

Received: 31 August 2021 Accepted: 3 October 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i2.2096>



The Hidden Religious Dimension of Posthumanism. A Commentary on Francesca Ferrando's Philosophical Posthumanism

Markus Wirtz¹

Introduction

Since the end of the twentieth century, the intellectual movements of trans- and posthumanism have gained growing awareness in the humanities and social sciences, but also in a broader public. As Francesca Ferrando makes very clear in her brilliant and thought-provoking introduction to *Philosophical Posthumanism*, both currents are connected in many ways but should nevertheless be sharply distinguished from each other: Whereas transhumanism develops visions of human enhancement via technology, posthumanism is much more a critical enterprise which reflects on problematic anthropocentrism in all domains of natural and social life. As such, according to the first sentence of Ferrando's book, "Posthumanism is the philosophy of our time" (Ferrando, 2019a, 1). A great deal of posthumanism's attractivity is probably due to its astonishing unifying force. Many important critical movements and theoretical approaches who used to be practiced separately from each other seem to converge in philosophical posthumanism. To name but a few, Ferrando's posthumanism integrates Nietzsche's idea of the overhuman and Heidegger's thinking about the essence of technology, French poststructuralism and deconstruction, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, animal and robot ethics, bioethics, environmental ethics, new materialism, process ontology, object-oriented ontology (OOO) and even string and multiverse theories. Queer theory and intercultural philosophy are not explicitly mentioned in the book but could certainly be added to this list.

My following remarks on Ferrando's fascinating introduction into Philosophical Posthumanism are based on the conviction that Posthumanism is indeed the "philosophy of our time", which means the adequate philosophy for the Anthropocene. The intend of my commentary is to work out two possibly problematic aspects of posthumanism: (1) A maybe too one-sided critique of a humanism to whose inclusive dimensions posthumanism should rather feel connected; (2) A hidden religious dimension of posthumanism related to its almost metaphysical power of a non-dualistic unification of the diverse and its ethical call to conversion (from humanism to posthumanism).

¹ Markus Wirtz, Department of Philosophy, University of Cologne, Germany. E-mail: mwirtz@uni-koeln.de.



Plural meanings of the “human”

A great number of determinations of what the human being is or what it should be has been made throughout history. Several of these plural meanings of the “human” are considered in Ferrando’s book, mostly in a very critical way, which is not surprising as anthropocentric assumptions are the main target of posthumanism. In the following, I would like to concentrate on four different meanings of the “human”:

- 1) The biological meaning of *homo sapiens* as a species belonging to the family of hominids (great apes);
- 2) The cultural and historical meaning of humanism as an intellectual movement in European history from the 14th to the 16th century;
- 3) The ethical meaning of humanity as an ideal, a moral imperative and an affective disposition to treat others with empathy, compassion and respect;
- 4) The legal meaning of humanity in the form of human rights which should be respected all over the world for every single human being.

My intent is to show that these meanings of the “human” are not necessarily discriminatory or as essentializing as is usually suggested by posthumanist thinkers.

The biological meaning of the human: *Homo sapiens*

The species definition of *homo sapiens* as a member of the family of great apes was in the first place an emancipation from theological assumptions about the divine essence of the human being. In the traditional monotheistic setting, the human being had been understood as “God’s image” or as the “crown of creation”, separated from animals, plants and minerals by his rational capacities and his moral consciousness (Ferrando, 2019b, 646f.). The evolutionary integration of humans into the animal pedigree by Darwin in the late 19th century was usually regarded as a degradation of the human being, an attack on human exceptionalism. Considering humans as a biological species with specific abilities and disabilities does not imply necessarily to postulate a superiority of humans above other animals. On the contrary, realizing that human beings are able to change or even to destroy the environment of the planet because of their characteristic features as a species may lead to a humble awareness of the danger and vulnerability of this strange being. Defining the human biologically as an animal with specific physical, mental and social capacities re-integrates the human in the world of animals and shows at the same time what distinguishes the human being from all other animals. The mistake which has to be avoided is to create an essential dualism between the biological animality of the human that links him to the natural world and his rationality that links him to a spiritual world. Here, the posthuman critique is totally right in deconstructing the artificial opposition between the human (biological) nature and the human spirit (Smart & Smart, 2017, 46). In order to better understand human beings in their interconnectedness with other living beings and to avoid placing him in a superior position above all other animals, evolutionary anthropology should integrate human-animal studies and multispecies ethnography as much as possible.

The cultural and historical meaning of the (European) human: Humanism

Five hundred years before Charles Darwin developed his theory of evolution, the cultural movement of humanism had already marked a break with traditional theological precepts. The



rediscovery of Greek and Roman antiquity led to the elaboration of an ideal of free personal development which, although too one-sidedly fixed on European antiquity at the time, nevertheless created the basis for the general idea of the free individual. Even if Michel Foucault followed Antonin Artaud in regarding Renaissance humanism more as a diminution than a magnification of man (Behrent, 2019, 456), the emancipatory aspects of this cultural movement should not be overlooked. Ideas stemming from Renaissance humanism obviously influenced Nietzsche's concept of the overhuman in the 19th century and, in our time, inspires transhumanist fantasies of a limitless life extension for selected individuals. One of the central points in Nietzsche's overcoming of the human is the creative destruction of traditional values by a subject that empowers itself to do so (Ferrando, 2019, 51). In this context, Karl Jaspers emphasizes the complete separation of man from the animal implied in Nietzsche's idea of the overhuman (Jaspers, 2020, 142). This is certainly an aspect that disqualifies Nietzsche as a true precursor of posthumanism but places him much more in the lineage of Renaissance humanism.

The ethical meaning of the human: Humanity

With regard to the third, the ethical meaning of the human, I would like to draw attention to an interpretation of humanity as an affective disposition inside the human being as a human being, regardless of her or his gender, color, cultural background, physical condition, etc. This disposition enables human beings to feel empathy, compassion and respect for the dignity and fragility of other human beings or other living beings in general. The posthumanist critique is totally right in working out the multiple processes of dehumanizing that had been included in the historical processes of humanizing. The question is, however, whether dehumanization is necessarily inherent in humanism or whether the dehumanization of the supposedly non-human has been a matter of serious errors which could be remedied in the long term by humanism itself, in the course of learning processes towards increasing inclusivity.

It is certainly true that every setting of a concept of the human involves a distinction between beings which fall into that category and other beings which do not. And it is also true that in European and American history, multiple beings have not been recognized as complete human beings or as human beings at all: Women, slaves, people of color, homosexuals, transgender people, people with disabilities, etc. (Smith, 2017, 5). The "processes of dehumanization" (Ferrando, 2019a, 79) which led (and sometimes still lead) to the exclusion of these groups has undoubtedly privileged a small minority of human beings, especially the European (or North-American) white heterosexual male subject. But does this undeniable fact necessarily lead to the conclusion "that the 'human' project has formed, historically and theoretically, through the construction of the 'Other': animals, automata, children, women, freaks, people of color other than white, queers, and so on marking the shifting borders of what would become 'the human' through processes of performative rejections" (Ferrando, 2019a, 81)? I wonder if the exclusion of all those "others-than human" has been a necessary implication of the category or concept of the human itself or if it was not rather a false exclusion of groups of beings from the utopian concept of the human which could and should have included them from the very beginning. That is why feminist and postcolonial theorists have good reasons to criticize an uncomplete humanism for its racist or sexist exclusions, but not to reject the inclusive ethical meaning of humanity. Such a rejection would deprive legitimate criticism of its own foundations.

The legal meaning of the human: Human rights

It is also the integrative force of the idea of humanity in a legal and political sense—as it first appeared in the declaration of human rights in the American and French Revolution at the end of the 18th century—that later liberation movements of all kinds were able to draw upon. The reference to an inclusive and universal concept of the human was and is still indispensable in the political fight for equal rights for women, for people of color, for the LGBTQ community, in postcolonial liberation struggles and also with respect to the protection of the individual against state despotism. To emphasize the importance of human rights is not to underestimate the importance of discussions about robot rights or animal rights. On the contrary, the discussion about these rights raises essentially important questions also in relation to human rights: Does the deconstruction of the human require new legal categories for attributing rights to beings? Which categories could that be? Wouldn't it be better to adhere to human rights and to create specific rights for non-human animals and robots instead of abandoning the concept of the human which grounds the human rights? By asking this, I am aware of the fact that human rights have been massively criticized as imperial tools of Western domination, but I think it is also plausible to state that human rights are indispensable in order to have a normative limit for state measures against individuals.

Posthumanism and human responsibility in the Anthropocene

Francesca Ferrando and other posthumanist thinkers have argued for posthumanism being the adequate philosophy for the geological era of the anthropocene. But I wonder how we can fully understand the impact of one species on the planet, the climate, the life of all the other animal and vegetable species if we don't consider the specific abilities and disabilities of the human species, especially its capacity to communicate through symbols, namely language, and its related ability to coordinate work processes and projects. This is not so much to assign humans a privileged or superior position in relation to other beings as it is to say that humans in the Anthropocene must take full responsibility for their actions on the planet, or, as Donna Haraway calls it, "response-ability" (Haraway, 2016, 114). The humanistic materialist Karl Marx was one of the first to have recognized the specifically human character of nature-changing cooperative work, as he points out in *The German Ideology*: "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life." (Marx & Engels, 1975, 31). My request to posthumanism in this regard is therefore: How can the human species fully assume its ecological response-ability in the Anthropocene if we don't have a clear consciousness of the specific production conditions under which human beings reproduce their lives and which changes historically?

Religious aspects of posthumanism

We will now turn to the aspects of philosophical posthumanism which constitute what I call a hidden religious dimension of posthumanism. This dimension manifests itself, on the one hand, in the posthumanist treatment of dualisms and, on the other hand, in the revolutionary shift from humanism to posthumanism, which bears traits of a religious conversion.



Post-dualisms and hyper-dualisms

The post-dualistic character of philosophical posthumanism is very much emphasized in Francesca Ferrando's introduction: "Philosophical Posthumanism is an onto-epistemological approach, as well as an ethical one, manifesting as a philosophy of mediation, which discharges any confrontational dualisms and hierarchial legacies; this is why it can be approached as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism" (Ferrando, 2019a, 22). As Posthumanism includes ontological, epistemological and ethical aspects, it fulfills all the criteria for an encompassing metaphysical worldview. Furthermore, the idea of mediation between extremes seems to relate back to the middle way of Buddhism.

With regard to the criticism of dualisms of all kinds, however, the question should be allowed whether actually every dualism implies a subordination. This is surely the case with exclusionary dualisms where one term dominates the other. Dualisms of such kind have to be deconstructed as we have learnt from the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. But, in a more general sense, dual thinking means nothing more than to divide a conceptual field into two parts (instead of three, four or twenty-three, for example). From an epistemological perspective, it is not necessarily better to use three, four or twenty-three parts instead of two to structure a thematic field. Dualistic divisions as such are not essentially bad. One has to examine in each individual case whether it is a hierarchical dualism that can be deconstructed, or a dialectical relation (and if that is the case, if it is a positive or a negative one), a polarity, a relation of complementarity, an opposition or a contradiction.

Apart from this necessary differentiation of dualisms, I wonder whether the post-dualistic approach of philosophical posthumanism is not just another dualism, a kind of hyper-dualism one side of which represents the exclusive, discriminatory, and essentialist view of old humanism, while the other side stands for the inclusive, relational, and processual view of posthumanism.

The shift from humanism to posthumanism as a religious conversion

How can the relation between the two sides of the dualism "humanism-posthumanism" be adequately described? I would like to argue that the shift from humanism to posthumanism has characteristic features of a genuine religious conversion. In comparison to the limited horizon of old-fashioned humanism, the posthuman worldview seems to offer nothing less than a new cosmology out of object-oriented ontology, string theory and multiverse hypothesis—a highly speculative enterprise which raises lots of epistemological questions I cannot pursue further here. Besides a new cosmology, Philosophical Posthumanism also contains the promise of a better life. After the conversion from humanism to posthumanism, we seem to live in a much better relation to other beings, be they animals, machines, or what would have been called "humans" in a dark past, we have hopefully left discrimination and pollution behind us, and we are happy to resonate in accordance with the strings of the multiverse. If this sketch of the posthuman paradise is approximately correct, it would be of no little interest to ask how the new posthuman religion situates itself in relation to existing world religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, Jainism, etc.

It seems that there are much more affinities from posthumanism to East Asian religions like Buddhism or Daoism which also emphasize the interconnectedness of everything in the universe, or to animism, than to religions in the monotheistic tradition. The patriarchal

implications of the monotheistic concept of God obviously are in contradiction to the feminist theoretical perspective of posthumanism (Ferrando, 2019b, 646). Furthermore, the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam seem to be insufficiently prepared for the expected technological developments in the near future. Therefore Ferrando's assumption is consistent "that the posthuman paradigm shift will be followed by a symbolic turn in religious imaginaries as well" (Ferrando, 2019b, 645). The conversion from humanism to posthumanism is so fundamental that it has even the transformational power to change the history of religions. The future will prove whether this prediction will come true. Based on past experience with religions in secularized modernity, however, it seems rather unlikely. Religions do not simply follow technological developments or adapt to them, but they rather develop an astonishing potential for persistence in secularized environments, sometimes to the point of fundamentalism. From this point of view, philosophical posthumanism may still follow a typically Western narrative of progress that underestimates the discontinuities of history—not only human history.

References

- Behrent, M. (2019). Michel Foucault. In M. Moriarty & J. Jennings (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of French thought* (456-466). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316681572.051>.
- Ferrando, F. (2019a). *Philosophical posthumanism*. Bloomsbury.
- Ferrando, F. (2019b). The posthuman divine: When robots can be enlightened. *Sophia*, 58, 645-651. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-019-00753-9>.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Jaspers, K. (2020). *Nietzsche*. Karl Jaspers Gesamtausgabe Vol. 1/18. Schwabe.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1975). *Collected works, Volume 5*. Progress Publishers.
- Smart, A. & Smart, J. (2017). *Posthumanism. Anthropological insights*. University of Toronto Press.

