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Going Back, and Starting Over

The Posthumanism of Shepard, Derrida, Braidotti, and Marchesini

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This article will look at four scholars who belong, at least broadly speaking, to the 'posthumanist' tradition, and at the ways in which they endeavor to correct mistakes in the distant past. First, there is Paul Shepard, who believes a false turn took place with the domestication of crops and animals in Neolithic times. His solution is a return to an economy of hunting. Next, there is Jacques Derrida, who finds the fatal wrong turn in Descartes' *Meditations*, a work often regarded as the manifesto of modernity. Derrida's, solution is to repeat Descartes thought experiment of universal doubt, deciding that the one thing impossible to doubt is the existence of his cat rather than of himself. Finally, Roberto Marchesini and Rosi Braidotti locate the error in the Renaissance, most especially in Leonardo's depiction of Vitruvian Man, and they endeavor to correct its glorification of humankind. All four regard the errors of their mentors as emblematic of an even more universal mistake of humanity at some undetermined time. They are based on highly speculative historical reconstructions, yet they have a resonance, and even a lyricism, that transcends purely intellectual analysis.

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People constantly fantasize about returning to the past, correcting a mistake, and starting over. The price of a vivid memory is an ever-growing burden of regrets. As W. B. Yeats wrote in his poem *Vacillation*:

> Things said or done long years ago,
> Or things I did not do or say
> But thought that I might say or do,
> Weigh me down, and not a day
> But something is recalled,
> My conscience or my vanity appalled. (lines 51-56)

This is also true on a collective level, and about five millennia of recorded history have left us with a vast store of seeming mistakes and missed opportunities.

The idea of going back and starting over also runs through human culture. Many mythologies tell of failed attempts at the creation of humankind, which were followed by new attempts. *Popol Vuh*, the Kiché Maya creation epic,

describes three, while Hesiod tells of four. The story of Noah tells of a new chance for humankind, after it had degenerated into wickedness, as does the Greek myth of Phyrra and Decalion. In the Middle Ages, artists often depicted Christ as 'the New Adam' and Mary as 'the New Eve'. Europeans have often described the Americas as 'the New Eden', where humanity might have a new beginning.

This desire to go back and make corrections is also an important part of major ideologies. Fascism was marked by a desire to return to a warrior culture in the remote past such as those of the ancient Romans, Greeks, or Germans. Communism endeavored to return, with all the technological advantages that have been developed since, to a time before the institution of private property. Posthumanism is a form of this desire to go back in time and amend an error by which humanity was set apart from the natural world.

Recent intellectual history bears witness to this weight of regret, as well as the impulse to go back and correct a grievous mistake. This is shown especially by the frequent use of the prefix 'post' (meaning 'after') in describing philosophical developments: 'post-Christian', 'post-Holocaust', 'post-industrial', 'post-structuralist', 'postmodern', and 'posthumanist', to name just a few of the most prominent. Such names suggest a backward-looking orientation, yet the movements are not, or not only, nostalgic. They suggest a desire to return to a previous age, not in order to remain there indefinitely, but rather to correct the course of history.

My focus in this essay will be on posthumanism, but I will regard it perhaps more as a loose collection of themes than as a formally constituted movement. It is, in practice, not always easy to clearly distinguish posthumanism from parallel movements such as post-structuralism and postmodernism. All of these programs express a similar disappointment with human culture, especially the modern West, which has brought a great expansion of chattel slavery, the Holocaust, the GULAG, nuclear weapons, and environmental devastation. Of the three, posthumanism is the most recent and also the most diverse. The 'humanism' that we are trying to move beyond may refer to, depending on the version, an intellectual movement, a traditional concept, or even the human organism itself as we have known it up till now[37]. The fundamental difference among these movements seems to be the point at which they would like to correct the course of history, though this is seldom made entirely precise. Posthumanism would go back at least a few centuries further than postmodernism, approximately to the Renaissance or earlier.

1. René Descartes, Back to Aristotle

Though I realize this may appear nervy, I will here discuss Descartes as the first post-humanist. My reason for doing this is that Descartes appeared around the end of the Renaissance, and reacted against the magical and speculative

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[37] C. Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis 2010, pp. 13-15.

ideas of early humanists such as Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. He endeavored to place knowledge on a more systematic foundation, and his *Meditations on First Philosophy* is often regarded as the manifesto of the modern period.

Descartes lived in an extremely turbulent age of religious wars, peasant revolts, and intellectual upheavals. Telling his story in *Discourse on Method*, he shows little of the sort of detachment and organization that people usually think of as 'Cartesian', but often comes across as blunt, frustrated, and angry. He begins with a review of many branches of knowledge, and tells how he became profoundly disillusioned with each. Descartes despaired of finding the answers in books, since «no opinion, however absurd and incredible, can be imagined, which has not been maintained by some one of the philosophers»[38]. Descartes goes on to tell how he gave up the study of books in despair, sold some of his lands, and resolved to seek for answers in experience instead, by travelling the world. Once again, he was disillusioned, since people in different countries were all convinced their customs and religion were right, yet there seemed to be no way to determine if that were true. So, if neither books nor experience could yield certainty, what was left? He decided to disregard all he had been taught, and to search for the truth inside himself.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy,* Descartes decides to systematically doubt all that he had been taught, in order to determine what best resisted his interrogations. This plunges him into a Baroque nightmare, in which he imagines that his sensations are the tricks of an evil demon, or that all people are really robots. He repeatedly falls into despair, but then decides that the most certain thing is his own existence. That assertion becomes the foundation of his metaphysics, which he believed would provide a unitary foundation for all human investigations. His model was Aristotle, who had synthesized most of Western knowledge, yet he hoped to improve on his mentor by placing all knowledge on a single foundation.

Descartes is widely regarded as the foremost spokesman for anthropocentrism, and with much good reason, but we should remember that anthropocentric philosophy is not monolithic. Descartes' work contains hardly any of the celebration of human prospects that can be found in the work of Pico della Mirandola and many other early humanists. In many respects, the focus of Descartes' world was not man but science, which he saw as an expression of the divine presence. But to justify his empirical and philosophical investigations, he felt it was necessary to exempt humankind. People were distinguished by having a soul and, in consequence, free will, while all other things, including animals, were entirely subject to cosmic law. The end result was to draw a very abrupt distinction between the human realm, governed by autonomous choices, and the natural world, governed by absolute necessity.

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[38] R. Descarts, *Discourse on Methods, and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by John Vitch, New York 2004, p. 15.

Descartes' attempt to find certainty involves a sort of magician's trick, a 'sleight of hand'. Descartes declares his own existence to be the one thing most impossible to doubt. But I am not Descartes, and neither, in all likelihood, is the reader. The historical record is surely compelling, but, apart from that, I have no special reason to believe Descartes exists (or once existed), and that, in any case, would not be philosophically enlightening. To make any sense of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, I must surreptitiously substitute myself for Descartes. I, not he, must be the one who exists. In using the first-person singular, Descartes is speaking for all human beings. To put the matter a bit differently, Descartes makes the implicit assumption that the world is filled with people whose minds and bodies are comparable to his own, to the point where one may stand in place of another.

2. Paul Shepard, Back to the Paleolithic

Paul Shepard is not always considered a 'post-humanist', but his importance for us here lies in producing the simplest, most direct, and most radical expression of this desire to go back to a point in time and begin again. He has made this case in many books, but most significantly in *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*[39], which I will focus on here. He is entirely clear about when and how he believes humankind made a mistake, as well as how it came about. It happened in Neolithic times, with the domestication of plants and later animals, which led to the degeneration of both them and human beings.

His solution is also comparably simple – to end domestication and return to a hunting economy. And how might that be accomplished? He has no specific plan for this, but the final chapter of *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* contains a highly-detailed description of his social ideal. All pets and other domestic animals will be freed, though people may still keep small gardens. People will be accustomed to the sight of blood and dismemberment from a very early age, and it will be given a sacramental meaning. Hunting will be done in small groups of males which will include boys aged 13 and older. Only hand weapons such as spears and knives will be used. No cameras, ambulances, motorized transportation, nor other mechanical devices will be permitted. Women will engage in gathering, and will probably hold most political and social offices, but will be excluded from the esoterica of male mysteries.

This is possible, according to Shepard, because the memory of it is preserved in our genetic inheritance, in spite of the changes that have taken place since Paleolithic times. But how can he know that the society he imagines ever existed? And, if it did, how can he be so confident that an ancestral memory of it has been preserved, or that the vast changes that have taken place in the human organism since Neolithic times are superficial? One could just as well wonder if the reason people build skyscrapers is because the gleaming surfaces address an ancestral memory of glaciers, which we have preserved from the Ice Age.

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[39] P. Shepard, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, Athen, GA 2004.

That is not entirely inconceivable, but it is science-fiction, and so is Shepard's construction of the future.

In addition, a huge contradiction runs through Shepard's work. Even as he constantly rails against anthropocentrism, he takes it to an extreme, implicitly assuming with Descartes that human beings have nearly absolute autonomy while other beings have virtually none. He blames human civilization, with a degree of justice, for evils such as environmental instability, genetic deterioration of animals, and lack of variation among plants. But the initial domestication was not through conscious choice and very little or no awareness of the ultimate consequences. What we call 'domestication' was, prior to modern times, more of a symbiosis, in which not only dogs and sheep but also men and women received advantages. Shepard, in other words, has changed humanity from the hero to the villain in the epic of civilization, yet his narrative remains entirely centered on humankind.

Even his recommendation of a return to the hunting economy of the Paleolithic is profoundly anthropocentric, in that it almost completely considers human beings in isolation from any ecological context, as the creators, rather than a product, of their environment. But the ecosystem is constantly changing, and there is no fixed point of environmental stability in the past to which we might wish to return. The period immediately preceding Neolithic times was an Ice Age, in which, without our assistance, nature effectively altered, and devastated, the environment to a degree perhaps beyond even what human beings are probably capable of today. But Shepard's work still has considerable value, since, perhaps more than any other author, he articulates this archetypal desire to start over. Simply as a wordsmith, Shepard is among the best writers on the environment, and, even at his most eccentric, his works retain a novelistic appeal.

3. Jacques Derrida, Back to Descartes

Derrida's agenda in *The Animal that I therefore Am* is essentially to repeat Descartes' thought experiment. Both authors begin at evening, in a period of almost complete solitude. Both survey all of previous Western thought and find it wanting, and both engage in a project of systematic doubt. The similarity even extends to style, as both employ a sort of stream-of-consciousness, in which they are alternately depressed and ecstatic. But, though without human companionship, Derrida is not entirely alone. Derrida's cat observes him naked in an epiphany to which the author continually returns:

No, no, my cat, the cat that looks at me in my bedroom or bathroom, this cat that is perhaps not 'my cat' or 'my pussycat', does not appear here to represent, like an ambassador, the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race, from La Fontaine to Tieck […], from Baudelaire to Rilke, Buber, and many others. If I say «it is a real cat» that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity. When it responds in its name […], it doesn't do so

as the exemplar of a species called 'cat', even less so of an 'animal' genus or kingdom. It […] comes to me as this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, into this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized [*rebelle a tout concept*][40].

Descartes had, as already noted, concluded that what was most certain was his own existence. Derrida's foundation is analogous, yet with a shift in emphasis. It is the existence of the Other, embodied in his cat: «The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here»[41].

But does substitution of the cat for the self really involve such a fundamental change? Even though the cat may be prior, the existence of Derrida seems to be implicit as well, especially since he constantly uses the first person singular. My suspicion is that it lays the groundwork for a reaffirmation of Cartesian dualism, in which the man represents civilization and the cat nature. This seems to be confirmed in later passages, as Derrida seems to forget entirely about the cat in his review of previous philosophy.

4. Roberto Marchesini and Rosi Braidotti, Back to da Vinci

Postmodernism was primarily a French movement, since that was the nation of the defining event of modernism – the French Revolution. Posthumanism, by contrast, is largely Italian, since its major point of reference is the birth of humanism in the Renaissance. The defining manifesto of posthumanism may very well be *The Posthuman* by Italian Rosi Braidotti, not because it is necessarily the best book, but because it very succinctly and clearly states the major themes and challenges that the movement faces. The most comprehensive book on posthumanism may be *Post-Human: Verso nuovi modelli di esistenza* (The Posthuman: Towards New Models of Existence) by her fellow Italian Roberto Marchesini, which investigates the movement from a wide range of perspectives including philosophy, biology, and technology. Both locate the error of humankind in Renaissance humanism, largely beginning with Pico della Mirandola's 1486 essay *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Interestingly, though they do not cite one another, both authors see the culmination of humanism in a place where a person brought up in America or France would probably never have thought to look – the famous drawing of Vitruvian man by Leonardo da Vinci. Perhaps even more interestingly, each gives a somewhat different explanation. Braidotti criticizes Vitruvian man, in addition to its triumphant whiteness and male gender, for upholding an overly individualistic view, in which perfection consists of autonomy and self-determination[42]. Marchesini criticizes it for anticipating an inflated idea of

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[40] J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Willis, New York 2008, p. 9.
[41] Ivi, p. 29.

[42] R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge 2013, p. 28.

humankind, where the features of the human body are projected outward to form an idealized cyborg[43]. It is, in other words, a union of man and machine, in which the animal plays no part. Both Braidotti and Marchesini see the image as promoting a false model of human purity.

But Vitruvian man is actually no more idealized than several other male and female figures from the Renaissance and Greco-Roman culture. He contains the world and yet exists within it, but the image is only distinguished from others by highly esoteric meanings. Has anyone ever attempted to directly emulate Vitruvian man as far as posture, hair style, or any other physical characteristic?

5. Conclusions

The proposed solution of Shepard is unabashedly utopian. The solutions of Derrida, Marchesini, and Braidotti, by contrast, do not seem fully commensurate with the enormity of the problem. All three, however, regard the errors of their mentors as emblematic of a more universal mistake of humanity at some time in the remote past.

Descartes had a dog named Monsieur Grat, which he cared for with affection. Would history have been different if, when Descartes asked himself what is most certain, Monsieur Grat had interrupted his master's meditations by barking, and then Descartes had declared the existence of his dog the most certain thing? On the cover of his later book, *Epifania Animale*, Marchesini offered a sort of correction of Leonardo, by having Vitruvian man portrayed as a butterfly[44]. Would history really have changed much if da Vinci had drawn such a figure instead of Vitruvian man? There is no way to know for certain, but in both cases, I think that unlikely. Nevertheless, there seems to be something almost primordial about our desire to travel through time and change the course of time.

All the examples we have looked at are based on highly speculative historical reconstructions, yet they have a resonance, and even a lyricism, that transcends purely intellectual analysis. The idea of such a journey is also a popular theme of fantasy and science fiction, found in Dickens' A *Christmas Carol* for example. Perhaps posthumanism, in this sense, is simply part of the human condition? As Robert Frost puts this in *The Road Not Taken*:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference[45].

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[43] R. Marchesini, *Post-Human: Verso nuovi modelli di esistenza*, Torino 2002, pp. 520-521.
[44] R. Marchesini, *Epifania animale: L'oltreuomo come rivelazione*, Milano 2014.
[45] R. Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, in *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, ed. by Michael Meyer, Boston 1993, p. 871 (lines 16-20).

But I suspect the problem may also be a misunderstanding of anthropocentrism. It is not a theory, and so it may not be corrected by intellectual analysis. It may usually be found alongside doctrines of human superiority, but it is not dependent on them. Despite what Paul Shepard thought, it cannot in the least be overcome by inveighing against human wickedness and stupidity. To obsess on human viciousness is every bit as anthropocentric as continually celebrating human accomplishments. Anthropocentrism will only be overcome when we stop being so preoccupied with human status, whatever that may be, and pay more attention to other forms of life.

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