ferrando. Since we are discussing compost, recently, there was an article in *The Guardian* about the absence of images of dead bodies in America (Pilkington, 2020). Psychologists are of the opinion that this has led to "incomplete grief" and a total lack of awareness of the reality of death among people. In fact, 21 percent of Americans have denied the need of a COVID-19 vaccine. Death has been condensed into data and graphs. Do you think that it's time to think about the responsibility and character of dead bodies, that they are not just silent structures, but assigned with performative potentials of their own? (I'm also keeping in mind the rejection of the alive/dead dualism by Posthumanism). Should dead bodies be reconsidered as performative agents?

FF: This is a very important and delicate question. I don't know that I have the final answer to this, but I would like to bring some food for thought to this discussion. On one side, in places like Benares in India, the experience of seeing life and death constantly merging with each other—seeing bodies, ashes, and flowers—is very real and brings us back to our material existence, forcing us to think and reflect. But in the United States, it is different; the topic of death is completely erased. People do not talk about death, and even if they do, it is regarded as a very somber, unfortunate event. When people die, it almost becomes an individual experience of people dealing with death. I think that is unhealthy, and on some level, COVID-19 has brought us back to the realization that we are all going to die. Even if we achieve radical life extension—as some transhumanists want, which I am not necessarily against, but I do not think it will add much to the existential experience—people are still going to die. I believe death has to be a part of our dealing with life. Many Buddhist practices of meditation, for instance, ask you to think of yourself as dead, because death really allows you to see yourself as alive. Going back to the specific idea of the body, I can tell you something that profoundly changed me personally was seeing the dead body of my grandmother. I loved her deeply, and I was there with her every day for the month before she died. The day she died, I procrastinated for hours before going to see her, as I could not accept the fact that she was not with us anymore. When I did manage to go, I remember taking her pale hand in mine, and within one month, I started experiencing Raynaud's Syndrome, a condition defined by poor circulation in bodily extremities, in my hands. This allowed me to start a journey that I will always be grateful for: the journey of yoga. My condition eventually disappeared, but,

more importantly, yoga turned me into a spiritual person as I embarked on a journey of self-discovery. The relation between acknowledging the body, seeing, and touching is a profound experience. But there are also layers to developing this greater body awareness. For instance, exposing young children to being near the dead body of someone they loved is a delicate situation that should be considered thoroughly and handled with great care, as it requires preparation and psychological support. So, there may be exceptions, but I think that we need to reconsider this process because, in my experience, it deeply changed me. Seeing my grandmother both alive and then dead profoundly impacted me on an existential level. I strongly believe that the physical body cannot just be erased from the conversation on death. I understand why, during the emergency of COVID-19, bodies were not accessible due to the fear of spreading the disease, but it is also important to acknowledge the trauma suffered by the people who have had the experience of having loved ones die and not being able to see or touch them, or say goodbye. For example, in Italy, a man who eventually wrote a very touching public letter on this (Turchetto, 2020), was not allowed to see his deceased father, who had died of COVID-19 in hospital. This happened to many people during the high peak of the COVID-19 outbreak. Another man, who lives in a small town, recalls that the day of the funeral of his loved one, he saw, from his window, the hearse transporting the deceased to the cemetery pass by, he could only assume that his loved one was in it, since he was not allowed to attend the funeral for preventive measures. He is still dealing with this trauma of not having the opportunity to say good-bye and feels guilty because of this. Going back to our initial discussion, I definitely feel that erasing bodies is something that we should reconsider. Of course, we need to consider many other aspects, such as the spreading of the disease through funerals and bodies, but there may be preventive measures that allow for a safe farewell. I also believe that, if people are ready, being close to the dead body of someone you love is an important aspect of grieving.

AD: Do you think there is an inherent problem with humans not referring to themselves as bio-evolutionary animals, but rather as products of a particular historical time and political space, reflecting the trouble of the anthropological machine? Why is the environment reduced to mere aesthetics?

FF: In the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, before humans started to become sedentary, Nature worship was at the center of the existential and spiritual quest, with Nature perceived in female forms and animal hybrids (such as the numerous figurines excavated in Eurasia). But this huge chunk of time, which makes for 99% of human history, is actually not considered "history", that is, recorded time, usually associated with the development of writing—and urbanization. Living in urban settlements marks a shift in human consciousness. This immanent form of "pre-historical" devotion, which I like to refer to as Nature worship, eventually evolved into metaphysical religions and mythologies; successively, in the separation of nature (*physis*) and culture (*logos*) which is traceable, for instance, in Classical Greece, where nature became associated with female and non-human animals—and portrayed as barbarian and wild, thus to be tamed—whereas culture, associated to male and "human" education (*paideia*), was regarded as civilized and sophisticated—that is, superior. This hierarchical separation between nature and culture did not just involve non-humans versus humans, but also humans versus other humans. For example, the word *anthropos*, which means 'human' in Greek, was specifically connected to speaking Greek, to being part of *paideia,* which meant "education". Many civilizations that were not Greek were considered barbarian and thus not *anthropos*. This separation between nature and culture has been very prevalent, and in this

separation, many societies have been seen as the plus, whereas nature has been portrayed as the minus. There are many traditions across the globe that can offer examples. For instance, both the Hindu theory of the transmigration of the soul in reincarnation, as well as some Buddhist theories of rebirth, contain anthropocentric biases, according to which being (re)born in a human form is considered a privilege and the result of good karma, while being (re)born in a non-human animal is considered a minus. These things have to be fully reconsidered. We can no longer see ourselves in separation from nature, nor can we see ourselves as better than non-human animals. This does not mean that we should dismiss human life. There are some people, such as the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), who are calling for the extinction of the human. I certainly do not support that either, because for me the human is not a plus, but nor is it a minus. The human is part of the manifestation of existence: human extinction would not do us any good, as other species would not necessarily do any better. I do not think that the solution lies in giving up the crown, but in deconstructing the notion of the "crown" itself by manifesting posthumanistic ways of existing in our daily lives. Posthumanism, for me, means that we need to readdress the human in relation to all the other species, as part of the larger picture, not as the plus or the minus. Nature and culture cannot be understood in separation and must be addressed in conjunction. Think of the relationship between culture, biology, and epigenetics. Think about how culture is constantly transforming and changing biology itself. We cannot see nature and culture as separated anymore, which, referring back to Vandana Shiva, does not mean that the human can do anything just because we are "cyborgs". We need to be careful with such ideas. It is very important to see ourselves as part of the larger picture, recognizing that diversity improves and enriches our lives, promoting a balanced planet and healthy human lives. In fact, the English term "health" comes from the Proto-Germanic word *haylaz,* meaning "whole", as in relating to the whole picture. We need to think of diversity with real honesty and dignity. We need to reconsider what we are doing from an ecological, technological, existential, and ontological perspective.

AD: And let us end with your solution of the posthuman multiverse. Could you guide us through this intriguing theory?

FF: It is interesting that you ask this question. In my book, *Philosophical Posthumanism,* in order to understand where the notion of the human comes from, I start from the very beginning of how we define ourselves in nomenclature to the species in biological terms. I then move to physics, where I go to the hypothesis of the multiverse, which very well may be a reality. The point of the multiverse, for me, in philosophical terms is really extraordinary. We can think, for instance, of the rhizome, which was developed as a metaphor by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) back in the '80s, helping to understand the internet and the online experience. Think of rhizome, turmeric, ginger, and many other forms of life that are not linear. You can take a piece of turmeric and put it in the Earth or water, and watch it spread and grow. Deleuze and Guattari were equating this process to our own lives: life is not linear. This metaphor was then brought to the internet. When you navigate online, one link is going to take you to the next, and to the next, and one hour later you find yourself reading about the multiverse, perhaps, and you had no idea that you would end up there. So, in that sense, it is rhizomatic. The multiverse, for me, is as precious a metaphor as the rhizome was to help understand the online experience. The multiverse is, for me, a metaphor that could also apply to real, physical reality. Why? Let's play a game. I love philosophical hypotheses and games. Friedrich Nietzsche changed my life when I was sixteen years old, as I was reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* I love

his metaphor of the eternal recurrence of life's events to understand if we are living the life we truly want to live. So... What if your life was going to come back exactly the same forever and ever? Would you do exactly what you did in your life? Would you speak the way you spoke to others? Would you act the way you did with others? Would you do the same? Would you accept that life? Nietzsche is not postulating a spiral, but a cycle: everything, exactly, the same. He says that if you would accept your life exactly the way it is, forever and ever, you are the *Übermensch,* which is the superhuman/overhuman. You are taking full responsibility of your life because your life is the highest work of art you can ever imagine. I am going to push this to the multiverse from an ethical perspective and bring in ethics and physics. What if, in the hypothesis of the multiverse, you are co-constituting many actual universes in the ways you exist, through your vibrational range? Let's go back to quantum physics and string theory and think of ourselves in the material sense as a network of strings, constantly reconstituting ourselves. What does it mean, from an ethical and existential perspective, that we do not just exist in one dimension, but are coexisting and co-creating other dimensions through our vibrational range? I bring these ideas to the book as hypotheses because I am a philosopher, I am not a scientist. I do science in philosophical terms, but I do not want to go into a strictly scientific realm. A special edition of *National Geographic* (2020) recently came out, addressing the scientific reality of other possible dimensions, and bringing a lot of science to the conversation in saying that this might be a reality. My point, however, is not influenced by whether or not it is a reality. As I said, I love philosophical hypotheses and thought games, and believe that they can enrich our life immensely. For instance, the questions that Nietzsche proposed in his work changed my life. They have stayed with me, and I constantly ask myself, "Would I live this life again and again and again?" If the answer is no, I have to change something; if the answer is yes, I am doing what I should to manifest the life I want to be. In that sense, I love the multiverse not only as a scientific hypothesis, but also as a thought game: What if we think of ourselves as a constantly changing network of multiversal alliances? We are constantly connecting to a different vibrational range and co-manifesting all these other layers of existence. It is a fascinating way for me to end the book, because it is not an end, but a beginning.

Acknowledgments

Deep gratitude, on behalf of Francesca Ferrando, to Matigan King and to Ellen Delahunty Roby, who contributed to the edited version of this dialogue.

Asijit Datta would like to express his sincere appreciation to Pragati Prashanth for her assistance in the transcription of this article.

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