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AND FUTURE VISIONS
OF PHILOSOPHICAL
POSTHUMANISM**

REVIEW

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Francesca Ferrando (2019): *Philosophical Posthumanism*.

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Francesca Ferrando's book on *Philosophical Posthumanism* engages in a passionate way with the history of posthuman thinking, its future visions and various schools of thought nourished by a critical stance toward classical humanism. The book sheds light on the different schools of thought pertaining to Post- and Transhumanism, their origin and agenda, which is a task rarely tackled. Beyond the comprehensive work on Posthumanism and its relatives, Ferrando develops a clear-cut vision of Posthumanism as a philosophical theory with practical implications for contemporary and future societies. She claims that Philosophical Posthumanism (PP) is not only a theory but also a practice and therefore she places her work in a context between studies of the classics and a lively discussion of current gender studies. Rosi Braidotti praises the book in her very engaging foreword as a "joyful de-familiarization" (XVI) from the inherited habits and schools of thought. This describes brilliantly the style of the book. The author does not hesitate to leave the trodden historical paths in order to establish PP as a theory with intricate links to classical humanist thinking and a complex vision of a posthuman future. Such a future should be true to the idea of an inclusive society with a positive outlook on the differentiation of life-forms and constant becoming instead of essentialist categorization.

The book has three systematic parts: The first one outlines the different disciplines pertaining to the current discussion of Post- and Transhumanism and their historical roots. In the second part Ferrando discusses the concept of the human that underlies the various theories and their ways of imagining a future beyond humanity as it exists today. The third and last one dives deeper into the metaphysical and ontological foundations of Posthumanism along the lines of a critical discussion of the concepts of evolution and becoming. The main focus lies on the question how humans, non-humans and technology are intertwined and how a concept of life and evolution can be developed that captures this complex dynamic of becoming. This inclusive perspective characterizes the whole book. Despite a few rather deep disagreements with some theoretical strands, especially in Transhumanism, Ferrando sticks to an argumentative and informative style. She emphasizes PP as a non-dualistic theory that enacts an open and inclusive stance toward all theories and cultural practices: "Philosophical Posthumanism is an onto-epistemological approach, as well as an ethical one, manifesting as a philosophy of mediation, which discharges any confrontational dualisms and hierarchical legacies; this is why it can be approached as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism." (22)

With this, the agenda for the book is clear: In the next chapters Ferrando paints a broad picture of the various versions of Posthumanism as an umbrella term (26) for Trans- and Antihumanism, Metahumanism, New Materialism, Object Oriented Ontology and so forth. She argues that PP is different from Trans- and Antihumanism, because of its explicitly inclusive post-anthropocentrism and post- or non-dualism. Ferrando's version of a PP states that humans and all perceiving and cognizing entities are first and foremost embodied beings and hence the body-mind dualism does not hold. The author argues for a continuous concept of life as embodied form of existence. She places technology and its agency and cognition in a continuity with biological life-forms. This idea relates Ferrando's view of posthumanism in a productive way to theories that argue for a deep continuity of life and mind as for example Evan Thompson's view put forward in his book *Mind in Life* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007).

The first systematic chapter of the book focuses on the concepts and historical roots of Post- and Transhumanism. These two theories are different according to the author not only in their stance toward the future of human life, but also in their historical and conceptual roots. Both challenge the idea of a human nature as essential. They view the human as a constant becoming alongside developments in technology, culture and environment.

Posthumanism is rooted in postmodern thought and thus presents itself as a critique of anthropocentrism, dualism and biases originating from humanism. It challenges the traditions, cultures and forms of knowledge gravitating around classical humanist thinking. Ferrando emphasizes that posthumanism is dedicated to overcoming anthropocentric thinking. What is human

needs to be conceptualized in her view as a form of becoming, as an open process. There is no final idea that needs to be realized in this process of becoming. This version of Posthumanism does speak of transcending what is acknowledged as human today, but not with a definite goal. Rather it envisages a differentiation of life-forms and the forming of new commonalities with technology and other biological forms. Ferrando stresses that we can be posthuman already today (28) by embracing this openness and all varieties of embodiment, neural diversity or gender diversity. In that view, posthumanism is not only a theory, but also a lifestyle or an attitude toward life.

Transhumanism has become a cultural and scientific topic around the same time like Posthumanism, in the late 1980s/early 1990s (27). But according to the author this theory remains attached to humanist ideas. In Transhumanism, the concept of the human remains central as something that needs to be transcended with a clear goal. That goal is to overcome human finitude. In this view, humans are obliged to perfect their form of existence and their limitations are eventually to be transcended by the use of technological and medical enhancement strategies. Openness and mutability of what is human is not understood as a process toward diversification, rather it is determined by the idea of perfection, of overcoming human limitations toward an enhanced cognition, better health and eventually immortality (31 f.). Ferrando paints a similar picture of the relation of Transhumanism and PP as Janina Loh in her German introduction to *Trans- and Posthumanism* (Hamburg: Junius 2018), only that Loh coins the term Critical Posthumanism, while Ferrando calls it Philosophical Posthumanism. Both theorists argue on a similar basis. Ferrando puts a stronger emphasis on the practical impact of Posthumanism as an actual way of life.

Both Post- and Transhumanism essentially include technology as a driving force within the conceptual framing of human life. This is also pointed out in the discussion on Heidegger's view of technology as way of revealing (39 ff.). Transhumanism on the one hand side necessarily relies on technology in order to enhance and perfect human minds and bodies. Ferrando on the other hand side argues that in a posthumanist' perspective technology is poietic: It shapes bodies, cultures and ways of thinking. Such a poetic potential becomes problematic when it is used purely as means to the end of capitalist logic or control. As such, technology reveals the world as a *standing reserve*, as Heidegger frames it. The potential for diversity remains hidden from view within this scope. The ability of technology to produce diverse life-forms or rather enter a dynamic form of becoming with other forms of life is essential to Ferrando's thinking. She argues here with regard to Michel Foucault and Donna Haraway (44).

The second part of the book systematically unfolds the notion of human and non-human. Ferrando develops a fine-grained analysis of the concept of the human as historically instrumentalized as an exclusive notion that does not simply represent a species as a whole, but only a

defined group of individuals that are representative of what is socially accepted (65 f.). To be human historically is related to a certain concept of rationality, of gender, social standing and color of skin. Thus, the term human did not cover a natural kind but represented a social construct that excludes the other (women, children, slaves, diversely abled and so forth). Recapitulating Foucault's technologies of the self, Ferrando stresses how to be human is not a category but a process (83). She emphasizes that this process needs to be historically reassessed and critically engaged with today. In the remaining pages, Ferrando paints a vivid picture of the conceptual history of the human as well as the diverse forms of humanizing and de-humanizing processes throughout history. The combination of conceptual work and historical analysis is characteristic for the style of Ferrando's thinking. She develops an account of the origin of the term 'human' from Greek to Latin and the concept of mammals vs. homo sapiens in Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae*, which on the one hand side has placed human life in a continuity with organic life but at the same time has taken part in the development of anthropocentrism and male dominance (96f.).

The final chapter gives an overview on the diverse concepts of ontology discussed within posthumanist theories. Ferrando relates posthuman thinking to the anthropocene and human impact and entanglement with environmental developments on a planetary if not cosmic scale. With a nod to Haraway she writes: "The environmental turn, more than evoking an essentialization of the Earth, liquefies the relation between the Earth and the human; symbolically and materially, the Earth may turn into Gaia, the ancestral mother of all life; the human may acknowledge themselves as compost (Haraway 2015), eventually turning into humus, nourishing the Earth." (107) Ferrando inquires deeply into the notions of life as animal and human life, in the categories of animate vs. inanimate and eventually develops a notion of a deep continuity of life that is open to include technology as a form of life und human life merging with technology. After having taken a closer look at artificial intelligence, she discusses the possibility of opening up the paradigm of evolution to include technology not only as a factor in human evolution but also as being a subject of evolution itself. The major part of the last chapter is dedicated to developing an in-depth understanding of the ethical (bioethics) and ontological foundations (autopoiesis) of a concept of life that encompasses technology, AI und humans. The strength of this argumentation for an autopoietic and processual concept of life lies in the fact that the author draws a line between Francisco Varela's and Humberto Maturana's theory of autopoiesis and the discussion around Posthumanism. Ferrando manages to reveal the links between biology, technology and philosophy. In the closing section, she presents a very informative discussion of the role of New Materialism and Object Oriented Ontology as ontological foundations of Posthumanism. The book ends with a thought experiment meditating on the multiverse in its physical and philosophical framings as a joyful celebration of posthuman thinking.

The biggest merit of Ferrando's work is bringing together a very thoughtful historical analysis of the intellectual roots of Posthumanism, while at the same time using these considerations within the performance of posthuman theory as non-dualist and non-anthropocentric celebration of life in all its diversity. The author meets highest academic standards in presenting her arguments and adds a very accessible and engaging text to the canon of philosophical literature.