TRANS-HUMANITIES

Title : Posthumanist Selfhood: Challenges to Being a Conglomerate

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Source : *Trans-Humanities*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (2013), pp. 121–134
Published by : Ewha Womans University Press
URL : http://eiheng.ewha.ac.kr/page.asp?pageid=book10&pagenum=060600
Online ISSN : 2383-9899

Posthumanist Selfhood: Challenges to Being a Conglomerate

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In today's technologically saturated existence, the relationship between humans and technology is everywhere in front of us. Metaphorically speaking, since the Promethean gift of fire we have understood that human beings are technologically dependent. Today, however, archaeology and anthropology have demonstrated this to be literally so. For most of human history, technology has been considered solely as a form of material service that fulfilled human desires or gave humans power against the gods or nature. It was not until the effects of the industrial revolution that it was first regarded as a phenomenon that participates in the constitution of *the human*, the metaphysical makeup of man, structuring our lives, opportunities and self-understanding.

In the last century, pessimistic technological determinists and optimistic instrumentalists focused a great deal of attention on the interdependent relations of humans and technologies. Scholars have been aware of society's remolding due to the technological machinery of the industrial revolution and capitalism. The primary questions concerning technology, however, have continued to revolve around whether or not particular technologies are good or bad things in themselves, and whether they fit into a human world or force humans to fit into their own. The standard dualist metaphysical foundations of Enlightenment humanism that separate the subjective human from the objective world continue to permeate almost all thinking concerning technology. In the twenty-first century, "the question concerning technology," as Heidegger titled his 1954 text, is under scrutiny in university classrooms across the globe, and in an age of ubiquitous devices, information, and technical discipline, comprehending our technological constitution is no longer an esoteric leap. We are quite aware that technology impacts the fundamental identity and context that defines our own self-understanding, what we call *the human*, and we

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recognize that this identity has evolved over time, challenging the ontological parameters of Enlightenment humanism. The concern is no longer with technology solely as an object or instrument, but as an ethos through which we define *the human*. This challenge to the ontological status of mankind represents two separate but overlapping campaigns that are at the center of the continued development of our ontological self-understanding, and they have embraced two half-century-old monikers, transhumanism and posthumanism, born out of the prophecies of technological determinists.

This essay will provide a brief overview of the state of affairs for transhumanist and posthumanist ontologies, the difference between these often-conflated arenas, and the challenges they face. By placing each of these movements in context, the movements foundational assumptions that are often assumed in many articles will be clearly laid out. We will begin with a word on the ontological background of trans- and postumanism in Enlightenment humanism in order to clarify the foundational differences between the two. After this, an overview of current trends in technological studies that are seeking to establish a new paradigm of ontological relationships between human beings and technology will establish the role that technology has played in the ontological critique of Enlightenment humanism's dualistic aspects. And finally, through posthumanist attempts to try to overcome this dualism, we will see how the inclusion of technology as a fundamental aspect of being human hopes to pave the way for an evolving and complicated posthumanist ontology.

Even as 17th century technology was usurping the place of humans in terms of empirical testimony about reality, rationalist and empiricist philosophers like Rene Descartes, in his *Meditations*, and John Locke, in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, were debating the foundations of epistemology that were still wrapped up in the dualist metaphysics of antiquity's material and immaterial worlds. While Descartes' skepticism did much to focus attention on the insufficiency of metaphysical claims of knowledge, he relied specifically on thinking as a foundation that did little to escape the troubles of dualism. The new forms of epistemological inquiry that erupted during the Enlightenment remained classically bound within similarly dualistic territories of minds and bodies, and immaterial subjects and material objects. The functionality of Platonism's dualistic

worldview persisted as a transformed and augmented foundation under a more modern conception of the world, fitting tightly with the immaterial realm of Christian eschatology, in the place of an ancient Greek afterlife. Indeed, this should be unsurprising, as Christian theology owes a great deal to Plato's metaphysical constructions. This deep historical dualism remained intertwined with the development of Enlightenment humanism, wherein *the human* achieved its ontological status as a rational, immaterial subject. Despite the intellectual arsenal that has assaulted it over the last three centuries, this dualistic construction of *the human* has remained virtually impregnable ever since.

The notion of *the human* as a coherent immaterial self, a rational, responsible moral subject, has dominated our self-understanding since the eighteenth century. The physical world and its influence were largely ignored in the makeup of the individual well into the twentieth. Artifacts and the natural world remained "outside" the psychological self, a Cartesian mind floating in an immaterial abyss. Yet even at the beginning of this modern construction, technology played a fundamental role in the development of Cartesian notions of selfhood. Don Ihde points out in his "Merleau-Ponty and Epistemology Engines," that the notion of the subject and object as metaphors for the self and world were themselves explicitly connected to the technological attributes of the example of the *camera obscura* (364-66). Ironically, the dualism of Enlightenment humanism, it seems, took its most famous division from a technological metaphor. This is quite fitting, since technology is also at the center of the challenge to its survival.

This fundamental dualism of self and world is the key difference between transhumanism and posthumanism and how they articulate notions of selfhood. Posthumanism concerns itself with reconnoitering a new paradigm for the constitution of *the human*, one that supersedes the inherent dualisms of Enlightenment humanism. Transhumanism, on the other hand, appropriates humanism's dualistic posture and attempts to amplify the humanistic attributes until they reach the level of the superhuman. Transhumanists hope to achieve this amplification through the saving powers of technology, famously exemplified in such science fiction ideas like separating a mind from a body in order to be "uploaded" into a computer or equivalent mechanistic system. Ironically, such amplification would lead, for transhumanists, to a "posthuman," though

in this case the term posthuman only indicates an entity still understood logically at its core to be constructed through a dualist paradigm, i.e. an independent "self" that is healthier, wiser, and has more power to realize its desires such as immortality, beauty, moral purity, etc. In harmony with a long dualist history, this vision repeats the goals of a Christian world predicated on the metaphysical notion of seeking the Good. The "posthumans" postulated by transhumanism are not commensurate with posthumanism's philosophical goal of disassembling Enlightenment humanism's dualistic foundation. Indeed, "posthumans" in this sense are nothing more than the fantasy of the attributes of *the human* intensified toward the absolute, a project already undertaken in centuries past by theology and already critiqued well enough by Ludwig Feuerbach in his nineteenth century text *What is Christianity*. Transhumanism, in opposition to theological viewpoints, uses technology to replace the saving grace of God.

Likewise, transhumanism embraces the Enlightenment project of "progress" that was born historically along with the Christian optimism toward a New World of seemingly infinite resources and opportunity. One can see the outline of transhumanism taking shape in the nineteenth century social orientation toward nature that usurped its province and incorporated it into the human project. Historical accounts, such as Thomas Hughes' *Human Built World*, detail the redemptive value of technology in society's reframing of a post-industrial revolution world. It is through the hope that technology will improve humanity that transhumanism recognizes its roots in the desire for human "progress." Still holding to this position, the explicit message of scholars like Nick Bostrom and Max More, as well as bioethicists like Julian Savulescu, is that not only *can* we be better, but we *should* be better.[1] Transhumanists see improvement as a primary goal, and this prescribed improvement is not limited to health or intellectual acuity. Moral improvement is also argued for as a duty and an obligation. Such an explicit invocation of moral authority and cultural dominance rests, once again, on the back of the metaphysics of a vestigial worldview that led to the problems of colonialism that we now seek not to repeat. That such moral goals could be reached

1. See *Unfit for the Future* (2012) for Savulescu's position on moral enhancement. He is the coauthor of *Human Enhancement* (2011) with Nick Bostrom. Max More's perspectives are readily available on his website.

solely by the injection of technologies once again highlights the metaphysical usurpation of the theological realm by a transhumanist vision of technology's illimitable powers.

In contrast to transhumanism's desire to appropriate technology for the goals of a long standing ontological framework, posthumanism engages the phenomenon of technology with a much different posture. Posthumanism asserts that the missing ingredient in Enlightenment humanism's recipe for *the human* is technology itself. The claim is that *the human* is not separable from technology and that the constitution of the human is a technological constitution. A clear example of this is exemplified by the archaeological classification of human history through the presence of artifacts. It is only through the presence of such technological engagement with the world that we recognize ourselves, or our ancient ancestors. Posthumanism's stance is directly in opposition to transhumanism on this point. Instead of assuming an already defined human for whom technology can function, posthumanism attempts to show that technology is part and parcel of *the human* itself. For posthumanism, technology must become part of the first principles that constitute *the human*, meaning that the immaterial subject and material world can no longer be fundamentally distinct. The view is that if that perceived detachment could be disregarded, then the metaphysical superstructures that have delineated *the human* since the beginning of classical western cultural history could be dismantled, allowing for a new unified ontological foundation. A being could be judged on functionality, relationality, and physicality, dissolving the problematic assumption of an inner immaterial realm. Such a change in the understanding of *the human* would have ramifications from the esoteric halls of philosophy to the pragmatic halls of city courthouses. But to achieve this, posthumanism would have to overcome dualism's ace-in-the-hole.

The greatest advantage of humanism's dualist metaphysics is that it fits our perceptual experience. This advantage is recognizable in many forms of pragmatic understanding. For instance, colors appear to be part of the object and not an effect of the mind/brain. The stars at night seem to traverse the sky, while we appear to be stationary. Indeed, much like other forms of metaphysical description that have played into our experience of being, Enlightenment humanism's divisions mimic our experience and are difficult to undermine. These discriminations have

thrived as they have given meaning, value and dignity to human lives conceived under the parameters of philosophical Idealism and European Christendom. In fact, to the great benefit of many, Enlightenment humanism provided an optimism concerning the place of *the human* in creation and the cosmos. As Langdon Winner remarks in his article "Resistance is Futile," this humanistic metaphysical subject is the representative of human innate value targeted in the post World War Two UN Declaration of Human Rights (406). There is freedom, both political and ethical, that accompanies the view that the body itself and the environment in which the body resides have no effect on the inherent value of being human. We all, as such subjects, equally share this foundation of value and dignity.

Since, we feel like individual rational subjects and thus we rarely question the premise. Unfortunately, humanism explains the phenomenon of feeling like a coherent "self" in an incomplete, tautological and yet paradoxically satisfying way. Depending on the disciplinary construction, we are souls in bodies, minds that control temples of flesh, immaterial subjects staring out at a material world, or individuated will whose motivation is wrapped up in the becoming of the world, overcoming and surpassing itself. The latter of these is recognizably a Nietzschean construction that is often considered in relation to transhumanist ideas of the progressive direction of the human subject.

Discussions about Nietzsche's place in the tradition of transhumanist and posthumanist thought is a popular topic. *The Journal of Evolution and Technology* devoted an entire issue to it (Volume 20, Issue 1). It is easy to see a correlation between Nietzsche's "Übermensch" and the transhumanist idea of the improved and better human, but the ontological foundations of these two supreme beings remain somewhat at odds. For example, Heidegger saw Nietzsche's philosophy as bringing an end to metaphysics, but of course this meant the dualistic groundwork inherited from antiquity, not the inquiry into the workings of reality, the questioning of being. For this reason, the term metaphysics has often been replaced in modern scholars by the term ontologies (which I use in this article), in order to attempt to escape the connotation of dualism. Consequently, if Nietzsche's "Übermensch" overcame metaphysics in a revaluation of values, it is not clear that this new entity would be commensurate with a transhumanist goal, since transhumanism values humanistic values.

Instead, Nietzsche's orientation seems as though it could have much more in common with posthumanism's goal to supersede Enlightenment humanism altogether and redefine the ontological foundations of *the human*. Indeed, some scholars support this position, accusing transhumanists of being inconsistent, basing much of their philosophy on a naturalist stance that presumes an end to metaphysics while valuing the values derived from humanist dualisms.

Humanism's ace-in-the-hole has been its phenomenological buttress for the last three hundred years. Transhumanism seeks an amplified version of humanistic attributes and continues with humanism's ontological structure, hoping that the outcome of creating superhuman posthumans will lead to a world that is beyond our current recognition. But this is as far as transhumanism can postulate its ends since it doesn't critique the foundation of humanist metaphysical dualism. Replacing this buttress of human experience with posthumanism's explanation of the ontological relations between humans and artifacts, an as yet alien and not well understood paradigm for framing *the human*, would chafe deep metaphysical prejudices, and these prejudices may be hardwired into our biological and phenomenological constitution (Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* 187-228). The assumption of a coherent subject is pragmatic, conforms to theological prejudices and is supported by laws governing ethical normativity. A posthumanist replacement may not fit our experience of the world, and we are both reticent and wary about such drastic changes in our ontological status. We want to resist this new upheaval just as centuries ago scores of educated and reasonable people watching the sun traverse the sky, with their feet planted firmly still, resisted the idea that the Earth turned. In the face of such resistance, posthumanism must provide the ontological framework to make the acceptance of a new constitution of *the human* agreeable. For posthumanism to be successful, it must deconstruct the dualist notion of *the human* and rebuild its relationship to technology in a more profound and integrated way.

Just as technology is responsible for expanding our view of nature, our understanding of *the human* is also connected to the assumption of a distinction between technology and nature. In the *Nichomachaean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that difference between *techne* (artifacts) and *physis* (nature) is the source of origin from which they issue forth (335). The origin of *techne* is the human, and the origin of nature is not. Thus

it is already spelled out in Aristotle that *the human* consists of something other than the natural. Otherwise *techne* would itself belong to this category by transitive virtue of *the human* as a natural entity. *The human* is somehow a point of departure with an assumed foundation that is beyond nature, allowing the human to be a *sui generis* point of origin for *techne*. Such a view is exactly what posthumanism seeks to remedy. Posthumanism is an attempt to mend this bifurcated ground and its phenomenological assumptions and to bring the role of technology back into the natural foundation of *the human*. Through technology lies the path to reuniting immaterial subjects with their material bodies and forming a new model of self-understanding. This project, however, requires a new ontological orientation, one that was not realizable until the philosophical progress of the last half-century.

In the mid-twentieth century, Martin Heidegger approached technology with a metaphysical critique and explicitly connected technology with the ontological status of *the human*. In his 1954 *Die Frage Nach der Technik* [*The Question Concerning Technology*] he placed the phenomenon of technology squarely in the sights of what can perhaps best be described as a phenomenological method of questioning and exploration that, for him, defined human engagement in the world. He employed it to try to make sense of technology as a phenomenon and tied his metaphysics of Dasein to technology. This approach opened many new avenues of inquiry for the phenomenologists of the second half of the twentieth century such as Merleau-Ponty and Don Ihde who, through phenomenology, have been so influential in blurring the lines between technology and *the human*. It also effectively paved the way for the connection between basic aspects of phenomenology and technology that have defined a great part of technology studies of the last twenty-five years. Unfortunately, Heidegger's Hellenistic bias overlooked the fundamental critique of Aristotle's metaphysical assumptions, mentioned earlier, concerning *the human* at the root of the difference between technology and nature even as he critiqued their *poietic* emergence. This overlooked critique has still not been fully realized, though a great deal of work in technology studies and posthumanism has made the promise of a new constitution of *the human* possible. In this constitution, *the human* is no longer a cloven entity, half-in and half-out of the physical world. Instead, there is only one world wherein nature, technology and

the human are unified in their foundation.

Posthumanism's concern with an organized and stable philosophical foundation for a shift in conception of *the human* distinguishes it from transhumanism's muddled foundations of naturalism and dualism. A strong teleological atmosphere surrounds the transhumanist project as described by its key figures like Kurzweil and Bostrom, while posthumanism appears to not yet have a goal, but instead to be rather concerned with understanding the process. Scholars like Kathryne Halyes and Donna Harraway[2] represent a vein of posthuman inquiry that is less teleological and more descriptive, dealing with cultural studies and literary criticism, and above all undermining notions of essentialism that have propped up traditional metaphysical views and humanist dualism.

The reasons for the acceptance of Enlightenment humanism's dualism, however, are quite evident. And though we now widely recognize that the experience of being is connected to this metaphysical prejudice, the dualist perception persists, hinged on the ethical concern of moral agency and responsibility that is only satisfactorily described by dualist ontologies. Though the issue is clear, it remains an imposing hurdle because the reunification of technology and nature in *the human* appears to require a physicalist ontology that rejects dualism and, therefore, conflicts with the phenomenological experience of being an agent with a will.

Transhumanism completely eschews engagement with this obstacle. There is a fear that the testimony of human experience may take a backseat to objective explanation of technology or technical systems and ultimately resolve into a form of determinism, robbing *the human* of dignity and volition. A physicalist ontology always faces charges of determinism wherein the freedom of the will, the cornerstone of moral agency and responsibility, is jeopardized. In essence, *the human* is reduced to physics, perhaps an unpredictable physics like patterns of weather, but nonetheless unacceptable to most. We comprehend ourselves as actors and not as deterministic response mechanisms. A coherent inner "self" runs the show, so experience tells us, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary.

It seems clear that the challenges for transhumanist ontologies are not nearly as complex as posthumanist problems in regard to a foundation.

2. See Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) or Haraway's *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1990).

Transhumanism simply needs to look at the critiques of teleology and enlightenment humanism that have already been penned, some more than a century ago. The primary issue for transhumanism is its inconsistent use of humanist values while promoting technological futures that would require what we call *the human* to be a non-dualist entity, constructed rather than given. Ironically in this light, *post*humanism must come first and pave the way before there can be an intermediary *trans*humanist realization of a "posthuman future." Posthumanism must rearticulate *the human* that shares its inherent agency with that of the material world, where technological artifacts and human beings are no longer distinct entities. This may seem like a Heraclean task, but headway is being made. The sociological approaches of the last twenty-five years have pioneered new paths despite their own discordant ontological stances and foundations. The most promising of these favor an indefinite distribution of agency among material agents rather than a simple dualism or a problematic monism. But while this tactic looks appealing on the surface, it is singularly difficult to establish. The concern is that, as human will is removed from its ontologically privileged location in the immaterial subject and dissolved in a physicalist ontology, the intentionality of humans is degraded to create a balance of intentionality between humans and artifacts, shattering the long-held understandings of human intention and motivation. As Bruno Latour argues in "A Collective of Humans and Non-Humans," it is not just people that kill people or guns that kill people, but the intersection of the two that is responsible for the dynamic that leads to armed assaults and murders (*Pandora's Hope* 176-78). We certainly do not see how it is possible to punish the gun, nor do we comprehend how holding a gun responsible alleviates the sense of responsibility for the crime. Nevertheless, we must still answer the question: Can we consider artifacts as moral actors? Indeed, scholars like Benjamin Hale are attempting to discern the constraints on the moral considerability of artifacts in general (216-40). For us, human intention is the litmus and, for most, to discuss the intention of artifacts treads the line of the absurd.

Much of posthumanist ontological discussion has emerged from studies in the social construction of technology. Unfortunately, these fields tend to stick to detailing examples of social influence in the emergence of technologies, as in Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker's example of the

bicycle in *The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts*. Other undertakings, like Bruno Latour and Michael Callon's Actor Network Theory (ANT), do attempt to detail the relationship of artifacts to humans and the interaction that takes place. ANT's metaphysical model of *actants* and their dispersed influence and accountability has had a major impact on posthumanism and its ability to articulate the incorporation of technology into a conception of *the human* (*We Have Never Been Modern; Pandora's Hope; Reassembling the Social*). Similarly, issuing from studies in the sociology of scientific knowledge, Andrew Pickering offers a slightly different metaphorical relationship in *The Mangle*, though the general concept of interweaving avenues of influence from artifacts and technologies to humans, and vice versa, remains familiar. In Latour's turn of phrase, the dualist metaphysical representation of *the human* is replaced by "a parliament of things" wherein combinations of entities replace the singular human or artifact (*We Have Never* 142-45). Even so, these approaches have not solved the equation for measuring the inherent agency of participants within a particular network. It is still clear that the influence and agency of artifacts and humans in these webs of interaction must be determined somewhat arbitrarily by the observer, and this in itself problematizes the ontological model.

And here rests the state of transhumanist and posthumanist ontology. Different projects, yet fundamentally intertwined. Transhumanism awaits a solid foundation for its posthuman future, while prioritizing humanist values, and posthumanism must tackle the conundrum of distributed agency, which the transhumanist use of technology makes evident. Together, they hint at a way around the Enlightenment's dualist metaphysics, but are not quite yet ready to undo the ontological foundations that are so agreeable to our phenomenological experience. Indeed, Latour asks perhaps the most important question facing the project of overcoming Enlightenment humanism. A productive answer to this question would ultimately allow for a redefinition of *the human* that would permanently displace the tradition of dualism that has haunted philosophers since antiquity:

> *What can we do to give to technology the dignity equal to that of morality so that we may establish between them a relation which would no longer be that of the tool to the intention?* ("Morality and Technology" 248).

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Abstract

This article drafts an overview of transhumanist and posthumanist ontologies, as well as provides grounds for their historical distinction based on their relationship to enlightenment humanism. By exploring their relationship and challenge to the dualistic metaphysics of enlightenment humanism, the essay makes clear that these two movements have distinctly different philosophical foundations. Transhumanism is critiqued for its reliance and intensification of dualistic attributes as virtues for its conceived ends, while posthumanism is shown to argue for a redeployment of ontological frameworks but without a complete or convincing response to the problematic dualisms that have been a part of the philosophical tradition since antiquity. Importantly, focus is placed on the role of technology in the makeup of both transhumanism and posthumanism. Technology holds a central place in each movement, but for very different reasons. Thus, the article pays attention to detailing technology's relationship to the manner in which both movements construct notions of the human being as an ontological entity. By focusing on the notion of *the human* as a concept and by placing these movements in context, while revealing their philosophical groundwork, the article outlines the challenges facing each movement and the paradoxical byproducts that each generate. Through a philosophical lens, these movements are assessed along with their contemporary attempts to provide new, and simultaneously reinforce old, ontological paradigms.

Keywords: transhumanism, posthumanism, humanism, technology, ontology, metaphysics

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Received: 12 November 2012
Reviewed: 23 January 2013
Accepted: 31 January 2013