

Being Posthuman: Ontologies of the Future

By Zahi Zalloua

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In recent years transhumanism, which encourages human biotransformation and improvement, has moved forward onto the centre stage in ethical discussion. Technological advances have led to concerns that human/machine boundaries will dissipate. However, *Being Posthuman* by Zahi Zalloua emphasises that these ethical issues of drawing and preserving boundaries between the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ are not new or exclusive to modern technological concerns, they are historically prevalent and have predominantly contributed to the unethical treatment of groups deemed to be non-human. Zalloua claims that the only way for us to promote the ethical treatment of these groups that we have harmed, and continue to harm, is to tear down this wall of human/non-human distinction that separates us, and in doing so to become posthuman.

Being Posthuman provides a psychoanalytic

perspective on these human/non-human boundaries, considering why they were drawn and why they persist even in the face of logical inconsistencies and serious ethical fallout. He argues that trauma is the psychoanalytic root for the creation and maintenance of these distinctions and that the creation of the human is an exercise in exclusion. The human preservation of a sense of superiority is reliant upon the existence of distinct ‘others’ over whom to hold superiority. This psychoanalytic perspective is complimented by an examination of a variety of philosophical and cultural sources, ranging from *Nausea* to *Black Mirror*, which showcase human perceptions at the cusp of these human/non-human borders.

Chapter one, ‘Cyborgs’, begins by examining issues surrounding human technological enhancements. The cyborg presents a unique case for human/non-human

boundaries as it possesses elements of both. Zalloua highlights both the transhumanist position, that cyborgs should be integrated into the human category, as ‘human+’, and the competing bioconservative position, that cyborgs should be considered non-human in order to preserve the current human ontology as they threaten our ‘biological commons’ (42).

¹ He then suggests, however, that cyborgs exist in the space between the two boundaries, as posthuman beings, stubbornly refusing to come down on either side. Zalloua claims that ‘the cyborg delights in “irony” and “perversity”, and readily avows its partiality, making no pretension to completeness or mastery’ (38). It is in this way that Zalloua views the cyborg as ontologically incomplete as it ‘identifies with its monstrosity’ (41). This suspended duality, belonging to both and to neither group simultaneously, pressures the boundaries between the human and the non-human, showing that they are not entirely sufficient.

Zalloua then considers the potential social implications of cyborgs. A major benefit is the removal of stereotypes and attitudes towards those with perceived physical differences, typically seen in stereotypes of gender or disability. However, a serious drawback is the potential privatisation of our cultural and natural resources, as access to these upgrades will likely be limited to those wealthy enough to afford them. Therefore, an individual’s socioeconomic status might determine whether they are considered human, human+, or non-human. While this issue is already problematic

enough, Zalloua warns that this could also lead to continued increases in socioeconomic discrepancy as those who cannot afford upgrades lose access to employment opportunities and fall further behind. While these issues seem like those of a futuristic fantasy, Zalloua compares this situation to smartphone ownership, which he views as a contemporary form of human extension.

Chapter two, ‘Animals’, considers the boundaries between humans and non-human animals. Zalloua emphasises the strangeness of this distinction as we acknowledge ourselves to be animals while still separating ourselves from animals. This separation is often justified by the idea that humans possess the unique capacity to reason whereas animals do not. Zalloua dismisses this idea as an anthropocentric delusion, suggesting that this capacity is only valued since we possess it. Furthermore, the fact that we only accept a capacity to reason which imitates our own excludes animals and designates them as inferior by definition. Zalloua highlights ownership of pets as an example of this inferior designation since pets are owned as property by humans. He discusses the issues of animal rights and how these rights are assigned to some but not all animals, suggesting that our human centism is so intense that we assign animals rights based on how many human-like qualities we perceive them to have. Pets’ rights are an extension of the owner’s human rights and also because they are commonly subject to anthropomorphism, increasing their human-like status. Zalloua claims that the continuation

¹ Biological commons provide a natural link between all humans. They allow for a shared sense of human identity through the universal possession of organic bodies.

of this human/non-human animal distinction leads to the mistreatment and suffering of animals in a way which we would consider monstrous toward humans. He provides the example of the treatment and slaughter of livestock, whose entire existence is dedicated to being part of a factory process for the benefit of humans. Why is it the case that we acknowledge that humans are ‘animals’ and yet allow the suffering of non-human animals in a way that we would not allow for humans? Zalloua claims that the continuation of this unethical treatment stems from our psychoanalytic root: fear of trauma. Acknowledging these non-human animals as equals means acknowledging the weight of the suffering that we have caused. Thus the boundary of human/non-human animal distinction produces denial, and denial maintains the boundary.

Chapter three, ‘Object Fever’, considers the boundaries between the ‘object’ and the ‘subject’. Again, Zalloua emphasises that posthumanism diminishes the divides between the human and non-human by stating that ‘being posthuman acknowledges that the subject is an object’ (129). However, he proceeds by investigating whether a posthumanist need necessarily remove the subject/object distinction altogether. He introduces two main theories in this discussion: Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO) and Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT). Zalloua rejects both of these theories, claiming that they lead to ‘object fever’, described as ‘the maddening compulsion to attend to all that is nonsubject, to all that is before and beyond the subject’ (116). He claims that the antidote to object fever is for

the subject to be considered after the object, allowing for a distinct subject to be perceived as it is altered by the presence of and interaction with objects. Whilst Zalloua wishes to reduce human superiority over non-human objects, the removal of the subject altogether would be unsuitable, as this would prioritise an objective reality free from the subject and so would contend with psychoanalysis.

Chapter four, ‘Black Being’, considers the implementation and persistence of racial boundaries, particularly those which separate ‘black’ from ‘white’. Zalloua identifies these boundaries as a white construct – implemented in order to create a more exclusive definition of ‘human’ by excluding black individuals and labelling them with what he calls ‘blackness’, a designation of the ‘inhuman’. Once again, this designation is cyclical as this initial ‘inhuman’ labelling condoned atrocities such as enslavement, which in turn reinforced the white illusion of black individuals as objects, non-human ‘things’ which could be owned. This provided a delusive white defence for terrible actions committed against fellow humans. Thus, humancentric ontologies have not only been utilised to preserve the concept of ‘human’, by excluding animals and objects, but also to manipulate this concept, by excluding other human beings, in order to secure power.

Zalloua argues that this designation of ‘blackness’ to the ‘inhuman’ has been, and still continues to be, so harmful that no redistribution of rights could amend the ever-continuing damage. He points to the mass incarceration of young black men in America as an example that modern slavery has simply changed its face

‘from the plantation to the prison-industrial complex’ (126). He claims that white attempts to consider issues of inequality, such as uproars caused by police brutality, are often unhelpful as they lead primarily to spectacle, and falsely imply that injustice is not a common occurrence. This diminishes the underlying oppression faced by black individuals on a daily basis. He claims that the only way to resolve this issue and to provide true equality is to remove the human/non-human boundaries that created this distinction in the first place. However, this is no light consideration, as the removal of these boundaries threatens the removal of their history. This would potentially diminish the weight of past injustices and the endurance of those who have been oppressed, forcibly removing identities and heritages in order to fix the future behaviour of the aggressors.

Being Posthuman provides an open discussion of these important topics free from dogmatic command, considering multiple perspectives, while still periodically reinforcing Zalloua’s posthumanist viewpoint and its advantages. This allows for the creation of an ideologically inclusive platform which has the potential to encourage further discussion and literary response from the intended academic readership. The continuation of academic discourse on posthumanist considerations highlights their importance and may increasingly extend their generality to non-academic audiences. The issues discussed here must be considered by a general audience if we are to embrace posthumanist ideology and start taking steps away from the ethical problems caused by anthropocentrism.

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