Posthumanism

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Introduction

Posthumanism is a collection of diverse ways of thinking that are highly skeptical about the centrality of the “human” in Western philosophy and politics. Where humanism holds that unique properties such as language, tool use, culture, and so on enable humans to transcend nature, posthumanism emphasizes the different ways humans are continually produced through material forces, discursive regimes, and through nonhuman agencies. One of posthumanism’s key aims is to dissolve binary distinctions that characterize humanism, most notably culture/nature and self/world. Posthumanism is associated with the rise of poststructuralism through the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as struggles against hegemonic definitions of the human in feminist, postcolonial, anti-racist, and queer politics. It is also closely allied with philosophies that emphasize the embodied, material, and vital nature of human life. Within geography there has been some skepticism about whether posthumanism is any more than another episode in a procession of -isms. More receptive geographers have emphasized that posthumanism is broader in scope and in political and philosophical ambition, and captures many other -isms within its own orbit as ancillary concepts.

Posthumanism is in some sense easier to understand and identify due to recent changes in biological sciences that blur the boundaries of the human, such as genetic modification or xenotransplantation, as well as new technologies which can subvert or extend human agency in various ways, from electronic surveillance to unmanned military drones. Posthumanism is commonly identified therefore as both an epoch and a theoretical perspective. While the “post” in posthumanism may be taken to signal a transition to a new stage after humanism, many commentators argue any quantifiable historical shift is less important than the radical ethos of posthumanism’s attempt to deconstruct and move beyond a unitary, Western-specific idea of the human. Some scholars have argued that posthumanism is symbiotic with humanism, in that it relies on the figure of the human for a constituting other; from this perspective posthumanism risks reifying humanism as something grander than a historically and geographically located mix of practices, ideas, and technologies. Furthermore, some strains of posthumanism can often reproduce certain humanist commitments to ideals like freedom and democracy. In this sense posthumanism may present an evolution of humanist thinking, rather than a radical break. Others argue that posthumanism offers productive ways to move decisively beyond the human, but only if we reorient our horizons toward an ontology of life that is more radically open-ended, relational, and emergent.

Decentering the human

It is possible to identify a series of four logics through which posthumanism works to decenter...
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the human. Each of these logics implies that the human should be taken neither as a common sense dogma, nor as an unproblematic grounding for ethics or politics, and works to replace the human as the sole concern of analysis. Each has been influential in geography, the social sciences, and humanities.

The first is biological. Western Enlightenment thought enshrined a firm divide between humanity and the rest of nature. Advances in biological science have rendered such a view increasingly untenable, however. Beginning with Darwin, who placed humanity in a genealogical continuum with other species, research in diverse fields, including ethology, comparative genomics, and neurophysiology, has concluded that many other species share supposedly exclusively human characteristics, including language, tool use, and consciousness. Social theorists such as Donna Haraway have also emphasized the way the human body relies on alliances with other organisms, including slime, bacteria, or domesticated animals, for its continued operation. For these theorists, posthumanism involves tracing the ethical, political, and ontological implications of this biological decentering. Animal geographies have charted the constitutive inclusions and exclusions of nonhuman creatures for human culture and identity in varied settings. Eco-Marxism has, at a larger scale, shown how nature is not separate from society, but is produced by capitalism, demonstrated most spectacularly by the power of biotechnology to make new life. Others have pointed to shifts in governmentality wherein the object of intervention is no longer simply the traditional human subject, but aspects of human biology, including genes. Posthumanism therefore emphasizes distributed biological interdependencies and shared life, rather than a divide between nature and culture.

The second decentering concerns subjectivity. Where humanism posited an autonomous, rational being in charge of its own actions and destiny – the knowing subject – posthumanism emphasizes how the subject is given over to and produced by other forces beyond its own control. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, showed how much human behavior was driven by unconscious desires and fantasies. While psychoanalysis has had a modest impact on geography, recent theories have been more influential. Emerging from poststructuralism, Judith Butler’s notion of performativity was crucial in eroding the idea that a subject had any kind of essence at its core. Butler argued that gender difference was not a matter of nature, but of social performance. Performativity stresses the malleable, motile, and historically contingent character of subjectivity, in contrast to an essential human nature that takes the same basic form regardless of time and space. In geography, since the 1990s great attention has been paid to difference in the creation of subjectivity, both through discourse and representation, and also more recently through embodiment, materiality, and emotion. Far from being an autonomous, knowing subject, the human is seen by posthumanism as a process made through many more-than-human flows.

Third, technology has decentered the rational human. Karl Marx was one of the first commentators to write systematically about how technology and wider systems shape the conditions for human nature. Actor–network theory has also been deployed to show how technology is not a passive object operating at the behest of a potent human agent. Instead, actor–network theory exposes how agency circulates between heterogeneous actors, including technologies of all kinds, in complex, hybrid circuits. Posthumanism therefore stresses that technology is not something added to an already existing human, but is something that makes
up humans. This is what Jacques Derrida called “originary technicity” and Graham Harman, building on Heidegger calls “tool-being.” From a posthuman understanding, the human is always a human-with-technology (and always has been). Indeed, posthumanism emphasizes that the human itself is a product of what Agamben (2004) called the “anthropological machine,” a system which produces self-recognition and partial differentiation of humans from other entities. Aspects of quantitative geography have also worked to decenter the dominant notion of the human. In the 1950s and 1960s, cybernetics conceptualized humans not as subjects of their own lifeworlds, but as nodes within a system that merely reacted to external forces. While cybernetics and systems theory were only models they were influential in producing ways of thought, for example in managing environmental and economic crises. More recently, advances in computational power and complexity theory have contributed to the rise of agent-based modeling in geography. Modeling human decision-making and behavior as part of emergent systems further decenters the idea of an independent, self-aware agent in favor of one reacting in complex ways to stimuli and feedback in sociotechnical systems. In addition, under the auspices of government and corporate surveillance a growing ecosystem of digital information, including self-replicating code, adaptive algorithms, and “big data,” increasingly shapes the way that humans think and react.

The fourth way in which the human is decentered is more recent, and can be termed “the planetary.” While the deleterious impact of human activities on earth systems and other creatures has long been of concern to geographers and others, in recent years awareness of the unprecedented temporal and spatial scale of these impacts has led some to christen a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene remains contested. For some it represents the apotheosis of humanism, with progress reaching a new level of intensity and extensiveness. For others, this new epoch firmly embeds humanity in the earth’s material and energetic flows. This latter version of the Anthropocene shows the extent to which modern humans have internalized ecological and geological earth forces, and also humanity’s differentiated vulnerability to such forces. This planetary decentering means the human is no longer an agent in charge of its own destiny: instead, the human is beholden to planetary forces beyond its control.

Each of these four logics of decentering has been influential in posthumanism. We can also discern three broad approaches to posthumanism: as epoch, as epistemological style, and as ontological condition.

Posthumanism as epoch

This populist strand of posthumanism takes the proliferation of new biotechnologies and technoscientific objects as a hallmark of a new historical epoch and a new stage of human evolution. Broadly speaking, much of what was previously limited to the realm of science fiction has come into being and changed the way many humans interact with the world. Such a list would include, but by no means be limited to: from William Gibson’s cyberspace to the pervasive chatter of social media; from cyborg military machines (the films Robocop, Blade Runner) to unmanned drone warfare; from the paranoia of the cult 1990s television show The X-Files to the burgeoning discipline of exobiology; from speculative tales of colonizing other planets (Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars Trilogy) to proposals by private corporations for extra-earth mining and space exploration ventures; from dreams of electric sheep (Phillip K. Dick’s Do Androids
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Dream of Electric Sheep?) to cloning Dolly the sheep and the creation of synthetic bacteria. The list would encompass the breakdown of boundaries between flesh and information, with genomics and bar-coding life for medical, scientific, and commercial purposes now part of biocapital enterprise across the world. These technological novelties are part of both spectacular and mundane processes changing the nature of everyday life for many. They each involve many “things” – DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), images, bodies, instruments – that defy easy classification as natural/cultural or artefactual/given. Posthumanism as epoch suggests that all these processes have passed some threshold, putting the human in new terrain never before realized.

Optimists see this new horizon of humanity as an event to be celebrated. This position is popular among libertarian pro-technology and innovation groups, in particular certain science fiction writers or authors in, for example, Wired magazine. They see playing with new ways of being human as exhilarating and technological creativity as something to be encouraged. They welcome boundary crossings between machine, human, and animal. They also inflate the potential for science and technology to make good on current speculative proposals, such as downloading human consciousness as software. This strain of posthumanism is also, however, ambivalent about inequalities, skeptical of state power, and welcoming of the creative destruction that capitalism brings. Instead, ingenuity is crucial, as amid an ever-faster pace of change the slow are left behind and the most adaptable posthumans thrive. This populist strain therefore in fact follows quite closely the established tenets of humanism: the potency and sovereignty of the individual; the march to ever-greater progress and prosperity; the promise of tomorrow to make good the problems of the present. Critics see this strain of posthumanism as an opportunistic attempt by advanced capitalist interests to graft a promissory posthumanism on to existing neoliberal subjectivities.

Pessimists agree that we have crossed a threshold into a posthuman era, but dispute that this is something to be celebrated. Rather, they see the proliferating evidence of posthumanity as deeply worrying. Pessimists include religious commentators, deep green environmentalists, and those who wish to defend the legacy of the European Enlightenment and its humanist commitments. They oppose, each for different reasons, genetic modification, nanotechnology, geoengineering, and other developments that they see as polluting the sacrosanct boundaries between humans and other creatures. Conservative thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and Francis Fukuyama, for example, argue that genetic manipulation and xenotransplantation are morally wrong on the grounds that they alter human nature. Deep greens oppose genetic modification because they believe that biotech corporations do not have the right to make new forms of life, and also because they worry about the unpredictable mixings that occur when new creatures are added to the earth’s biodiversity. More broadly, mainstream environmentalists remain wedded to the idea of saving a transcendent nature, and erasing signs of human pollution of that separate realm. By contrast to the optimists’ desire for ever-faster change and ever-greater motility of human form, the pessimists want to halt current changes and where feasible turn back the clock to a time when categories were clear and the human was pure.

Posthumanism as epoch tends to describe hyperbolically new technological developments for rhetorical advantage to support existing ideological commitments. Both optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of posthumanism as epoch share a reliance on the figure of the
human. For the optimists, the potency of posthumanism is to be measured by its distance from the historical figure of the human. For the pessimists, the dangers of posthumanism can be gauged from the degree of deviation from the established norm of the rational human. Posthumanism as epoch is generally seen as the conceptually weakest of the three approaches to posthumanism.

**Posthumanism as epistemological style**

Feminist, postcolonial, disability, anti-racist, and queer studies have critiqued the normative assumptions at the heart of humanism. The central insight of this deconstructive stance is that “the human” acts with regulatory force as a standard of sameness to produce insider and outsider groups. This strand of posthumanism therefore interrogates different ways of knowing the human and their political effects.

Historically, a powerful standard of the human emerged from the Western Enlightenment and colonial encounters with various other peoples deemed by Europeans to be inferior in one way or another: due to their environment, physiology, innate intelligence, or distinct cultural evolution, for example. The figure of the white, male, full-bodied, and heterosexual human was deployed to justify a series of epistemic and physical violences against subaltern groups. Edward Said was one of the first thinkers to articulate a reasoned critique of the colonial experience and its injustices. Said’s *Orientalism* exposed how ideas of European exceptionality relied on a constitutive other, the Orient. Said argued that reason/enlightenment and violence/barbarism were not mutually exclusive, and that both could be found within humanism. Said turned Western, rational thought back against itself, critiquing humanism in the name of a more cosmopolitan humanism.

Michel Foucault’s ideas were another major force in anti-humanist critique from the 1960s on. Foucault argued against the autonomy and self-determination of the human subject, and against seeing the human at the center of history. Foucault’s work on madness, sexuality, and biopower showed how the production of difference was an internal dynamic within Enlightenment humanism. Instead of a dominant ideal human, Foucault emphasized how the human was socially constructed and power-laden. Posthumanism as epistemological style therefore replaces fixed identities with lines of difference that cut through gender, ethnicity, corporeality, race, sexuality, and so on.

One of posthumanism’s political aims is to enable people to decode, resist, and transgress their subjectification as certain kinds of subject. Feminist geography has examined the construction of gender and the inequalities that flow from the naturalization of rational man as the measure of all things. Feminist geography has been a particularly influential subdiscipline, with an important landmark being Gillian Rose’s *Feminism and Geography* (Rose 1993), which exposed the patriarchal assumptions inherent in the discipline. Postcolonial geography has brought self-critical awareness of how the discipline helped produce discourses of European exceptionalism, as well as to the political implications of how history is written. Postcolonialism critically engages with the continued legacies of colonialism, including how humanist ideals and their exclusionary universalism are written into social, cultural, architectural, and economic forms.

Posthumanism as epistemological style also encompasses the tenets of knowledge production dear to humanism. While the scientific method, steeped in empiricism and critical rationalism, was more a model of and less a
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rule book for scientific inquiry, science and technology studies (STS) has exposed the supposedly objective, disembodied, and universal idea of knowledge as a myth. STS emphasizes the role of culture, political economy, and the mobilization and alliance of myriad objects with contextually specific procedures in producing and mobilizing knowledge. Scientific knowledge remains thoroughly marked by its geographic and historical context, rather than floating freely. Feminist epistemologies have taken the situatedness of knowledge as a methodological and ethical imperative. For instance, standpoint theory and situated knowledges both stress that knowledge production should acknowledge its partiality and locality, and that done well this produces more acceptable knowledge than false claims to universality. Posthumanism is closely allied with these ways of knowing, in which the subject is neither all-knowing nor transcendent of their particular circumstances.

Geographers have also deconstructed the divide between human and nonhuman, although not always under the banner of posthumanism. In the 1990s, animal geographies were reinvigorated by geographers drawing on animal philosophy and Foucauldian ideas of discipline and spatialized difference. This subdiscipline explored the subjugation and suffering of nonhuman creatures, which is often justified by the “great divide” (Latour 1993) between humans and all other animals. Animal geographies also exposed the ways in which representations of animals and other parts of nature provided ideological justification to naturalize certain forms of human behavior, such as heteronormative sexuality. Conceptually, animal geographies sought to deconstruct the nature/culture dualism not only in exterior space but also as it ran through the human, examining what Agamben called a great “caesura” at the heart of the human. Posthumanist animal studies therefore seek to account for the animal within as well as animals in diverse settings such as the city, the farm, and the laboratory. Feminist scholars have been among the foremost to point to the ethical implications of denying animality in favor of a constructed rational human. This denial has led to a “crisis of reason” and fuels environmentally destructive behavior (Plumwood 2002), so deconstructing ideologically charged human rationality became not just a matter of epistemology but also an ethical necessity.

Posthumanism as epistemological style maintains certain commitments to the importance of representation, and often works by deconstructing the self/other binaries at the heart of identity-making practices. This strand of posthumanism is therefore often concerned to denaturalize nature, offering counter-readings to the messages encoded in nature and in representations of nature. The impact of posthumanism as epistemological style has been great. Replacing a pre-given, unitary standard of the human with the ongoing production of different subjects has enabled geographers to study the power relations of different processes of subjectification and has opened up important political spaces for anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-heteronormative politics. These perspectives emphasize the need to go beyond extending existing modes of representation to subaltern groups; they call for a deeper reassessment of the model of rational man as the foundation of modernity. The commitment to working at an epistemological level, however, means that this branch of posthumanism eschews the bodily, material dimensions of life. In other words, it is more concerned with the figure of a certain kind of human and posthuman than with the fleshy beings themselves. Therefore some scholars have pushed posthumanism to think of a more relational subject with embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy, and desire as core
qualities. Moreover, some critics have suggested that, ironically, posthumanism as epistemological style remains too reliant on humanism, not just as a necessary straw figure for criticism, but also because it usually ends up invoking humanist ideas such as freedom, democracy, and progress to articulate its political goals.

**Posthumanism as ontological condition**

This final approach to posthumanism is rooted in anti-essentialist, process-oriented, and vitalist philosophies. It is associated with the ideas of Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, and Isabelle Stengers, among many others. These thinkers emphasize dynamic processes of becoming instead of a world composed of discrete entities. In this ontology, human characteristics are merely temporary intensifications of matter and energy, indivisible from other agglomerations of matter. Accordingly, posthumanism as ontological condition is closely allied to geographic studies of embodiment, materiality, emotion, and the nonhuman.

Within geography the ideas of Bruno Latour and others associated with actor–network theory have been particularly influential. Latour argued that the modern settlement between nature and culture was merely an illusion and that the world was constituted through flows and connections between heterogeneous actants. Latour argued that the human was a result of purifying practices that worked constantly to separate a hybrid world into two realms, nature and culture. Actor–network theory therefore conceptualizes the human as an ongoing performance spun out of many different agents and agencies. Latour's ideas have been recently supplemented by several other bodies of thought. First, concepts of multiplicity have augmented the flat ontology suggested by actor–network theory. Instead of one network, there is a multiplicity of overlapping networks, which create a denser, more complex sense of space. Second, geographers and others have drawn on the geophilosophy of Gilles Deleuze to produce assemblage theory, which accounts for conditions of multiplicity and describes open, emergent systems.

Critical of the text-bound excesses of postmodernity, scholars such as Nigel Thrift have highlighted the importance of forces that work on a pre-, ex-, or postrepresentational register in human becoming, formulating what has become known as nonrepresentational theory. Of particular importance has been the concept of affect, which is broadly defined as the capacity of a body to affect and be affected by other bodies through extralinguistic forces. Through ideas like affective atmosphere and affective politics, geographers are beginning to understand how life is shot through by transhuman energies. In related vein, cultural and historical geographers have reconsidered phenomenology, and in particular the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, to explore how the world is brought into being through sense and experience, always in particular circumstances.

Feminist and postcolonial scholars have also cautiously brought the body back into their research agenda. While deconstructive posthumanism argued powerfully that race, gender, and sexuality were socially constructed rather than naturally given categories, scholars such as Rosi Braidotti have argued for re-ontologizing the body and examining the ways that difference is lived, felt, sensed, and performed. For this feminist perspective, bodily — and in particular sexual — difference becomes a political position from which to build alliances, rather than a problem to be overcome. Similarly, geographers have shown how race is materially produced through affective and bodily assemblages, as well as constructed through discourse. Both feminist
and race scholars are mindful of the dangers in returning to the body, given the political effectiveness of constructivism and the dangers of naturalism. But the political message of such work is that a shift in focus from discursively codified subject to processes of subjectification that encompasses body, technology, and the stuff of life generates a politics open to reappropriating the play of differentiation. Posthumanism emphasizes the mutability of being such that politics becomes a matter of interfering in flows of energy and matter to produce new possibilities for becoming otherwise.

This branch of posthumanism also brooks no ontological hygiene between humans and other species. Of particular resonance has been Donna Haraway’s material-semiotic cyborg and, more recently, companion species. Haraway argues that beings are a “knot of relationality” that draws in many species and many histories. Haraway’s work has also consistently reproached environmentalists for their anti-technological stance. Posthumanism as ontological condition draws on the concepts of originary technicity to argue against any possibility of human/technology purity, and instead argues for a critical appropriation of the technologies of capitalism.

There are several key differences between posthumanism as ontological condition and other forms of posthumanism. First, it denies that there has been any historical transition to a new, posthuman era. Instead, the argument is that we have never been human (Haraway 2008). In other words, the doctrine of humanism never fully encapsulated the condition of becoming human. This branch of posthumanism does recognize, however, that processes of mixing and decentering have accelerated in intensity in recent decades. Second, its vitalism – the notion that matter is agentic, self-organizing, and mutable – distinguishes this approach from the priority accorded to meaning, representation, and identity politics by the other forms of posthumanism. Third, its ethics and politics are less grounded in humanist commitments to universal justice, rights, freedom, and so on. Instead, the ethical-political commitments of ontological posthumanism are situated, context-specific, and open-ended. They exhibit a strong experimental flavor, and are organized through lines of connection and alliance which cut across national, species, and other traditional forms of difference.

Often, research practice uses participatory methods and is aimed at encouraged resubjectification of both researcher and researched. Therefore much turns on an enlarged sense of embeddedness and awareness of relation to others, which creates new geographies of ethical response and responsibility. This posthumanist ethical-political project is generally underspecified, with speculative appeals to care and flourishing common but still not fully substantiated or worked through.

These ethical and political commitments mean that posthumanism has been met with some skepticism by geographers committed to more established forms of politics. Some critics point to the similarities between an open-ended, experimental, and context-bound ethical project and forms of uncertainty and precarity produced by neoliberalism. Others note that the posthuman possibilities presented by complexity and the mutability of matter have quickly lost their political potential as biocapital incorporates such resources into new regimes of accumulation. Eco-Marxists and political ecologists are debating the utility of posthuman immanent ontologies which do not use structure or meta-explanatory devices such as capital. Still others have identified a blind spot in posthumanism, in that it critiques humanism from the inside of Western thought. These critics have argued that there are plenty of human cultures that never shared Euro-American ideas of the human and its
separation from nature and technology. They see
the lack of attention to Indigenous knowledge
and cosmography as extending the dangerous
Euro-American exceptionalism of humanism.
From such a perspective, while posthumanism as
ontological condition cleaves to posthumanism
as a transhistorical theory rather than as an
epoch, this maneuver still denies the way in
which posthumanism has emerged from partic-
ular historical conditions and particular sites of
privilege to become a key concern of our times.

SEE ALSO: Actor-network theory; Animal
geographies; Bodies; Difference; Nature and
corporeality; Nonrepresentational theory;
Performance and performativity;
Postcolonialism/postcolonial geographies;
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Subaltern; Whiteness

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Abstract: Posthumanism is a mode of analysis highly skeptical of the centrality afforded the human in Western philosophical and political thought. Where humanism holds that the human is defined by unique properties such as language or culture, posthumanism emphasizes that, just like other beings and objects, humans are continually and differentially produced through biological, technological, and other more-than-human forces. Posthumanism can be approached as an historical epoch, as a matter of epistemological style that deconstructs the universal claims of humanism, and as an ontological condition that argues we have never been human.

Keywords: body; nature; subjectivity