

***Moving Beyond the Human: Posthumanism, Transhumanism and Objects***  
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We must learn to ignore the definitive shapes of humans, and of the nonhumans with which we share more and more of our existence. The blur that we would then perceive, the swapping of properties, is a characteristic of our premodern past, in the good old days of *poesis*, and a characteristic of our modern and nonmodern present as well (Latour 1994, 42).

**Introduction**

First, a confession: I am a late arrival to discussions of posthumanism and transhumanism. In my own work in philosophy of technology, I have struggled to find the direction I think philosophy of technology should take regarding fundamental philosophical positions pertaining to ontology, epistemology and ethics. In that sense, *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* (2014) has served as a useful entry into contemporary discussion of what exists, how we can (and should) go about enquiring after those things that exist, and how we should conceive of ethics in a world inhabited, seemingly equally, by humans and non-humans (or, we might posit, *unequally* inhabited: there are far more non-humans than humans in this universe). What follows, then, could be fairly called an “unfamiliar” or “uninitiated” review of Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner’s edited text. Perhaps as a testament to the persuasive strategies and flair of the varied contributors to this edited text, I find myself quickly taking sides between posthumanism and transhumanism, only to have that position challenged by the next entry. In the process, my ontological and ethical views have undergone contestation and transformation.

In what follows, I muddy the waters even further by bringing to the discussion emerging lines of thought dealing with ontology and ethics described as speculative realism (SR) and object-oriented ontology (OOO). Juxtaposing post and transhumanist ideas with those of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology presents a muddle, an imbroglio in Latourian terms (1994), but it also serves to make distinct our ontological and ethical positions. Just as we might find utility in clearly defining what something is not, I hope to provoke those with post and transhumanist leanings to become even clearer in their accounts by setting themselves up against some “other,” in this case speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, though recognizing what Emmanuel Levinas (1990) claims that wrestling with “others” yields: “If one could possess, grasp and know the other, it would not be other” (90).

**Common Ground?**

As Ranisch and Sorgner emphasize in their introduction, common ground among post and transhumanists does not immediately emerge at first blush. Their introductory chapter provides an overview of the positions, including histories of the terms, specific adherents, and intellectual trajectories, but the initiate will be forgiven if she finds posthumanism and transhumanism so vastly different that they warrant their own separate volumes. Chapters on “Ontology” by Thomas Philbeck and “The Body,” by Francesca

Ferrando do attempt to show how both post- and transhumanists view such broad categories similarly and differently, but I am left wondering why there should not be two chapters, written by different authors, for each subject. The posthumanist ontology and the transhumanist ontology, for instance, appear starkly at odds with one another. The common term, humanism, belies the strong differences between the two camps (if, indeed, we should only discern two camps, a point Ranisch and Sorgner emphasize is not entirely accurate). For Ranisch and Sorgner, the main similarity between post- and transhumanism is that they acknowledge the present by looking to the future. Beyond that, their trajectories diverge. As Riggio (2015) points out, “all that brings them [posthumanists and transhumanists] together is a vague sense of overcoming the human” (5). The site of synthesis between posthumanism and transhumanism remains murky and contingent: the pieces are present, but much assembly is required.

This review does not aim to put those pieces together, and I am not entirely sure they should fit together into some seamless whole. Though I do side with posthumanist perspectives, at the very least regarding ontology and morality, I argue that posthumanism does not go far enough in its egalitarianism, as the discussion of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology below should make clear. On the side of transhumanism, by accepting some version of the Enlightenment, dualist view of the human (the basis of humanist thought)—as acontextual, rational, and self-sufficient—transhumanists ignore the phenomenological and ethical implications of dividing humans and non-humans.

As both Ferrando and Philbeck emphasize, though it may seem natural, even intuitive, for humans to think of ourselves as separate from each other and from everything non-human, indeed even having some sort of separate “me” inside my body, humans have always already been inseparable from technologies. If we accept the human as such a mixture, then one contentious or problematic aspect of transhumanism no longer seems radical: human augmentation (physical, cognitive, etc.) through technologies has always occurred, so attempting to delineate between augmentation and therapy makes little sense. In philosophy of technology, the strengths of postphenomenological perspectives (*cf.* Ihde, 1993; Verbeek, 2005) lie in their explorations of how technologies mediate human experience: we experience the world through our technologies and this has normative implications for ontology, morality and epistemology. We should have an even thicker understanding of the social to include things other than humans and animals: a society of objects (humans included), equally real, impacting, influencing and interacting with each other.<sup>1</sup>

### **On Postphenomenology**

Don Ihde’s postphenomenology seeks to remind us of the technologies/frameworks that mediate our experiences of the world around us and to challenge our understandings of

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Bogost’s (2012) *Alien Phenomenology* posits general positions, though still contentious, for speculative realists and object-oriented ontologists: “*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*” (page 11, emphasis in original). He writes that “the philosophical subject must cease to be limited to humans and things that influence humans. Instead it must become *everything*, full stop (p. 10, emphasis in original). Such a crowding together of things means that “everything whatsoever is like people on a subway, crunched together into uncomfortably intimate contact with strangers” (31).

human-technology relationships. Postphenomenology blurs divisions between subject and object in ways similar to the posthumanist position of Francesca Ferrando (2014). Ferrando makes no clear distinctions between humans unaided or unadulterated by the technologies that mediate our experiences. For Ferrando, humans have developed *with* technologies, not alongside them or even because of them. The “human” is inextricably linked to technologies: what we might today label “humans” cannot be explained without explicit reference to our technologies. Attempts to demarcate technology as some “other” non-human extension make no sense to the posthumanist because the human has emerged alongside technological developments (the ability to wield fire for warmth, cooking, etc., coincided with anthropological explanations of the difference between humans and our most recent predecessor) (Ferrando 2014). In that sense, Joe Pitt’s (1999) definition of technology—sometimes maligned for its generality—as “humanity at work” fits well with the posthumanist claims that there is no strong delineation between humans and the technologies that mediate our experience with the world. Ashley Shew Heflin’s (2011) study describing tool use among non-human animals serves as a bridge that links the human and non-human, regarding tool use and technology, and makes explicit the need to move beyond anthropocentric understandings of technology use, similar to claims made by posthumanists like Ferrando and Katherine Hayles (1999).

With such a blurring of humans, non-humans and technologies in mind, Martin Heidegger’s (1979) claim that “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological” implies that when we seek to explain technology as an “other” or something non-human, we imagine a master-servant relationship whereby technologies are things to be mastered and dominated (35). In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger argues that the two common twentieth-century definitions of technology, “a means to an end” and “a human activity,” serve to blind us to the essence of technology (1979, 4-5). The essence of technology is not equivalent to those two definitions, yet we have come to accept the instrumental definition in part because the instrumental explanation seems sufficient (5). Unfortunately, seeing technology as human means to specific ends “conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology” (5).

The posthumanists, I argue, aim to bring humans into the right relationship with technology by exposing the idea that a definition of “human” without referencing “technology” misses a, perhaps *the*, crucial element that makes us human. Francesca Ferrando’s (2014) rendering of human-technology relations as a symbiosis offers a framework from which we can evaluate technologies without recourse to instrumentalist notions about technologies as servants to humans, as separate from humans. Moreover, the symbiotic relation posthumanists like Ferrando posit permit a moral philosophy that grants non-humans agent status, and this allows relations like that described by Deborah Johnson and Thomas Powers (2008) where machines/programs attain “surrogate agent” status.<sup>2</sup> The separation of the human from the non-human serves instrumentalist ends, but

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson and Powers wish

to show that technological artifacts have a kind of *intentionality*, regardless of whether they are intelligent or conscious. . . . technological artifacts are directed at the world of human capabilities and behaviors. It is in virtue of their intentionality that artifacts are

it does not permit the view of humans and technologies in service *to each other*, and this view best characterizes the kind of “right relation to technology” that Heidegger envisioned, and also points to an emphasis in object-oriented ontology and speculative realism regarding intersubjective relations, which I hope to elucidate by again returning to postphenomenology.

Postphenomenologists like Ihde invoke the “variational method” to support the normative idea that multiple perspectives, the ability to imagine/interpret an object, situation or experience from more than one vantage point, are required to understand phenomena. The “variational method is a rigorous style of analysis that permits the phenomenologist to experience *Gestalt* shifts” (Selinger 2006, 92). Ihde rejects the idea that there is only one way to observe, understand, and explain phenomena. His variational method, coupled with his own tendency to situate himself in his analysis (thereby rejecting any objectivist view of the phenomena), permits him to achieve “phenomenological parity.” Phenomenological parity allows for what F. Allan Hanson (2008) calls “extended agency.”

### **Re-Imagining Moral Responsibility**

Hanson (2008) argues for a re-imagining of moral responsibility that includes extended agencies, or humans and artifacts/technologies, as opposed to the modernist conception of agency and moral responsibility as solely human. Hanson’s usage of an ‘everyday’ or ‘casual’ definition of responsibility allows non-humans to take a share of the responsibility for an event. Just as the gravitational pull of our Sun exerts influence on planets, the car in a vehicular homicide has responsibility for the accident as well as the human (assuming a human does the driving) (418). For Hanson, “the responsibility for an act lies with the extended agency that perpetrated it. If the act has moral import, the extended agency’s responsibility has a moral dimension that can be called moral responsibility” (418).

To those that would contend that only humans have intentions—therefore the car in the homicide has no intentions—Evan Selinger and Timothy Engström (2007), as well as Don Ihde (1990, 2002) and Bruno Latour (1994), would contend that the use of certain technologies actually changes humans and our intentions. The person with a gun is not the same as the person without a gun (Hanson 2008, 419), and the gun undergoes similar transformation when put to use (Latour 1994). The potential of a person when she gets behind the wheel of a car is vastly different from her potential without the vehicle. She simply has different potentials in situations where certain technologies enable different types of action than would occur without those technologies.

Of particular interest to philosophers of technology that look at autonomous agents like machines and software would be just how far agency should be extended to the autonomous technologies. In the casual sense in which Hanson uses responsibility, we

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poised to interact with and change a world inhabited by humans. Without being directed at or being about the world, how else could technological artifacts affect the world according to their designs? Insofar as artifacts display this kind of intentionality and affect human interests and behaviors, the artifacts exhibit a kind of *moral agency* (251, emphasis in original).

would need to attribute agency and responsibility to the autonomous technology, and by extension, to the designers of the technology. Hanson's (2008) explication of some technologies possessing extended agency as well as Johnson and Powers' (2008) work in surrogate agency of certain programs demand that we break from instrumentalist conceptions of technologies as value-neutral and begin to develop ethical theories that account for more than traditional anthropocentric systems.

James MacFarlane's (2014) insightful review rightly points out a fundamental difference between post- and transhumanists: the former term remains elusively ambiguous while the latter demarcates a broadly coherent set of techno-optimistic ideas. The actor network theorist, object-oriented ontologist, social epistemologist, and/or STS scholar should see an opening for analysis here: the former label covers terrain too broad for fixed coordinates; the latter has 'settled' its area more robustly and has achieved greater consistency.

## **Conclusion**

*Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* brings together diverse perspectives and viewpoints and, to my mind at least, erodes such neat divisions as "posthumanism" and "transhumanism" in a manner similar to Bogost's relation of the object-oriented ontologist's debt to phenomenology. Bogost (2012) contends that his philosophy deals with how things appear to beings/things, but that "it's a phenomenology that explodes like shrapnel, leaving behind the human as the solitary consciousness like the Voyager spacecraft leaves behind the heliosphere on its way beyond the boundaries of the solar system" (32). The "flat ontology" proposed by SR and OOO advocates like Bogost and Harman (2005), nourished by evocative metaphors such as a spacecraft leaving behind the known solar system, demands that humans accept *a* place among objects, things, automata. Speculative realism and object-oriented ontology have a place in the posthuman world, and their use in the process of imagining that world might just aid us in becoming posthuman.

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