



THEORY

# Posthuman Glossary

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so-called castrated female has been relegated in psychoanalysis. Posthuman sexuality also values the space between the two as an ethical site of desire, what Irigaray calls the 'mucosal', whereby the model of the vulva as two sets of two lips shows self-touching, desire without binaries of mastery and submission, and proliferative parts indicate both the limitless nature of sexuality and, as lips, the discursive regulation the speaking of sexuality operates. This is why Foucault and Lotringer both claim we speak too much about sexuality. Our society is saturated with sexuality but actual bodies, pleasures, intensities and what constitutes the sexual have been largely annihilated due to the overemphasis on description and the commodification and marketability of sexuality as a concept abstracted from bodies and pleasure in the training of docile consumers. Both theorists advocate silence as a response to the question of sexuality, while feminists often utilize play with language (via poetry and art) to reflect the playful experimentation posthuman sexuality advocates.

Posthuman sexuality raises an ethical conundrum, however. Subjectivity has mistakenly collapsed gender and sexuality (whether due to dimorphism creating gender division or both as corporeal regulated sexual systems). This means there is a history and present need for activism involving minoritarian subjects, particularly women but also those addressed under the acronym LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-, queer, intersex, asexual), itself an acronym which indiscriminately collapses sexuality with gendered identity. Similarly the contemporary debate between some trans persons and so-called 'terfs' (trans exclusionary radical feminists) is in one sense more about the debate between whether we should have gendered categories at all.

Queer theory attempted this address – in its post-USA incarnations via Continental philosophy queer went further than sexual alterity to become a refusal of heteronormative gendering and sexuality and subjective categories entirely. However, the issue remains a contentious one and the activist question facing posthuman sexuality now is 'if we have rid ourselves of all sex, gender and sexuality, how do we continue to fight against the oppression of what are still considered minoritarians based on their relationship with sex and gender?' This is a question which continues to be addressed within posthuman sexuality.

*See also* Feminicity; Trans\*; Feminist Posthumanities; Posthuman Ethics.

*Patricia MacCormack*

## POSTHUMANISM

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My work on this topic begins with an insistence on distinguishing between 'the posthuman' and 'posthumanism'. Many of those who aspire to, or imagine the inevitability of, what is often called a 'posthuman' condition – I am thinking in particular of figures such as 'transhumanist' Ray Kurzweil (of *The Singularity is Near* fame) and philosopher Nick Bostrom – are, philosophically speaking, rather traditional humanists. Bostrom's version of the posthuman derives, as he freely admits, from ideals of rational agency and human perfectibility drawn directly from Renaissance Humanism and the Enlightenment, and its guiding lights are (among other pillars of philosophical humanism) Isaac Newton, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant.

This 'humanist posthumanism' (as I label it in *What Is Posthumanism?*) (Wolfe 2010) is problematic for at least a couple of reasons. First, it encourages us to think

that the full achievement of that thing we call 'human' must be predicated upon overcoming and finally transcending not just our 'animal' origins (in the name of a rational manipulation and optimization of the human condition) but also the fetters of materiality and embodiment altogether. The clearest symptom of this very old humanist philosophical desire is transhumanism's prediction that we will, someday soon, be able to overcome all diseases and infirmities, eventually achieving radically extended lifespans, and even immortality. Leaving aside the practical and pragmatic questions that accompany this claim, I merely wish to point out that the achievement of the fully 'human' condition by the killing off, transcendence, repression or overcoming of the 'animal' body is a very old and very familiar hallmark of humanism – and, historically speaking, a very dangerous one, as recent work in biopolitical thought by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Giorgio Agamben and others has made clear. The introduction of such an ontological hierarchy between the 'human' and the 'animal' (and the animality of the human) has been, as these thinkers remind us, one of the key discursive technologies for rendering not just animal populations, but various *human* populations, 'killable but not murderable'.

A second reason that this 'humanist posthumanism' is problematic is that even when it does not indulge in such familiar strategies – indeed, even when it opposes them – the humanist mode of thought in which such opposition is mounted undercuts what may be quite admirable ethical, political or other impulses that we share with humanism. For example, animal rights philosophy as articulated by its two most important founding philosophers – Tom Regan and Peter Singer – is certainly posthumanist in the sense that it opposes

the ontological hierarchy just outlined. It is posthumanist, that is to say, in its opposition to anthropocentrism and to the assumption that the subject worthy of ethical recognition, in any way coincides, *prima facie*, with the taxonomic designation 'human'. But it is humanist, and in a debilitating way, in *how* it mounts this argument philosophically. Whether in Regan's neo-Kantian version or Singer's utilitarian version, what secures ethical standing for the animal is a set of characteristics, qualities and potentialities that ends up looking an awful lot like *us*. And so animals are accorded standing because they embody, in diminished form, some normative concept of the 'human'. And that would seem to be at odds with the ethical commitment that got the whole enterprise of animal rights philosophy up and running in the first place – namely, the desire to recognize the ethical value of different, non-human ways of being in the world.

What all of this means is that the nature of thought itself, and not just the *object* of thought, must change if it is to be posthumanist. More precisely, the 'human' can no longer be considered either the origin or the end of thought, and in at least two senses. First, the 'human' is not an *explanans* but an *explanandum*, not an explanation but that which needs to be explained. To put it another way, the most philosophically complex and pragmatically robust accounts of what constitutes the specificity of this thing we call 'human' are accounts in which the idea of the 'human' as we've inherited it from the Western philosophical tradition actually does no heavy lifting. For example, many people would argue that part of what makes humans 'human' is a unique relationship between language and cognition. But to really understand what is going on in that relationship – to really explore the relationship between the neurophysiological

wetware of the brain, the symbolic processes that shape that wetware, and the evolutionary processes in and through which both have co-evolved – we have at our disposal all sorts of conceptual tools not available to Descartes or Kant or Aristotle, tools that allow us to explain how the ‘human’ is the *product* of processes that are, strictly speaking, inhuman and ahuman. How do we know? Because we now know that the very same processes produce similar products in non-human beings as well, as well-known experiments with great apes (such as those conducted by scientist Sue Savage-Rumbaugh with the bonobo, Kanzi) have shown (see Savage-Rumbaugh and Lewin 1996).

Moreover – and more radically – not only is the line between human and non-human impossible to definitively draw with regard to the binding together of neurophysiology, cognitive states and symbolic behaviours, the line between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘brain’ and ‘mind’, is also impossible to draw definitively. For the ‘human’, what makes us ‘us’ – whether we are talking about cultural and anthropological inheritances, tool use and technologies, archives and prosthetic devices, or semiotic systems of all kinds – is always already on the scene before we arrive, providing the very antecedent conditions of possibility for our *becoming* ‘human’. In a fundamental sense, then, what makes us ‘us’ is precisely *not* us; it is not even ‘human’ – a fact that is particularly clear in the various prosthetic technologies that human beings use to offload and exteriorize memory and communication, which in turn reshape the anatomy and physiology of the brain. And what is true of those technologies is true of all semiotic systems and codes, of even the most rudimentary type. In short, dating back thousands of years to the advent of tool use and, later, symbolic systems of communication,

human beings are *prosthetic* beings. What we call ‘we’ is in fact a multiplicity of relations between ‘us’ and ‘not us’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, organic and non-organic, things ‘present’ and things ‘absent’.

What all this means is that posthumanism distances itself from the transhumanism discussed above most decisively by reconceiving the relationship between what we call ‘the human’ and the question of *finitude* – not just the finitude that obtains in our being bound to other forms of embodied life that live and die as we do, that are shaped by the same processes that shape us, but also the finitude of our relationship to the tools, languages, codes, maps and semiotic systems that make the world cognitively available to us in the first place. If ‘the map is not the territory’ (as Gregory Bateson (1988) once put it, borrowing a phrase from Alfred Korzybski), then this means that the very maps that make the world available to us also make the world, at the same time, *unavailable* to us. While this may sound paradoxical, it is in fact common-sensical. For example, were we to seek the most empirically, scientifically exhaustive description of a particular piece of land, we would find ourselves, very quickly, consulting a host of experts in various fields: geologists, hydrologists, botanists, zoologists and so on. And what we would find is that the more we empirically scrutinize the object of analysis, deploying all the forms of expertise and types of knowledge that we can possibly muster, the more complex and multi-dimensional that object becomes. From this vantage, the ‘territory’ being studied becomes a ‘virtual’ space, but for this new mode of thought called ‘posthumanism’, ‘virtual’ here doesn’t mean ‘less real’, it means *more* real.

Now all of this might seem merely a matter of taste, but if we believe sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995), this new form of

thought, this constitutively paradoxical form of reason, is in fact a hallmark of modernization and of modernity itself, understood as a process of 'functional differentiation' of society into discrete autopoietic social systems, each with its own governing codes of knowledge and communication (what is sometimes called, more moralistically, 'fragmentation' or 'specialization'), each struggling to manage and reduce the increasing complexity of a larger environment that they themselves help to produce, in fact, in deploying their own specialized discourses. From this vantage, the contingency of the various codes and 'maps' that we use to make sense of the world around us is in fact a reservoir of the very complexity those codes and maps attempt to reduce. Posthumanist thought, in this sense, is both an index and an agent of complexity.

*See also* Anthropism/Immanent Humanism; Posthuman Critical Theory; Critical Posthumanism; Insurgent Posthumanism; Ontological Turn.

*Cary Wolfe*

## POSTHUMANIST PERFORMATIVITY

Theories of scientific knowledge and liberal social theories owe much to the representationalist belief that there is perfect correspondence and, consequently, ontological distinction between linguistic descriptions and reality. Representationalism, in particular, postulates that that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. This system of representation is often theorized as a tripartite arrangement that places the (human) knower in a relation of absolute externality to nature and the world, medi-

ated only by scientific knowledge in its multiple representational forms. This model is so entrenched within Western culture that it has taken on a common-sense appeal. And with it, the inertness of nature as a timeless and ahistorical entity awaiting/inviting representation goes now mostly undebated (Barad 2003).

The taken-for-granted ontological gap between words and things upon which modern Western science rests has generated questions around the accuracy of representations, especially among feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial critics and queer theorists (Butler 1993; Foucault 1973, 1972, 1977, 1980; Haraway 1991, 1992a, 1997; Latour 1991). Their search for alternatives to the static relationality model proposed by representationalism has brought forward performative understandings of the nature of scientific practices that shift the focus from linguistic representations to discursive practices, i.e. from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality to matters of practice/doings/actions.

Michel Foucault was the first to theorize discursive practices as the local sociohistorical material conditions that enable and constrain disciplinary knowledge practices, and produce – rather than merely describe – the 'subjects' and 'objects' of knowledge practices. More recently, queer theorist Judith Butler (1993) drew on Foucault's suggestion that the repetition of regulatory bodily practices produces a specified materialization of the body to link her notion of gender performativity to the materialization of sexed bodies. As a result of these and other efforts towards a performative understanding of identity, matter loses its traditional connotation as passive blank slate of culture to emerge as 'a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter' (Butler 1993: 9).