

# [Posthumanism particularly so when it is characterized](https://assignbuster.com/posthumanism-particularly-so-when-it-is-characterized/)

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Posthumanism  is  arguably  brasher  about  its  connections  with  futurity  than  other  concepts explored  in  this  Companion.  The  term’s  morphological  partitivity  into  post-humanism  and post-human-ism  bears this out. It handily foregrounds the paradigm’s readiness to contemplate rupture with the complex and diverse traditions of humanism and also the supersedence and/or obsolescence  of  the  human  itself.  Consequently  posthumanism  can  come  across  as  distinctly attitudinizing  in  its  outlooks.  This  is  particularly  so  when  it  is  characterized  by  a  radical futurology  that  celebrates  the  provisionality  of  the  human  in  the  seemingly  steady  and irreversible  tending  towards  evolved  and  enhanced  versions  of  humanity.

The  term transhumanism,  which  suggests  a  going  beyond  and  exceeding  of  the  human,  is  sometimes used to refer to such positions and outlooks. They are exemplified, for instance, in the work of Ray Kurzweil, notably in The Singularity Is Near. Reserving the term  singularity for that point in  the  future  when  humanity  will  recognise  itself  as  anachronistic  and  out  of  step  with  selfreplicating  and  self-optimizing  technologies  of  Artificial  Intelligence  and  Artificial  Life, Kurzweil argues that humanity’s centrality is only a function of “ our ability to create models—virtual  realities  …  to  usher  in  another  form  of  evolution:  technology”  (2005:  487).  Joel Garreau, in Radical Evolution, further explains:  ‘ Transhumanists are keen on  the enhancement of  human  intellectual,  physical,  and  emotional  capabilities,  the  elimination  of  disease  and unnecessary  suffering,  and  the  dramatic  extension  of  life  span’  (2005:  231-2).  Additionally, Hans  Moravec’s  speculation  that  it  will  become  possible  to  download  human  consciousness into a computer is emblematic and is quoted towards the beginning of N.

Katherine Hayles’s How  We  Became  Posthuman,  which  remains  one  of  the  most  influential  introductions  to posthumanist thought (Moravec 1988: 9-10; Hayles 1999: 1). Hayles’s work (about which more will be said below) tends to be appreciably more nuanced and  measured  than  many  transhumanist  statements,  which  are  probably  best  approached  as manifesto-like declarations. Transhumanist expression, through its extravagance and politics of shock, is  intent on securing notice and discussion of ideas  and possibilities which  cannot be comfortably  dismissed  or  derided  even  if  they  seem  overstated  or  outré.  In  this  respect, transhumanist  manifestoes  recall  the  strategies  and  tactics  of  the  great  declarati ons  of  the twentieth-century  avant-garde  emerging  from  movements  like  Dada,  Surrealism  or Situationism.  The  equivalent  position,  here,  is  the  idea  that  technology  and  ‘ the  prosthetic impulse’ (see Smith and Morra) will be naturalized rather than supplementary to, or facilitative of, human life and action.

After all, it is hardly seismic to think of a different operationality of the  human  or  of  exceeding  humanity’s  reach  and  transgressing  the  circumstancing  of  its thrownness Geworfenheit, as Heidegger would have it, after  Nietzsche announced (for all the problematising  of  this  statement  that  subsequently  occurred),  that  ‘ God  is  dead’. Transhumanism,  whose  closest  20th-century  analogue  is  perhaps  Futurism  and  its  rhapsodies about ‘ the internal glow of electric hearts’, about ‘ eternal, omnipresent speed’ and about ‘ our insolent  challenge  to  the  stars’,  is  encouraged  in  such  thoughts  through  the  pervasiveness  of bioengineering  and  of  the  technocultural  lifescapes  of  the  21st-century,  when  what  might previously have seemed science-fictional is immediate and has in fact become all too mundane and mondaine. The world no longer marvels but grows increasingly blasé about hi-tech devices and  solutions,  or  about  technoscientific  breakthroughs  which  in  one  year—take  2012,  for instance, when we are writing this—can bring about some telling corroboration of the probable existence of the Higgs boson particle, or the landing of the Curiosity rover on Mars, or extend mapping  of  the  human  genome,  or  provide  further  confirmation  that  the  Denisovians,  an obscure  group  of  ancient  humans,  were  genetically  different  from  both  Neanderthals  and modern humans, thereby further countering presuppositions about human exceptionalism.

It is not too fanciful to speculate that all that might  be needed to render a posthumanist paradigm orthodox and indeed itself passé is the discovery of extraterrestrial life: possibly the only event that could focus minds on what would then be an all too post-humanist circumstancing. In  the  midst  of  all  the  above,  resistance  to  posthumanist  culture,  tropes  and  ideas  is  not surprising. Posthumanism is perceivable to some observers as a  rather jejune futurology that recharges a residual Luddism and technophobia in the most hyperconnected individuals. It canprompt  fear  that  the  authenticity  and  integrity  of  human  experience  and  interaction  are distanced  in  a  world  of  relays  and  avatars.  Posthumanism’s  momentum  can  seem  driven towards a contracting of individual autonomy in favour of overarching, all -embracing systems that  are  panopticon-like  in  their  omnipresence.  Through  their  autopoietic  potentialities  such systems decentre the self further in an age of network cultures, where it can become more apt to speak  of  posthumanist  nodality  rather  than  posthumanist  subjectivity.

The  extremes  of  this unease  could  suggest  that  Terence’s  “ Homo  sum,  humani  nihil  a  me  alienum  puto”  I  am  a human  being,  I  consider  nothing  that  is  human  alien  to  me  risks  being  overridden  by  the consideration  that  what  is  nonhuman  or  less  or  more  than  human  is  less  extraneous  to posthumanism than humanity and the human. The work of Hayles calibrates itself more sensitively to the fear and dismay that can arise in response  to  that.  It  approaches  posthumanism—which  can  be  thought  of  here  as  the  cultural condition  occasioned  by  21st-century  biopolitics,  technoculture,  lifescapes  and  all  the  desires and anxieties arising therein,  as well as  the discourse that studies all that—with some of the circumspection  that  might  be  expected  from  someone  who  followed  up  formal  training  in chemistry  with  formal  training  in  literary  studies.  Even  so,  however,  the  sense  of  revised urgency  in  response  to  what  is  already  imminent  and  immanent  is  distinctive.  In  an  article called  ‘ Traumas  of  Code’,  for  instance,  Hayles  suggests  that  the  pre-eminence  of conceptualizations of language in late 20th-century thought might give way to the more cogent priority of investigating the intrinsicality of code within contemporaneity: In  computer-mediated  communication,  including  cell  phone  conversations,  email,  chat room  dialogues,  blogs,  and  all  documents  written  on  a  computer,  the  language  we learned  at  mother’s  knee  is  generated  by  computer  code.  Though  computer-mediatedlanguage may appear to flow  as effortlessly as speaking face-to-face or scribbling  wordson  paper,  complicated  processes  of  encoding  and  decoding  race  up  and  down  the computer’s  tower  of  languages  as  letters  are  coupled  with  programming  commands, commands are compiled or interpreted, and source code is correlated with the object code of  binary  symbols,  transformed  in  turn  into  voltage  differences.  Most  of  this  code  is inaccessible to  most people.

At the level of binary code, few are equipped to understand it  with fluency, and even fewer can reverse engineer  object code to arrive at  the higherlevel languages with which it correlates. As a result, contemporary  computer-mediated communication  consists  of  two  categories  of  dynamically  interacting  languages:  socalled natural language, which is addressed  to humans (and which I will accordingly call human-only language);  and computer codes, which (although readable by some humans)can be executed only by intelligent machines. (2008: 136)This  long  quotation  is  included  here  because  it  demonstrates  how  homely  or  familiar  tropes (‘ mother’s  knee’;  ‘ tower  of  languages’)  can  be  deployed  in  posthumanist  writing  to demonstrate the insidious naturalization of posthumanist operationality. Posthumanist retooling of human thought and action is facilitated by that naturalization. In the process, assumptions about  what  is  integral  to  the  human  are  transformed,  even  if  the  sense  of  alterity  cannot  be dispelled: No longer natural, human-only language  increasingly finds itself in a position analogous to the conscious mind that,  faced with disturbing dreams, is forced to acknowledge it is not  the  whole  of  mind.  Code,  performing  as  the  interface  between  humans  and programmable  media, functions in the contemporary cultural Imaginary as the  shadowy double of the human-only language inflected and infected by its  hidden presence.  (2008: 157)This is a more nuanced restatement, then, of the four shaping tenets that were foundational in How We Became Posthuman and in posthumanism itself: First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability  of  life.  Second,  the  postuman  considers  consciousness  …  as  an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow.

Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation,  cybernetic  mechanism  and  biological  organism,  robot  teleology  and  human goals. (1999: 2-3)Key  to  this  form  of  posthumanism,  therefore,  is  the  idea  of  dynamic  emergence,  of  the ‘ complex mutuality of the interactions’ between ‘ the embodied human subject’ and ‘ intelligent machines’, so that ‘” what we make’ and “ what (we think) we are” coevolve together’, such that  ’emergence  can  operate  as  an  ethical  dynamic  as  well  as  a  technological   one’  (Hayles 2005: 243). But is this all there is to posthumanism, then: a technoutopic will impelled toward ‘ homo technologicus,  a  symbiotic  creature  in  which  biology  and  technology  intimately  interact’, leading to ‘ homo sapiens transformed by technology’ into ‘ a new evolutionary unit, undergoing a new  kind of evolution in a new environment’ (Longo 2002: 23)? Not at all. There are other forms  of  posthumanism  which  are  reviewed  briefly  below.  Some  look  at  posthumanism’s genealogies  and  alternative  histories,  as  well  as  posthumanism’s  interdisciplinary  and transdisciplinary  temptations  and  affiliations.

Some  are  more  contained  and  others  more political.  There  are  also,  then,  dissident  positions  which,  without  denying  the  importance  of posthumanism  as  a  cultural  moment  and  as  a  field  of  discourse,  pursue  its  conflicted relationship  with  paradigms  that  preceded  it,  like  postmodernism  or  poststructuralism,  and critique its technological overdeterminism. But in all this, what remains consistent across thesedifferent  posthumanisms  is  the  view—and  its  critique—that  humanity’s  centrality  in  the horizons  of  time  and  space  are  anything  but  self-evident.  Added  to  that  are  the  idea  that contemporary  epistemology  must  renew  itself  and  respond  to  diminished  attunement  to humanism’s  orientations,  among  them  entrenchments  in  the  studia  humanitatis  and  their legacies, and to uncritical acceptance of the values of  humanitas, which are not above being totalizing.

There is, additionally, the reluctance to accept that there  must be limits to human reach  and  self-(re)design,  and  the  conceit  that  humanity  can  be  re-engineered  beyond  the constrictions of biology. Some aspects of these points, all of which turn on the idea that ‘ human technologies  have  produced  a  hypercomplex  environment  for  which  humanist  distinctions between  the  natural,  the  human,  and  the  technological  are  increasingly  non-functional’,  as Bruce Clarke puts it (2008: 195), are considered below.