

Have We Ever Been Posthuman Concept Note

Post-humanism has come to encompass many fields and schools of thought such as new materialism, transhumanism, bioethics, techno- and cyber-feminisms, Deleuzian philosophy, cybernetics, technology, and environmental and Anthropocene studies. Posthumanism suggests the urgency of the need to redefine the human and deconstruct key assumptions of the humanist tradition - challenging the centrality of the human in research, the prioritization of reason and the implication of human exceptionalism that is built into the foundation of how humanists and post-enlightenment thinkers have characterized the relations between humans and animals, the human and inhuman, as well as subject and object, and nature and technology.

But, as the title of our conference suggests, we must ask, have we ever been posthuman? – or more accurate to its Latourian nod, we might entertain the thought that we have never been posthuman, or can never be. This conference takes a critical approach to posthumanism, not necessarily to deny the power of its critiques, far from it. But to ask ourselves to what extent these priorities have truly impacted our theorizing and our practice and if decentering the human is in fact all that it is cut out to be. Can we ever solve human-generated problems without centering the human? Given the diffusiveness of posthumanism, have we ever really met its demands or are we awash in conceptual platitudes that leave little by way of implementation?

One response could be that post-humanism's decentering of the humanist subject and post-dualistic impulse has been a fruitful way of revealing hierarchical dichotomies that order our social, economic and political spaces, leading to important realizations about how the paradigmatic features of the ideal humanist subject have been the basis of exclusion and oppression. Thus, posthumanism aligns with critiques of racialization, dehumanization, and colonization. But what then? What tools does posthumanism offer to rectify these situations? Posthumanism purports to reconceive notions of agency that better align with subjectivities predicated on interdependence, relational and processual existence, and heterogeneity. To what extent does such reconceptualization produce effective change, to what extent does the theoretical ideal of redefining agency meet with the reality of who we are and how we behave? Have we ever been posthuman?

Another important feature of Posthumanism is the reintegration of the human into the natural world, while simultaneously deconstructing the strict defined separation between the ecological

and the technological. Posthumanists have signaled the need for substantial revision of our understanding of our place within the environment and the necessity for rigorous analysis and vigilance concerning our impact, both past and future, on it. Models of interaction have been proposed and new ways of understanding, such that it is important to consider the human and environment as co-constituting and co-imbricated. This renewed focus on the environment has led to several ethical developments, attentiveness to nonhuman voices and ways of being and a shift to more sustainable practices. Post-humanists often espouse a form of ecological egalitarianism, which eschews what has been called “species-ism”, rejects the destructive tendencies of humans, and advocates for multispecies ethicality. These priorities have been somewhat uncritically endorsed throughout posthuman literature – but to what extent do they clash with the intent to focus on the historical exclusions of certain humans and to fight on the front of those exclusions, against all too human political, economic, and cultural forces. Thus, we invite reflection on the status of posthumanism, on its promise and efficacy, on its optimisms and its faults. We invite participation in the questions: have we ever been posthuman, and further, should we or can we ever be post-human? How can or have the priorities of posthumanism been fruitfully applied? Further, what elements of the human, and even the project of humanism, should we retain? How do we navigate the fact that human experiences and human activities comprise the bulk of our problems – that staying with the trouble necessitates the centering of the human and that human consciousness, ideas, thought, and interests are not so easily excised from the equation.