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Manifestations of the Post-Secular Emerging within Discourses of Posthumanism

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Introduction

In this short paper, I want to sketch out the beginnings of a conversation between two contemporary concepts in critical theory: the posthuman and the post-secular. They have shared origins in the critique of the assumptions that shaped Western modernity, and particularly the elevation of the human subject as autonomous and self-determining, distinguished from animals, nature and machines; but also uniquely rational and unconstrained by the bounds of superstition, tradition and religion. The posthuman alerts us to the contingency of the boundaries by which we separate the human from the non-human, the technological from the biological, artificial from natural; but similarly, the post-secular questions the fixity of the boundary between science and religion, profane and sacred and the modernist evacuation of faith from accepted conventions of public and moral reasoning.

I will keep insisting, however, that the post-secular is absolutely not about religious revival or triumphalism; in fact it is deeply contest and contradictory. But my reading of the post-secular and its potential as a ‘third space’ between secularism and religious

exclusivism leads me back to some of the multiple and sometimes contradictory threads within posthumanist critical theory; so I hope that some mutual engagement between the two frameworks might generate new insights into thinking critically and constructively about the human/ posthuman future.

The Post-Human Condition, or Being Human Never Came Naturally

Has humanity ever not been technological? Arguably, human development has always accompanied the manufacture and use of tools and artefacts, however elementary. However, our relationship with our tools and technologies intensified with the construction of the world's first stored-memory computer in 1948 and the identification of DNA in 1953 as innovations in genetics, cybernetics, neurology and information and communications technologies have transformed our personal and cultural lives (Graham, 2002a, 2004b). Technologies are now incorporated into our bodies as permanent, autonomously-functioning devices, such as artificial hearts; or they create immersive environments, such as cyberspace and virtual reality, which reshape our physical concepts of time, space and distance. The terminology of the 'posthuman' encapsulates these various revolutions. Yet consideration of the material implications of new technologies also gives rise to philosophical reflection as well: not only about the practical or social consequences of our increasing dependence on such technologies, but also to what the ethical, political and cultural implications are likely to be. In that respect, the right question is anthropological, even ontological: as the theologian Philip Hefner has put it, "... the question can never be first of all "what are we *doing* with our

technology?” but it must be “what are we *becoming* with our technology?” (Hefner, 2003: 9)

In this respect, the posthuman might also be conceived as a kind of ‘thought experiment’: an opportunity to think anew about the relationship between humans and their environments, artefacts and tools in a digital and biotechnological age. In preparing this paper, I found it helpful to return to the work of a social and cultural theorist whose work has proved helpful in thinking about these issues: Bruno Latour (2003). In particular, his work locates the capacity of modern technoscience to unsettle the ‘ontological hygiene’ (Graham, 2002a, 2004b) of what it means to be human in the face of advanced digital, medical and biotechnological procedures and systems. On the one hand, Western modernity rests on the establishment of clear boundaries between species and categories: human/non-human, active/inert, culture/nature. This he terms a process of ‘purification’. But the paradox is that the very fruits of modern science and technology which depend on the demarcation between human manipulation and transformation of its non-human others engenders, in its resulting products, a series of phenomena which precisely breach these boundaries. He characterises this as a parallel – and contradictory – process of ‘translation’.

Being ‘modern’ involved the careful discursive and material policing of these boundaries; but their blurring exposes the fiction that ‘we have ever been Modern’ (Latour, 2003).

One of the chief artefacts of modernity and its twin processes of purification and translation, argues Latour, is of course the human subject itself: or perhaps more

precisely the discourse of humanism. The strong affinities between human and non-human nature, the malleability of genetic and digital technologies, the ubiquity of virtual and computer-mediated communications and their accompanying influence on everyday life, not least in taken for granted understandings of space, place, community and embodiment means that ‘matter is not dialectically opposed to culture, nor to technological mediation’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 35). In other words, the biological and the technological, the material (or ‘real’) and the virtual are co-existent and co-evolving. The inability to disentangle everyday life from its (inter)dependence upon or with advanced technologies renders the classical humanist subject obsolete.

Thus, talk of the ‘posthuman’ is a way of tracing the fault-lines by which we have differentiated organic from inorganic, nature from artefact, human from non-human; but now a recognition that the boundaries are less secure between the human, non-human and ‘otherwise human’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 196). It represents a refusal to fix or reify human nature or essence independent of an account of humanity’s co-evolution with its environments, tools and artefacts. It exposes the extent to which ‘being human’ has never come naturally!

In speaking about the ascendancy of modern humanism, Latour himself argues that it was premised on ‘the simultaneous birth of “nonhumanity” – things, or objects, or beasts – and the equally strange beginning of a *crossed-out God*, relegated to the sidelines.’ (Latour, 1993, p. 13)(my emphasis, see also pp. 32-35). And here we begin to get

glimpses of the other element within the emergence of modernity: the birth of a discrete philosophy, or sphere of life, known as the 'secular'. The creation of an immutable, autonomous, self-actualizing humanity was as dependent on the suppression of the transcendent, the divine non-human, as it was on the creation of a binary opposition between the normatively human and its 'others' in nature, the animal kingdom or in the world of tools, technologies and machines.

The Crossed-Out God: the paradoxes of Post-Secular society

So an inspection of the origins of modernity and of humanism through the construction of certain material and discursive boundaries leads us to another frontier: that which demarcates the secular from the religious, the material from the metaphysical. Hence, the emergence of the terminology of the 'post-secular'; but again, I must not be misunderstood as attempting to make a philosophical or theological case for the existence of God, or for advocating a return to pre-modern understandings of medical science, human rights, the humanity of women, the creation of the universe, or similar. The whole point about the post-secular is that it does not signal a reversal of the processes of secularization that have befallen the Western world over the past few centuries. Actually, what we have instead are simultaneous signs of a 'new visibility' of religion within global politics and society, alongside the continuing evidence of institutional decline (at least in large parts of the west) as well as enduring and vigorous resistance to the legitimacy of religious reasoning within political, legal, legislative and moral debate.

So some of the precepts of the traditional sociological secularization thesis still seem to hold true: the increasing marginalization of creedal and institutional religion in the West, in terms of institutional membership and affiliation as well as cultural influence. And yet, whether it is in the global ascendancy of forms of political Islam, or the persistence of various kinds of private spirituality (evident in the statistical growth of those who report themselves to be ‘Spiritual but not Religious’ (Graham, 2013, p. 7-10)), religion has not vanished from the public domain.

Talk of the ‘post-secular’ has emerged over the past decade as a way of characterising this new, unprecedented and paradoxical situation. It is primarily concerned with the language and conduct of citizenship in a public context where religious reasoning can no longer automatically be ‘bracketed out’ of political debate (Habermas, 2006); (Beckford, 2012); (Graham, 2013, pp. 15-17). Jürgen Habermas’ recent work has spearheaded this new turn in social theory and political philosophy, with his talk of the ‘post-secular’ as an expression of the newly prominent (yet problematic) role of religion in the public square, which represents a new departure from the classic assumptions of modern liberal thought towards the role of religion in the body politic (Habermas, 2008) (Habermas, 2010). Increasingly, political theorists of many kinds are asking questions about the self-sufficiency of the secular to furnish the public domain with sufficiently robust values for consensus. To that end, therefore, post-secular culture heralds a greater latitude towards religion, not only as a system of private beliefs but also a source of public discourse.

But it also mirrors much of critical posthumanist theory in subjecting the very category of ‘the secular’ to renewed scrutiny. As the postcolonial theorist Talal Asad argues, then, the secular, like the human, has a history, a ‘genealogy’ (Asad 2003, p. 192). Another major contribution to this debate has been Charles Taylor’s recent work *A Secular Age* (2007). He points to the historical contingency of a particular separation between Church and State in early Western modernity, but protesting against the assumption that such a settlement will necessarily be universal. Again, this should not be heard as an argument in favour of theocracy; after all, ‘secularism’ as some kind of separation of religious and statutory powers looks very different in France, from the United States, to India and Turkey. Taylor, too, is not trying to fight some rearguard battle for religious piety: his account traces the historical and cultural conditions under which unbelief became possible – indeed, more tenable, more taken-for-granted, than belief. Yet this is a situation that is ‘post-secular’ since the relative eclipse of religion under modernity is undeniable. As Taylor argues, Westerners cannot *not* live, on a quotidian basis, often at a quite unconscious level, within the ‘immanent frame’ of secularity. The re-emergence of forms of public spirituality do not herald a wholesale re-enchantment of human experience, since they cannot unmake humanity’s coming of age.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: post-human and post-secular as ‘third spaces’.

So the post-secular is located, in a sense, ‘between a rock and a hard place’ (Graham, 2013) of the resilience of religion, spirituality and the sacred on the one hand and the political settlements and epistemological convictions of secularism, materialism and humanism on the other. And it may be worth noting, finally, how posthuman discourse has demonstrated its own kind of mixture or ambivalence towards the sacred. Certainly, humanism and secularism have been paramount to the philosophy of transhumanism, which is premised on an embrace of radical Enlightenment humanism, in which new technologies continue to facilitate the continued evolution of the human species whose abiding characteristic rests in its inventive, rational instinct for invention and self-improvement (Bostrom, 2003).

Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution. Transhumanists hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means we shall eventually manage to become posthuman, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have ...

But in other respects, alongside the discourse of humanist self-actualization, here are also signs of the re-enchantment of technologies. Writers such as David Noble (1997), and Margaret Wertheim (1999) have been highlighting the parallels between humanity’s technological endeavours and a kind of demiurgical instinct – to become gods, to ascend to the heavens, to abandon the ‘meat’ of human embodiment in order to attain a virtual,

immortal existence – since the late 1990s. But in her new book (2013), Rosi Braidotti gives fuller articulation to a more immanentist, neo-vitalist philosophy in which the notion of transcendence or becoming divine through technology is less about achieving immortality or other-worldly existence as about the re-enchantment of matter itself and a recovery of a more organic integration of life itself in all its forms. For Braidotti, the posthuman is about ‘becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 66).

Sometimes this draws for inspiration from First nation, aboriginal or indigenous belief-systems (discussed in the work of the urban geographer Leonie Sandercock, 2006) which argues that the land is never mere property to be viewed as a commodity, only ascribed value through economic exchange. Rather, it is to be viewed as a living actor whose role as ground of being is vital for sustainable habitats and upon whom all life – human and non-human – is dependent. Whether or not it is expressed in explicitly spiritual or religious terms, it is this conception of the earth as sacred that renders the environment as irreducible to human appropriation. Even though this is conceived more in terms of a kind of ecological panentheism than any kind of traditional theism (Jantzen, 1998) it introduces a ‘more than human’ horizon to the ecology of the (post)human:

‘A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or “earth” others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism.’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 50)

Braidotti is, I think, searching for a way between ‘the new belligerent discourses about the alleged superiority of the West [...] expressed in terms of the legacy of secular Humanism’ on the one hand, and on the other ‘post-secular practices of politicized religion’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 36) – a third space, potentially, of qualified, contextual but principled politics and ethics that is capable of articulating alternative, more diverse, less polarized accounts of what it means to be human. And after all, it was Donna Haraway who famously declared, ‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’ (1991, p. 181), her way of rejecting Western modernist traditions of divine transcendence that bifurcate the spiritual and the material in favour of a future which acknowledges the affinities between the human, non-human, and more-than-human (in the form of re-enchanted realms of nature and cosmos) in a more integrated and responsible celebration of life in all its fullness.

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