Beyond Posthuman Theory: Tackling Realities of Everyday Life

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Introduction

This is a time of deep inquiry. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed us all in front of an existential mirror: *Who am I? Who are we, as a society, as a species, as a planet?* Many of the old anthropocentric habits based on the foundational myth of human mastery of the world no longer work. The Anthropocene, and all the related environmental emergencies that are happening, such as hurricanes, wildfires, flooding and drought, are co-caused by the unbalance created by human unsustainable practices of living, behaving and trading. We are at the forefront of a paradigm shift and we need to be fully honest and able to realize what is really happening. The point is not waiting for things "to get back to normal", because that "normal" no longer exists. That's the past: there is no going back. This is one of the deep teachings of the pandemic: these changes are here to stay. Understanding who we are means being able to tear apart the veil of ignorance constructed through social myths and beliefs, which may have been installed in our minds at a very young age. These myths, based for instance, on hierarchical notions of the human, on monetary excess as the ultimate economic success, and on unlimited resources of the Earth, are burdens to full existential awareness. They no longer work for us, if we want to know who we truly are. This is a shedding time. Through the force of the hurricanes, that are tearing cities apart; through the power of the water, which is reclaiming lands and space, we must let go of many of the values that we held. Humans are suffering: the only way out is to change, right now. We can do it, but we need to act. Denying climate change does not help in any way; theorizing, on its own, does not help either. This paradigm shift is calling all of us to action. Academics have the duty to confront themselves on these issues: thinking must be followed by actual change. The actualization can be challenging and intense, but is also cathartic, regenerative and empowering.

We are at a fascinating point in the posthuman turn. In the past decades, the intellectual community has traced an exceptional map of theoretical switches and hypothetical changes, but many of the same problematic views and habits that posthumanists have clearly identified are still endorsed by society at large in subtle and non-subtle ways. We need to be brave enough to change what no longer works for us. It is time to re-envision and manifest other ways of existing. The texts presented in this Special Issue of the Journal of Posthumanism show the variety and urgency of the discussion: from the crucial questions on the economic approaches suitable to posthumanism, raised by Dr. Jessica Ludescher Imanaka, to the discussion on advanced and speculative technologies, developed by Dr. Kevin LaGrandeur;

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from the religious and ethical debates surrounding a posthumanist approach to living, pointed out by Dr. Markus Wirtz, to the all-encompassing approach to existential posthumanism, rooted in ancient traditions such as the Yogic path as a technology the self, as explained by Dr. Debashish Banerji. I am immensely grateful to these inspiring intellectuals who have compiled such fascinating and enriching commentaries to my monograph "Philosophical Posthumanism" (2019). Their bright insights and questions can only spark deep theoretical reflection and active plans. In this response, I am not speaking for the whole posthuman community, which is large and varied, and thus will enable a wide range of possible *modi operandi*. Instead, I will share some personal reflections that are the result of an honest and passionate commitment to a posthumanist existential approach.

And AI said to humans: "Fear not; for (A)I am with you"

Let's start with some of the points highlighted by Dr. LaGrandeur. Cultural products are our current mythologies, foundational narratives in the making of the present and futures. In current debates, Artificial Intelligence is often seen as the new enemy. The fear-based AI takeover scenario based on the division of "us" humans versus "them" (machines / robots / AI; meaning, more generally, advanced technology), is very popular in Western countries, and constantly reiterated in the narratives of mainstream media. But in reality, AI has already taken over. In the Information Age, "you" are data, and your data is a precious item sold in the submerged economy of data brokers, typically without consumer agreement nor acknowledgment. Of course, the problem is not "technology", but the human intentions behind the technologies currently developed.[2] The risk of privacy breach and digital control is not caused by evil AI, but human greed. We should look inside of us, as a society, to find the root of the problem, investigating *who* is developing current AI; *how* it is developed and *why*. For instance, the cause of sexist and racist biases in facial recognition systems is the result of these technologies being developed by a very homogenous group, predominantly white and male, with no accountability. The consequences are serious. For example, in 2020, Robert Julian-Borchak Williams was wrongfully accused by an algorithm, and consequently arrested by the Detroit police department, because of the color of his skin; the reason being the inherent biases of facial recognition systems: "While the technology works relatively well on white men, the results are less accurate for other demographics, in part because of a lack of diversity in the images used to develop the underlying databases" (Hill, 2020). Technology is not separated from human inputs and outputs. And still, instead of looking at the human source of technological development, the phantom of a hostile super-intelligent AI is reiterated as the threat to our supposedly social sovereignty. Within this distorted frame, the solution to the fear of AI takeover becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy: *Become technology or die out*. In 2016, Elon Musk co-founded the neurotechnology company Neuralink, which is developing brain-machine interfaces to wirelessly connect humans and computers by inserting the device directly in the brain. The fight against the AI takeover scenario is a vital intention behind the Neuralink project, according to which: the only way to win over artificial intelligence is, on some level, to become artificial intelligence. Fear should never be the drive, nor the intention, of technological induction into society. Furthermore, giving private companies access to such sensitive data, such as brain and neuronal activity, is a serious leap of faith. The current obsession with data collection, based on its predictive potential and profit, has already brought us, as a society, to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the dreaded AI

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[2] These reflections are developed more thoroughly in my article: "Who is Afraid of Artificial Intelligence?" (in press).

takeover scenario. Let's be clear: the real threat is not an evil super-intelligent disembodied cybernetic power. According to economist Shoshana Zuboff (2019), in the age of Surveillance Capitalism, the biggest threat to democracy is the actual monopoly of big tech companies.

"Less is the new more"

It is time to delve into Dr. Ludescher Imanaka's important questions about business ethics and political economy. The word "economics" comes from two Greek words: "eco-" from "*oikos*", meaning "home", and "*nomos"* meaning "accounts", with a wide-ranging significance: from how to keep the family accounts, to how to keep global accounts. The term shares its etymology with "ecology": "eco-" (Engl. "home"), and "*logos"* meaning "discourse", referring to the discourse on the place we inhabit – which is planet Earth. From a posthumanist perspective, this resonance and alliance is crucial: eco-nomy is also an eco-logy. Here, let's note that in the capitalist market-value, the Earth (like everything else) does not have value on its own, but becomes a "resource", to be turned into potential goods and, within the current Big Data economy, into potential data. Reflecting on technology and modern worldviews, Martin Heidegger noted how nature had been reduced to a "standing reserve" for human use (1953, Trans. 1977, 17); in his words: "The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit" (14). Currently, the whole cosmos is being approached as a standing reserve, as the new market of space and asteroid mining seems to suggest. This also applies to life: cells, genes, and any type of biological specimen become "data" to be harvested, and "bio-capital" (Cooper, 2008), generating profit. Such a reductionist and disenchanted attitude to the planet can be traced to the Industrial Revolution. Before that, humans mostly depended on subsistence farming. This brought a direct relation to the land, as well as fragility and risk. After working all year long, suddenly a heavy storm could destroy the entirety of their crops; as a result, humans did not have a sense of full mastery and control over nature. The industrial revolution brought stability in production; humans began to rely more and more on the machine. In this shift, "nature" turned, symbolically and materially, into a standing reserve of raw material to be fed to the machine in order to produce power (such as the steam engine), as well as mass production of products, and ultimately, capital. It is precisely the Industrial Revolution that can be seen as the onset of the Anthropocene, according to Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, who locate it in the latter part of the eighteenth century: "We choose this date because, during the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become clearly noticeable" (2000, 17). Human presence on planet Earth has had direct effects on the biosphere throughout history, but after industrialization, such effects have peaked at a faster and faster pace.

We are referring to these precedents not to judge history or to evaluate past worldviews in positive or negative terms, but to realize where we come from, and where we want to move towards. Economics refers to the accounts of our home. In this era of deep ecological distress, we need to revise our approach, right now. For instance, the gross domestic product of a country (GDP) must take into account human and non-human well-being and ecological balance, among other factors; it cannot just survey the value of goods and services. We need to address the extremes in which we are finding ourselves, as global citizens of the twenty-first century. Consumerism can no longer be the answer to economic growth; this is why some economists are actually calling for anti-consumerism and degrowth (cf. Latouche, 2010). Some humans have too much. Author James Wallman defines this issue as "stuffucation". He considers it "one of the most pressing problems of the twenty-first century" and explains:

"We have more stuff than we could ever need, and it isn't making us happier. It's bad for the planet. It's cluttering up our homes. It's making us stressed" (2015). In this world scenario, where some humans live unhealthy and unbalanced lives because they have too much, other humans are still dying of hunger and malnutrition: "Despite record levels of food production globally, hunger and many forms of malnutrition still affect billions of people" (Webb et al., 2018, 1). In a global world, the distance between these realities is a matter of a short flight, of a car ride, or of no distance at all. In fact, quantity does not replace quality: "While traditionally associated with a lack of food, hunger, and malnutrition (which includes overweight and obesity as well as undernutrition) are associated with low quality diets. / Poor diet quality is a problem in every country—high and low income alike" (Webb et al., 2018, 1). It is time to revise our value system, to manifest social justice and wellness. If we still base our social principles on the economic myth of "more", we will never achieve existential balance. Numbers are infinite, and so people can never be rich enough: even if you have billions, someone will have more than you—just add a zero. We need economic awareness, in which the condition of being rich is not based on individual monetary excess, but on the quality of the life of the community to which we belong, as individuals, as a society, as a species and as a planet. This is no utopian day-dreaming, but a call to existential agency.

"In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is"[3]

In this respect, Dr. Wirtz poses intriguing questions, such as: *Is Posthumanism a new religion? Is Posthumanism going to "save" us all?* My answer is that posthumanism is not a religion, because it is not based on any faith; rather, it is an invitation to understand who we are, in actual, dynamic, embodied ways. If we truly want to know who we are, we need to acknowledge where we are at, at all levels, including in our historicity. There is nothing in posthumanism that should be accepted as a dictum or as an absolute. But, of course, we can also ask: *Do we need posthumanism? Can humanism bring us to an understanding of who we are?* The philanthropic tendency of the ideal humanism, which means loving and supporting each other, as humans, is indeed precious; but it often stands on a speciesist assumption, as the term itself recalls (Human-ism), which can be summarized in the imperative: "I Respect (Love / Support / Acknowledge) You, Because You are *Human*". Posthumanism would rather point towards a path of existential dignity for all beings. Shedding from thousands of years of damaging myths of human and anthropocentric superiority will bring unseen possibilities. And still, this is no easy task, and certainly needs much more reflection and elaboration, especially in its practical aspects. The theory sounds enlightened, but theory and practice do not always coincide. For instance, after the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City developed a serious problem of rat infestation: now that many restaurants were closed, rodents moved to buildings and houses in search of food. Rats have the right to exist, but they are also highly invasive and can bring serious diseases through their saliva, feces and flees (which, for instance, caused the spread of the deadly bubonic plague in the Middle Ages). Facing other more impelling issues, the city administration was not able to respond; residents were left on their own to deal with this alarming situation.

What to do? As a resident of NYC at that time, I had to face the issue myself. As a committed posthumanist, I meditated seriously regarding what solution would be in tune with all that was

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[3] This quote has been attributed to different people, from Benjamin Brewster (1828-1897) to Albert Einstein (1879-1955).

at stake: the health of my family and neighbors, the overgrown population of rats in the city, the impossibility to re-establish species barriers at this stage of things, and so on. After monitoring the quick worsening of the situation, we decided to employ not only natural and fair ways to reverse—such as finding and blocking their entry points—, but we also spread some poison, an anthropocentric method, in order to regain space inside our home. This was far from anything I would have chosen as a committed post-anthropocentric philosopher. I recall one day looking at one of these beautiful animals in the eyes, from my window inside; we were very close, just some glass between us, looking at each other. It was a powerful, quasi-mystical moment of interspecies connection: the rodent and myself, gazing at each other. I hope I did not harm them; as a matter of fact, I did not find any dead bodies. But I must admit that multispecies coexistence during a rat infestation in New York City was not something I was ready for, for the different reasons I mentioned earlier. I am bringing this uneasy example to say that the theory we have traced as a community is splendid, but is not enough. I am sharing this personal challenging experience to generate serenity and honesty, not judgment and shame. We, as a posthumanist community in an anthropocentric and anthropogenic era, need to tackle everyday situations, realizing that theory and practice are not simply mirroring each other. No one can give final answers on how to do things, as situations are different and cannot be simply assimilated. In this same moment, some posthumanists might have already elaborated some post-anthropocentric solutions to practical issues that we, on our own, would not be able to conceive, including the one I just shared. This is why we need to allow spaces for open and respectful discussion with similarly-minded people, creating community and support that bring real change to our lives, as well as healing to society at large.

We are the archetypes of existence

Here, I would like to address the relevant notes of Dr. Banerji, who reminds us all that, on some level, we have always been posthuman. We can trace existential awareness throughout human history, spaces and times. The traditions of Yoga, as well as of Buddhist meditation, among many others, call for a constant reality check by being fully present. Social frames and teachings are there to help us navigate existence: they can be useful, and we should be grateful to the people who traced them before us; but they can also become outdated burdens, and finally, real obstacles in understanding reality. For instance, standardized education can turn into a tool of propaganda, such as the way history is still taught in some curricula, perpetuating sexist and racist stereotypes, war culture and colonialist assumptions—for instance, by not acknowledging indigenous contributions to world development, or by erasing "pre-history" from the curriculum, so that the matrifocal character of Paleolithic and Neolithic findings are still not known by many. As educators, we know something for sure: education can promote real wisdom and authentic values of co-existence and multispecies respect. It is up to us to take the time to discern which elements we must keep and nourish, and which ones we must prune off, in what we were taught and in what we are teaching. There should be no frustration in this task, but serenity; everything is constantly changing in this dimension—social and individual values as well. This is the art of posthuman existence: manifesting post-humanist, post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic ways of existing. My ways are not necessarily going to be your ways. An artist must be original and unique; otherwise, they would not be considered artists but imitators, that is, someone who is just copying or reproducing other people's works. The uniqueness and diversity of the artist's vision is at the core of the

existential outcome: our life is our ultimate work of art. We exist in an existential act of creativity, original artists of our own archetypes. We should be fully aware of our intentions, because we are manifesting them anyway, in our everyday acts, in the ways we think and communicate; in the food, water and air we intake; in the ways we interact with, in and through technologies; more generally, in the ways we exist. Following the notion of *leela* in the Hindu tradition, we can think of the human as one of the acts that we are performing in the cosmic game, in which we are co-writing the script. Our existential performance is our final work of Art: full ontological agency. We are unique, resonant and dynamic archetypes of existence, in the sensitive bodies of spacetime. We, Are.

Acknowledgements

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