

Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality

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before,¹ adv., prep., conj. (...)

A. *adv.*

I. Of sequence in space. Now somewhat *arch.*

1. Of place, position or direction. Freq. contrasted with *behind*.
 - a. In front, in or on the anterior side; in a forward direction.

(...)

2. Of motion: ahead, in advance, in front.

(...)

II. Of sequence in time and order.

5.

- a. In a time preceding that in question, previously to that or this, earlier, sooner.

Hence: beforehand; already, in the past.

(...)

B. *prep.*

I. Of sequence in space.

1.

- a. Of place, position, or direction: in front of.

(...)

2.

- a. Of motion: in advance of, ahead of.

- b. Driven in front of, hurried on by. Also *fig.*

(a) With a natural force (esp. the wind) as object.

(b) With a human or other causal agent as object.

3. In front of so as to be in the sight or hearing of; in or into the presence of...

- a. Generally.

- b. In giving evidence or answering a charge.

- c. In deferring or doing honour to a person or thing (esp. by kneeling or genuflecting).

4.

- a. With the full knowledge of, under the observation or attention of. Hence: in oaths and asseverations as, **before God!**...

- b. In front of and claiming attention of.

5. Chiefly in religious language. In the mental view of; in the opinion or judgment of. *arch.*

6. In front of in the course of action or of life; in prospect.

- a. In front of (a person) as a field of action or as a resource; at the disposal of.

- b. In front of (a person) to be experienced or undertaken; in the future for.

¹ OED online (www.oed.com) accessed 13 July 2015.

- II. Of sequence in time or order.
 - 7.
 - a. At, in, or to a time earlier than (a point in time, a date, or an event).
(...)
 - 8. At or during a time earlier than the life, existence, or use of; preceding (a state or fact) in order of time.
(...)
 - III. Of rank or degree.
 - 10. To a higher degree than; in a position of precedence over or superiority to; in advance of in development.
 - 11. In preference to; rather than.
 - 12. In comparison with, in respect of. *rare*.
- C. *conj.*
- 1. Earlier than the time when.
 - 2. Rather than that; in preference to.
(...)

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called “animal” offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.²

² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 12.

Preamble

What was there *before* all situations?³

For the end of the human cannot be investigated without investigating its origin...⁴

When used spatially the English preposition *before* refers to anteriority, to objects located in front of something; when used temporally it may refer to events to come, anteriority (the future) as well as to something that has already happened, posteriority (the past).⁵

Before is one of those magic words which contain an intrinsic opposition. Grammatically speaking, before is an adverb, preposition and conjunction that expresses sequence in space and time. Spatially, it serves for example as the opposite of “behind” with its meaning of “in front, in or on the anterior side; in a forward direction”. It also implies, ironically, maybe, a certain “futurity” in the sense of “ahead, in advance, in front”. Temporally, however, this also seems to translate into

³ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 13.

⁴ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. George Collins, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 135. In many ways the argument we are proposing in *Before Humanity* echoes Stiegler’s rewriting of natural biological evolution into a technical co-evolution of the human. There is, however, an important difference in angle: where Stiegler proposes an “originary technicity”, which produces “The Différance of the Human” (ie. Stiegler’s critical reading of Leroi-Gourhan’s *Gesture and Speech*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993; cf. *Technics and Time 1*, p. 134ff.), we are here interested in the “pre-originary” relationality or maybe even “mediacy” (i.e. the always receding horizon of origin *as such*, not the effects of its *différance*) that we find at work in the preposition *before* and the role it plays in the “invention of the human”, as Stiegler calls it (see also Christopher Johnson’s excellent commentary in “The Prehistory of Technology: On the Contribution of Leroi-Gourhan”, in Christina Howells and Gerald Moore, eds., *Stiegler and Technics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp.34-52). Conceptually, the idea of *Before Humanity* also has affinities to Vicki Kirby’s notion of “originary humanicity” (cf. her *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 1-21 and *passim*). Kirby’s aim is to reinscribe a materialist-vitalist notion of “life” into Stiegler’s “originary technicity” in order to “concede its humanicity” (p. 20). While we of course share Kirby’s strategy of reinscribing some form of “humanicity” within the biological, technological and cultural process of “hominization” we propose to do so in the form of the question of an “originary nonhumanity” of the human, aided by a re-reading of paleoanthropology and a critique of the notion of ancestry. In doing so, our approach also bears some similarity with what Christopher Peterson (in *Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) calls “antehumanism”, even though we prefer the term “inhumanism” for reasons that we hope will become obvious. While Peterson is sceptical of posthumanism’s attentional shift towards “nonhuman alterity” (p. 1) and argues that “all attempts to think what is other to [the human] requires “an originary ‘detour’ through the human – and irreducible *antehumanism* [that] renders possible any ethical and political reorientation toward the nonhuman” (p. 4), in *Before Humanity* we are looking at divisions *within* the concept of humanity and the human and how they might “jam” what Giorgio Agamben calls the *anthropological machine* – the metaphysical *dispositif* that “makes us human” (cf. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 33ff.). The irreducible plurality of humans *before* humanity is thus our main concern, a concern we share with Kathryn Yusoff’s “geological” approach: “The narrative of ‘our’ sole survival, living on while all other hominins failed, and the way this narrative seemed contrived towards a heroic tale of human exceptionalism..., named an inability to catch sight of an ‘other’ anterior and interior to us in the ‘not-us’ part of the origin story” (Yusoff, “Geologic life: prehistory, climate, futures in the Anthropocene”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31 (2013), p. 786). What follows in *Before Humanity* is a contribution to telling this “not-us part” of “our” origin story that is both anterior and interior, and, as we will argue, in many ways, ulterior, still to-come.

⁵ Ruta Nagucka, “The spatial and temporal meanings of *before* in Middle English”, *Placing Middle English in Context*, eds. Irma Taavitsainen et al., Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000, p. 329.

“previous”, however, “in the time preceding that in question, previously to that or this, earlier, sooner”.⁶ So, one could say that *before* thoroughly ambiguates futurity, presence and pastness. “Humanity stands here *before* you” is a performative statement signifying presence. “Humans were here *before* humanity”, claims humans’ right towards precedence over humanity. “This human has its whole life *before* it”, affirms someone’s future. Often, the last kind of statement occurs in a “tragic” context and in the past tense when somebody dies *before* their time: “she was taken out of our midst while she had her whole life still before her”.

Before Humanity points towards all these meanings of *before* – pastness, presence and futurity – in the current “posthumanist” climate, when the question of what it means to be human is once again being asked with great urgency, in the face of new and not so new threats and new and also not so new “opportunities”. Posthumanism’s current main symptoms are, on the one hand, the rush for ever “smarter” gadgets that increasingly think for or at least with you, and, on the other hand, the ever more urgent discussion about climate change, extinction angst, exoplanets, biopolitics and speciesism. In short, posthumanism labels the “mess” that has arisen once the former certainty traditional answers to the question of “what does it mean to be human?” has given way to the uncertainty about what “humanity” should do next. In other words, it is a critique of the most fundamental anthropocentric values, assumptions and reflexes that have been underpinning modernity. Today, the question of what it means to be human thus returns with increased urgency. Technological and global economic challenges, looming environmental disaster and the erosion of traditional demarcations between human and nonhuman have been producing new and alternative ways of thinking about humanity (and its others). The ongoing critique or deconstruction of humanism that the label posthumanism points towards increasingly affects human self-understanding in terms of ethics (a critique of anthropocentrism, speciesism, evolution), politics (a critique of biopolitics, cyborgisation, neoliberalism), aesthetics (bioart, new media art, games and electronic literature), institutions (life sciences, posthumanities, converging media and computerisation) and life style (prothesization, enhancement, virtual reality environments).

The proliferating ideas and visions of our “posthumanity” are reaching a wider public and are circulating in the traditional mass media and increasingly of course in the so-called new, digital and social media. The transformative potential of posthumanism has become undeniable – for better or for worse. In this context, what we have called “critical posthumanism”⁷ is aimed at evaluating, contextualising and historicising the truly innovative potential of posthumanism. It welcomes for example the new and extensive possibilities for co-operations between the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences (and the new bio- or life sciences in particular). On the other hand, critical also means appreciating the resistance to the ideas relating to the posthuman, posthumanisation, posthumanism or posthumanity. The aim is to “read” the anxieties and desires at work when dealing with concepts of the human, posthuman and nonhuman and to look at prefigurations, genealogies, disavowals and alternative futures.

Before Humanity is part of our ongoing project to challenge posthumanist futurists and technoutopians by recalling prefigurations, genealogies and disavowals of the posthuman – and thus to remind ourselves of the essential openness and unknowability of the future. We focus on the ambiguity of *before*, which implies a kind of reverse thinking and an imagining of a time before origins, before there was such a “thing” called “humanity”. This goes against the predominant strain of posthumanism that tends to focus on (and maybe even hasten) what comes *after* humanity. Aiming for the time *before* time instead – the past before human “emergence”, a situation “without” narrative – does not only help “us” understand “our” stories or “our” ends better. Through the

⁶ OED online; see above.

⁷ Cf. Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism – A Critical Analysis*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

analogies and contrasts discoverable there, our attempt may also help clarify whether “our” presents and futures could well have been (p)re-figured in the pre-human. So, by conjecture, placing oneself *before* humanity one is asked to think one’s most basic affiliation: the one owed most naturally of all, to the human(ity) that embraces one. Thinking human nature, for example: what would be most natural? How does one place oneself naturally before what one already is? How could the non-human thinking of that not be unnatural: what indeed might it be? And what is this community of humanity, immemorial but with nonetheless traceable beginnings: absolutely capacious in that it excludes none of us, ever, so that it risks the absolutely unethical when it retains us even in our inhumanity? How might we be *before* humanity, both in time and space, at a time when we are running out of both and when our history might be running humanity down? Where, before humanity, do we stand, and what is it that is stood before us, thinking us back?

The move towards *Before Humanity* takes us one remove further within the history of humanism – which we understand as the ongoing discourse on human self-reflexivity, identity and soul searching. Previously, we had identified an earlier turning point at the beginning of the Renaissance, in the analogy between early/late or postmodernity and early/late or posthumanism. In *Posthumanist Shakespeares*⁸ we started from the assumption that if Shakespeare’s work coincides with the “invention of the human” (as Harold Bloom famously argued)⁹ it surely must also contain an important understanding of the inhuman, the non-human, the more-than-human, the less-than-human, and hence it became possible to explore the idea that the posthuman also finds itself there already. Is the posthuman prefigured, represented, contested in Shakespeare? Some questions the various contributors to the volume addressed were: if the posthuman is prefigured in Shakespeare, is it possible to come up with a posthumanist approach to Shakespeare that would be able to respond to his work in the light of critical perspectives that retain the memory of humanism but which also seek to exemplify what posthumanist interpretation might entail?

In a similar move the editors of the first double issue of the journal *Postmedieval* subsequently asked “when did we become post/human?”¹⁰ While we would agree with the editors of *Postmedieval* that “there is room for premodernist interventions into contemporary post/humanist discourses in order to draw critical attention to the *historicity* (the ‘when’) of certain issues that pace and fret around the turn to the post/human in contemporary life and thought, as well as to better describe, from the longest possible historical perspectives, the ways in which bodies (human and non-human) and the world have always been emerging together out of various dynamic material processes and fields of interpretation”,¹¹ our approach here is slightly different: in looking at the inconceivable origin implied in the phrase *Before Humanity*, the historicity that opens up is that of repetitions, prefigurations and alternatives. Since human nature is essentially open it is also subject to constant rewriting, which also challenges the irreversibility of historical teleology. Rewriting, following Lyotard’s notion, is a process that works both ways. Its logic is that of “anamnesis”, re-membering and perlaboration.¹²

Rewriting also implies new or different ways of reading. In “What is a posthumanist reading?” we asked: “how is it possible to read as if one were not human, or at least from a position of analytical detachment in relation to the humanity – whether ‘essential’ or ‘constructed’ – that informs and

⁸ Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, eds., *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, Houndmills, Palgrave, 2012.

⁹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, London: Fourth Estate, 1999.

¹⁰ Eileen A. Joy and Craig Dionne, “Before the trains of thought have been laid down so firmly: The premodern post/human”, *Postmedieval* 1-2 (2010): 1-9.

¹¹ Joy and Dionne, p. 5.

¹² Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp. 24-35.

determines the very position from which it is read?"¹³ In *Before Humanity* we propose such readings, not literally, of course, but by conjecture, which is the only possible way of reading from a postanthropocentric (if not postanthromorphic) point of view:

To read in a posthuman way is to read against one's self, against one's own deep-seated self-understanding as a member or even representative of a certain "species." It is already to project an otherness to the human, to sympathise and empathise with a position that troubles and undoes identity while struggling to reassert what is familiar and defining.¹⁴

Before Humanity pushes this empathy with the non/human to its "ancestral" limits, i.e. from the time before the human to the time of human emergence, and the traces of this anteriority that inhere in materiality throughout time including "today". Whether this presentism of the paleontological or the (neo)lithic is constituted by "wormholes", as Linda Charnes suggests,¹⁵ or whether we are dealing with what Eileen Joy calls "weird reading",¹⁶ this reading needs to "unground texts from their conventional, human-centred contexts, just as we would unground ourselves, getting lost in order to flee what is (at times) the deadening status quo of literary-historical studies at present..."¹⁷ Whether one looks at the asynchronicity prompted and exploited by rewriting or at the "ancestrality" of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism,¹⁸ the *before* in *Before Humanity* opens up a possible juncture (or, figuratively, a wormhole) between prehuman and posthuman times.

It is in this sense that we here stand *before* the human, in the same way we are *before* the law, in the sense that Cary Wolfe uses this phrase (following Derrida's reading of Kafka's parable)¹⁹ to refer to contemporary posthuman biopolitics and its effects on both human and nonhuman animals:

"before" in the sense of that which is ontologically and/or logically antecedent to the law, which exists prior to the moment when the law, in all its contingency and immanence, enacts its originary violence, installs its frame for who's in and who's out... "before" in another sense as well, in the sense of standing before the judgment of a law that is inscrutable not just because it establishes by fiat who falls inside and outside the frame, but also because it disavows its own contingency through violence: namely, the violence of sacrifice for which the

¹³ Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Linda Charnes, „Reading for the Wormholes: Micro-periods from the Future“, available online at: <http://emc.org/1-6/charnes.html>

¹⁶ Eileen A. Joy, "Weird Reading", *Speculations* 4 (2013): 28-34.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁸ Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on Necessity and Contingency*, London: Continuum, 2008, and our more detailed discussion below.

¹⁹ See Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law", in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 182-220. Derrida reads Kafka's parable in an entirely different the context of course (i.e. the relation between literature and the law) but there are a number of observations that will be useful for understanding the complex meaning of *Before Humanity*: for example that the preposition before allows for a positioning in front of something either facing it or turning one's back on it (like the man who seeks entrance and the doorkeeper in Kafka's text). And just like Kafka's man seeking entrance to the law without ever actually confronting it, one could be before humanity without ever finding it. Humanity, just like the law (in its "presence") would thus remain forever deferred, in *différance*. The analogy could be made to go further: just like the man who spends his life waiting for access to the law, who is (a subject) before the law without ever confronting it in its presence, until the doorkeeper closes his particular access to the law upon the man's death, every particular human might find itself before humanity in a similar way, without ever acceding to its presence. Every singular human finds itself before (the law of) humanity by interpellation, waiting its entire life to enter only to find out that at the end (the "end of man") some mediating doorkeeper closes this singular access since it is no longer needed (and will be opened up elsewhere to some other human presumably). There is no better way of describing the peculiar "performativity" of humanism.

distinction between human and animal has historically been bedrock, providing for the law the “foundation” for its exclusions that the law cannot provide for itself.²⁰

In the case of *Before Humanity*, the “violence of the framing” engulfs the human itself and instead throws us back to a situation in which the distinctions between human and nonhuman animal makes no sense and in which the very notion of “life” shows itself “in all its contingency and immanence” as it “enacts its originary violence” – to follow Wolfe’s analogy. *Before Humanity* gestures towards a biopolitics *before* the human, even though it is of course prompted by the looming contemporary scenario of a time *after* the human.

As we might be, in all this frenzy of posthuman times, “about to forget” the human, we are thrown back to its very beginnings. *Before Humanity* sets up two alternative scenarios: what happened just before we apparently became human (which involves a critique of paleontology, evolution and hominisation narratives)? And, witnessing the “end” of (at least a certain notion of) humanity, what task lies “before” the human (now)? In other words, while others might rush ahead into technoutopias of artificial intelligence and embrace the apparent inevitability of our evolution into augmented posthumans, we are interested in the proto-, paleo-, ante-... conceptualisations on which these “science factional” scenarios rely.²¹ The suspicion that develops might be articulated in the question whether we have ever been “human” (in a humanist sense) and if not, what could “we” have been? What could we still be?

The structure of *Before Humanity* reflects the temporal complexity by providing “chapters”, “intermezzi” and a series of reflections on “ancestrality”. These five reflections on ancestry together form a running philosophical commentary on the main conceptual emphases the individual chapters set out to anchor to literary “examples”. They are placed in greyed-out boxes within the chapters, but can also be read on their own, of course, as they, in a sense, form the theoretical “backbone” of the argument. While the three chapters each focus on literary “host” texts the three intermezzi constitute an extension of the argument base to examples beyond literature.

²⁰ Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 9.

²¹ On the notion of “science faction” see Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, pp. 107-134.