Introduction: Critical Posthumanism – Ten Years On

What I offered as a definition in 2013, in what was one of the first comprehensive introductions to the emerging theoretical paradigm of CPH, can still serve as a useful starting point into what has been proving to be a long and ongoing learning or rather unlearning process:

> [Posthumanism] is the *cultural malaise or euphoria* that is caused by the feeling that arises once you start *taking the idea of 'postanthropocentrism' seriously*. To be able to think the '*end of the human'* without giving in to *apocalyptic mysticism* or to new forms of spirituality and *transcendence* – this would correspond to the *attitude* that the phrase 'critical posthumanism' wishes to describe. The word '*critical'* here has a double function: it combines, on the one hand, openness to the radical nature of *technocultural change*, and, on the other hand, it emphasizes a certain *continuity* with traditions of thought that have critically engaged with humanism, and which, in part, have evolved out of the humanist tradition itself. The task is, therefore, to re-evaluate established forms of *antihumanist* critique, to adapt them to the current, changed conditions, and, where possible, to radicalize them.[1]

At the time (written in its original German version in 2009 and translated by myself into English in 2013), this volume and its definition provided a critical analysis of the first twenty years of posthumanism as an emergent theoretical discourse and academic field of enquiry. Today, one can certainly claim that posthumanism is no longer emergent but widely discussed and established. This preface focuses on what posthumanism and its critique have become, what they have been evolving into.

CPH – it is worth stressing again – is prompted but *not determined by* recent technocultural change (i.e. mostly digitalisation, biotechnology and artificial intelligence). The reference to the techno*cultural* aspect of the changes CPH addresses is meant to stress the case against technological autonomy (or technological determinism) even while accepting and promoting the idea of a co-evolution of technics and culture. The critical angle of *critical* posthumanism arises out of a positioning, an attitude or indeed an affective state *vis-à-vis* familiar ambiguities residing in well-established binaries – namely of apocalypse and transcendence, end and beginning, utopian and dystopian visions of (technocultural) progress, as well as of continuity and discontinuity, and, of course, humanism and antihumanism. Most importantly, however, it characterises an ethical and political stance that promises to take seriously the problem of anthropocentrism and its deconstruction.

Even though the definition is thus largely still valid, the ten years or so since its publication have also seen some important new dynamics and perspectives, as well as a greater variety of theoretical strands relating to and developing out of the discourse of posthumanism and the figure of the posthuman. The aim of this preface is therefore that of a consolidation, but also of an extension, an account of diversification, and, indeed, by implication, also a critique of

[1] Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 3.

CPH and its first twenty years odd as a theoretical paradigm. There is thus both a retrospective and a synchronic mapping, as well as a more speculative forward-looking element. It is important to stress that CPH involves both an engagement with the present (and its future projections) and a rereading of traditional Western ways of making sense of the world and 'our' place in it – even though it is precisely the collective nature of the pronoun 'us' and the possessive 'our' that have been and continue to be challenged. The janus-faced nature of the challenge this positioning poses (looking backwards and forwards *at the same time*) is that posthumanism is itself very much implicated in the paradigm change and the emerging new worldviews it describes. In this interventionist sense, it is very much political. However, it is worth stressing once more that this is a general feature of critique, which always begins with an analysis of the perceived state of affairs, asks how this came about and what implications this might have for the current and future decision-making process. The fact that any critique has to go through these steps (and this is where critique becomes almost synonymous with how European philosophy has conceptualised thought as such) does not mean that critique should not itself be submitted to critique – in fact, one of the major developments around CPH is that it is having to engage precisely with such a critique of critique, especially following Bruno Latour's provocative and controversial claim that critique "has run out of steam".[2] This has certainly reminded everyone that any critique is situated, through a specific analysis of its time (and place), and cannot therefore form a last or definitive judgment. Another way of putting this is that critical analysis is co-implicated and to some extent also co-constitutional of the *discourse* it sets out to analyse.

This is why it is vital for thinking and critique to start with differentiations or conceptual operations to make sense of what it finds itself called upon to analyse. It is a division that is undoubtedly questionable, as is the mystical authority (or self-legitimation) that hides behind the 'finding' and being 'called upon' ploy. No doubt this calls for vigilance and, thus, even more critique. Even the most justified critiques of critique, however, cannot help but repeat at least some of critique's foundational gestures. The question is how problematic this really is. This is a question that I will return to at the end of this preface, in what one might see as another instalment of CPH's self-critical outlook. However, before one can get to any 'postcritical' stance regarding CPH it is necessary to understand what exactly is being critiqued by it. One might then, in turn, see its limitations – limitations which are also always openings, extensions, radicalisations and so on, that nevertheless only become visible once a critical analysis has run its course.

There is, today, considerable scope for diversity and difference, sometimes even contradiction and divergence to be found in the field of 'posthuman studies' that the discussion about posthumanism and the posthuman have opened up. However, to achieve some (preliminary) sense of orientation, what one might identify as a most likely common denominator for the various accounts, narratives, and attempts to make sense of 'our posthuman times',[3] and that

[2] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225-248; taken up by Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) and many others). See also my contribution on "Critique" to the *Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2020); available online at: criticalposthumanism.net/critique (accessed 31/10/2023).

[3] Rosi Braidotti's phrase, in *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p. 1.

the phrase 'critical posthumanism' covers and also helps to map, is a shared critique of humanism's anthropocentrism. The standard narrative of posthumanism and its rise goes something like this: it is a term that has been in use within academia from the early 1990s and has infiltrated a wide range of disciplines – from cultural studies, to geography, science studies, gender studies, theology and media studies,[4] philosophy, literary studies, theoretical sociology and communication studies[5] and animal studies.[6] As a paradigm of thought and a form of 'knowledge',[7] it can now be said to be touching virtually all traditional disciplines, sciences and all kinds of 'studies' (from cultural studies, women studies, to posthuman studies or extinction studies), all the while transforming them into new interdisciplinary formations grouped under the label 'posthumanities'.[8] As Ursula Heise explains:

> Since the mid-1990s… new paradigms have manifested themselves through interdisciplinary research labelled 'x-studies' or 'y humanities': disability studies, critical animal studies, and food studies, for instance, or medical humanities, digital humanities, and environmental humanities. Instead of shared philosophical foundations or clearly defined political aspirations, these new fields focus on clusters of problems and questions…[9]

Posthumanism with its renewed insistence on the question of what it means to be human certainly forms a central aspect of the~~se~~ 'clusters of problems and questions' in these new fields.

What *critical* posthumanism *does* in each case is that it calls into question humanist or anthropocentric understandings of what humans are,[10] or what could be called, after Lyotard,[11] the humanist metanarrative – the idea that humans share a universal 'nature' or a species identity (an essential 'humanity'), that they are somehow 'exceptional' and radically different from (other) animals, on the one side, and from machines, on the other side, and that they are ultimately constituted as 'free' subjects who can determine their own history from a position above (the rest of) nature. Posthumanism instead questions the idea that something like 'nature' can be clearly distinguished from 'culture' or 'society', that a 'self' and 'identity' might be separated from the effects of 'otherness' and 'difference', that a 'body'

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[4] Neil Badmington, "Posthumanism", in: Simon Malpas and Paul Wake, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 240.

[5] Jonathan Bolter, "Posthumanism", in Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Robert T. Craig, eds., *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons), p. 1.

[6] Franklin Ginn, "Posthumanism", in: Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. 413.

[7] Cf. Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, *passim*.

[8] Cary Wolfe, "About Posthumanities", series blurb (not dated); available online at: https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/series/posthumanities# (accessed 02/12/2020);
and Braidotti, *Posthuman Knoweldge*, *passim*.

[9] Ursula K. Heise, "The Environmental Humanities and the Futures of the Human", *New German Critique* 43(2): 21.

[10] Badmington, "Posthumanism", p. 240.

[11] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

might be extracted from its (technical, biological, social etc.) 'environment', or that there might be a strict dividing line between 'subject' and 'object'. While deconstructing traditional knowledge formations based on these binary or radical, mutually exclusive, and inherently gendered and racialised oppositions with their built-in hierarchies, CPH seeks to promote new ways of knowing that focus on aspects of entanglement, co-implication, hybridity and interdependence – or, more appropriately and in analogy to Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action":[12] intra-dependence – instead of distinction and division.

In this strategic move, CPH builds on various precursors, most importantly on the work of 'poststructuralist' thinkers like Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Barthes, Irigaray, Althusser, Derrida, Cixous, Deleuze and Guattari, by radicalising and extending their antihumanist stance. The poststructuralists were reacting against structuralism and its attempt to produce 'objective' and 'scientific' knowledge of humans and their cultures. They did so by promoting a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'[13] based on the idea that the task of critical reading and interpretation is to debunk 'myths'[14] or 'naturalised' and thus unquestionable beliefs and their ideological motivations. This suspicion follows a genealogy of subversive thinking that goes back to Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud and the respective humiliations of human narcissism (or 'narcissistic wounds') their names stand for, as well as the humanist self-understanding of 'man' (or *Anthropos*) more generally. In the case of Darwinian evolution, 'man' is confronted with 'his' biological state as one primate amongst many; Marxism invalidates the notion that 'men' make their own histories and do so as free individuals; Nietzsche stands for a relativisation of truth and 'man's' will to power; and Freudian psychoanalysis denies that the conscious ego is in control of its 'own' thoughts, dreams and actions. In 'posthuman times' many other narcissistic wounds have been added to these (e.g. the challenges that deep time, big data, microbiology and artificial intelligence pose to the idea of autonomous human agency). In many ways, CPH draws logical and ecological conclusions from this critical genealogy, in that it turns its attention to the 'nonhuman', and privileges a holistic and inclusive approach to life (by seeing ontology as 'flat' or non-hierarchical). In doing so, as the definition above explains, it is bent on taking the notion of postanthropocentrism and its implications seriously.

Donna Haraway and her work on cyborgs, companion species and multispecies kinship;[15] N. Katherine Hayles and her rereading of the history of cybernetics through the lens of gender and embodiment, distributed cognition and symbiosis in and with new and digital media and 'code';[16] or Rosi Braidotti and feminist neomaterialism that seek a new politics based on a

[12] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [1957] (London: Vintage, 1993).
[15] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), and *Staying With the Trouble Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
[16] Hayles, *How We became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

'posthuman' affirmation of life in all its forms,[17] to name but the most obvious and influential ones, are CPH's (s)heroes. The strong feminist involvement in posthumanist thinking is no coincidence. It arises out of the importance of humanism's disappointing track record in terms of gender (and racial) equality despite its claim of a universal reach (i.e. an essential 'humanity' based on globally shared values). The ideal subject of humanism, 'man' (or *Anthropos*), in fact was always a device based on presupposed and often unexamined patriarchal, Eurocentric, white, liberal political norms. Humanism continues to underpin contemporary institutions like 'human rights' organisations, and this makes them susceptible to critique as (neo)colonial and (post)imperialist instruments effectuating the continuation of a Western or Eurocentric supremacy.[18]

However, CPH itself does not go uncontested. As a political project it defines itself against two kinds of 'enemies': what one might refer to as 'neohumanisms', on the one hand, and 'transhumanisms', on the other hand. Let me start from the (not at all unproblematic assumption) that there is a shared geohistorical position from which all of these -isms arise, namely an agreement about 'where we are now', or what situation this imaginary planetary 'we' finds itself in today. There will already be significantly less of an agreement about the follow-up question, namely, of how we got in this position or predicament. In Braidotti's words, one could say, the 'posthuman condition' is to be "positioned between the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Extinction".[19] In other words, (post)humanity finds itself at an important juncture within the history of late- or indeed post-modernity, asking itself: where do we go from here? This sets out a (provisional) endpoint and two alternative future trajectories. The endpoint or latest stage within Western modernity, after the history of industrialisation, colonial exploitation and geological extraction (of oil – a carbon based economy and culture), has led to what an increasing number of geologists and climate scientists are referring to as the 'Anthropocene' (or the period that marks a time in which humans and their actions have become the most important factors of atmospheric or climate change, geological stratification or sedimentation) with all the potential implications of this for humans, nonhumans and planetary life in general.[20] The human-induced 'sixth extinction' wave,[21] is the latest in a series of planetary catastrophes and upheavals that have led to fundamental changes in the composition of (biological) life on planet Earth. Each time, this has triggered a mass extinction of life forms and thus a complete reshuffling of evolutionary cards. In the fifth extinction event (believed to be caused by the impact of a giant meteorite and the dramatic changes to the global climate this brought about) the dinosaurs went extinct, which probably paved the way for the rise of mammals and primates. The sixth extinction it

[17] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), and *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); see also Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[18] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A History of Present Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[19] Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowldege*, p. 2.

[20] Clive Hamilton, Christope Bonneuil and Franç Gemenne, eds., *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[21] Elisabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Macmillan, 2014).

seems is being announced by the current dramatic loss of biodiversity, which is attributed to human-induced climate change. It threatens to be an extinction event that also poses a serious threat to human survival and maybe complex life forms more generally.

The beginning and promise of a 'fourth phase' of modernity, facing the Anthropocene as a planetary challenge, reinvigorates calls for a supposedly unified and universalised human or a return of (or to) *Anthropo*s. It gives rise to the idea that technological progress is our best hope of survival (whatever that form of survival might actually look like and whoever might ultimately benefit from it), but it also exposes fundamental differences and injustices that these enormous challenges: only a minority of humans have been directly responsible for anthropogenic climate change (mainly wealthy, Western nations largely governed by socially privileged white males – or the 'man' of humanist discourse – and their 'extraction' practices); the effects of environmental destruction and degradation, however, are disproportionately felt by already-marginalised groups. For many, the crossroads 'humanity' finds itself at seems to imply that in the face of these global threats what 'we' need is a new humanism (and precisely *not*: a *post*humanism): a new humanism that at last will deliver on the promise of human equality. The main objection to this idea of 'making humans great again' (like some Trump-inspired 'populists' might call this project) lies in the uncertainty of how such a new humanism could possibly avoid excluding nonhuman others once again. Thus far, humanism has always in effect meant: 'humans first' (a certain analogy with recent US politics and a general antidemocratic populism, again, might be no coincidence).

While the main bone of contention between posthumanisms and neohumanisms remains the very notion of the 'human' and its meaning, the main argument between posthumanism and transhumanism is about the role and nature of technology. As already mentioned, from the perspective of *critical* posthumanism, posthumanism should not simply be *equated* with the rise of technoculture.[22] Critical posthumanists (even though not everybody writing about posthumanism and the posthuman would necessarily or unproblematically identify with this label) do not belittle the impact technology, and especially digitalisation, has had and is having on every aspect of human and nonhuman (co)existence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. However, they critique a simplistic (and predominantly utilitarian) notion of technology, which tends to see technology as an almost 'fated' transformative dynamic of human development and 'progress'. This is what clearly distinguishes CPH from *trans*humanism, which tends to see technological progress as the main or even only driving force of history. Within that history, the present moment is then seen as an evolutionary turning point at which humans find themselves in the process of evolving with, or into, their successor species. What causes some confusion is the fact that transhumanists often refer to this utopian successor species as 'posthuman', while for posthumanists the notion of the posthuman remains a very much contested 'figure' that calls for critical and genealogical analysis. Posthumans – those entities, subjects or forms of agency, who have undergone radical technological 'enhancement' or some form of 'transubstantiation' (e.g. by downloading their mind into a computer) – have thus either become a form of (superhuman) superintelligence or, indeed, have been superseded by some further evolved form of (trans- or posthuman) AI. In this, transhumanist, sense, posthumans are in fact the apotheosis of a

[22] Badmington, "Posthumanism", p. 241.

certain understanding of humanism that remains informed by Christian eschatological motifs. One might thus rightly call transhumanism a spiritual or pseudo-religious, technognostic hyperhumanism.[23] Transhumanist visions or fantasies of disembodiment are the logical consequence of a dualist mode of (Christian, Neoplatonic, Cartesian) thinking that distinguishes between body and mind, mortal flesh and immortal soul and believes in their separability. They see posthumanisation, or the transformation and eventual transcendence of the human into a new, posthuman, species, as a technologically desirable (or indeed inevitable) outcome of history, often referred to by mystical terms like the 'singularity'.[24] The transhumanist techno-euphoria forms the endpoint of the trajectory of human perfectibility that goes hand in hand with a rejection of current 'meatworld' (enfleshed, 'wetware', biological or 'carbon-based') materialism. Instead, it can be said to whole-heartedly embrace a techno-utopianism and techno-idealism. In this view, following a tradition that runs form early-Gnosticism to late cyberpunk science fiction, it seems that it is simply human 'destiny' to transcend 'nature', 'biology' and 'death' and to seek immortality and perfection in some new technological medium.

CPH is much more ambivalent about technology, its origins, its ends and our relationship to it. It directly critiques the belief in human exceptionalism and perfectibility that underlies much of transhumanist thought. Even though science fiction is also an important reference point for many *post*humanists, more recent, ecologically-minded, posthumanisms are in fact not so much focused on a (technological) future. There has always been a way of reading science fiction not as a discourse predominantly focused on the future but rather as a critique of the present (and its extrapolations in the form of thought experiments and speculation). In fact, CPH interrogates (often playfully, creatively and subversively) the ambient and deliberate erasure of the boundary between science fiction and science fact, or 'science faction',[25] on which many transhumanist scenarios are actually based. Technology is not seen by CPH as an autonomous force of history – it is always the product of a specific time, context and selection process – neither does it perceive humans as sovereign subjects *vis-à-vis* technological development or objects. Instead, the human relationship to technology is co-constitutional or 'originary'[26] and 'prosthetic',[27] or 'entangled'.[28] However, it is an originary entanglement that does not imply another form of exceptionalism: nonhuman animals use technologies, too. It is also undecidable whether technology is 'natural' nor 'cultural' under these circumstances. This means that one might well say that there are posthumanisms that might function

[23] Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

[24] Max More and Natasha Vita More, eds., *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

[25] Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, pp. 107-134.

[26] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 3 vols (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008-2011); and Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[27] David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[28] Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), and Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007).

'without' technology,[29] not in the sense that they are technophobic or that they underplay or repress the impact of technology, but rather in the sense that they use a non-teleological notion of technics or the 'technical' in their analyses. There is nothing deterministic or inevitable about technology despite its undeniable transformative social and environmental impact. In this sense, posthumanism is not an exclusively future-oriented discourse but should be understood more generally as a synchronic and diachronic questioning of the humanist concept of the 'human' and thus as the 'ongoing deconstruction of humanism'.[30]

The best way to understand posthumanism like most –isms (feminism, Marxism, liberalism, materialism and so on) is therefore that it describes, explains, regulates and produces knowledge about that to which it adds a qualifying suffix. Adding the prefix 'post-' to these discourses, first of all, merely signals that they are no longer quite capable of defining their object, and that the consensus they seem to presuppose or to secure is no longer viable. Posthumanism, in this sense, speculates about what it means to be no longer (quite) human (at least in a Western humanist, anthropocentric sense). All these –isms, in short, represent (social) discourses:[31] the entirety of the statements and practices that relate to an 'object', which in the case of posthumanism is the 'posthuman', as well as its derivations 'posthumanity' and 'posthumanisation'. This object is constituted 'discursively', which means through describing it as a social reality. The most basic level of this discursive construction or formation says: there is such a thing as the 'posthuman', so what is to be done about it? What does it mean? In this sense, what starts off as a positioning – 'after the human' or 'no longer humanist' – requires a continued rereading or reinterpretation of an existing perceived state of affairs, world view or 'reality', followed by an alternative, more accurate, more convincing and a more 'realistic' understanding that harnesses change and is more 'comprehensive' and more 'persuasive' in its representation of 'where we are', so that it may provide a map for future orientation. The important thing to remember is then that discourses both describe and intervene in and to an extent also produce what they posit as their 'reality' and which they present as such to their 'subjects'. Discourses, as Althusser might have put it, want to recruit people and they address or interpellate them accordingly.[32] In short, they are eminently political and by definition, therefore, also partial and questionable, which means that they are contested both from within and from without, namely by other discourses. They are subject to power struggles over who has the best or most powerful explanations, who makes the most convincing, resonant and opportune truth claims.

The conceptual object around which posthumanism is constructed – the posthuman – is basically a metonymy. It functions like a figure, as in a rhetorical figure, or a powerful image.[33] It 'recognises' this figure in phenomena it analyses and turns it into the central aspect of the reality it in turn helps constitute. The posthuman thus becomes at once the most fundamental

[29] Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology", *Subject Matters* 3.1/4.1 (2007): 15-30.
[30] Badmington, *Posthumanism: A Reader* (2000).
[31] Cf. Ian Parker, *Discourse Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 1992); Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, pp. 36ff.
[32] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), pp. 121–73.
[33] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, pp. 8-11.

anchoring device as well as the most powerful conceptual resource. It helps, for example, to track figurations or indeed *pre*figurations of the posthuman across the ages (from angels to zombies, and chimera to cyborgs) and leads to the 'discovery' of *proto*posthumanisms in every period within the history of ideas, from classical antiquity to postmodernism, or even in prehistoric or deep time. It exposes the iterative limits of the Western cultural imaginary, and brings it into contact with figurations of the human that at once resist and confirm the purported obviousness of what it means to be human. If posthumanism had a clear idea about what the posthuman really was and meant then the argument would probably soon come to an end, people would lose interest and move on. If this initially sounds like a strong reason for rejecting posthumanism, it is worth remembering that *all* discourses function like that, including the very humanism posthumanism is grafted upon, and which has never really been able to explain and establish any general agreement about what its most coveted and mysterious figure or concept, i.e. the 'human, *really* meant or was. This drifting state of the human is in fact one of the main points of criticism and motivations for a posthumanist critique in the first place. 'We' have no idea who we *really* are and the one constant in humanist attempts to carve out an exceptional position for the human in this world is, on the one hand, to emphasise the differences between humans and their others (i.e. humans can do this, machines and animals cannot… even though all of these differences that traditionally served as markers of a radical difference have had to be substantially relativised), and, on the other hand, to reify difference by saying that the human is that which always differs from itself, that which cannot be pinned down. Humans are those creatures who are constantly reinventing themselves, because they are notoriously underdetermined – which is one of the founding gestures of renaissance humanism.[34] Seen from this vantage, one might easily derive the notion that 'we have never been human'.[35]

Questioning whether the posthuman actually *exists*, whether it is a figure that remains fundamentally, ontologically, futural, as something that humans are becoming, or might become, or whether it is something that humans have always been – which then prompts a genealogical search that will inevitably find similar figures in human and prehuman history – is an essential part and source of power for the legitimation of posthumanism as a discourse, especially in its self-reflexive mode (i.e. *critical* posthumanism, or CPH). The more discussion about the posthuman and posthumanism emerges the more established and the more 'real' they become. Entire academic and scientific careers depend on this process, as does funding and influence on political decision-making (and hence the possibility of actually bringing about some anticipated reality). This is not a cynical or nihilistic claim that implies that everything is a 'construct' (i.e. the recently much maligned dominance of the discourse of 'constructivism' in the cultural and social sciences) and that any way of making sense of the world is as good as any other – it merely means that reality, including scientific claims about reality, are always contested and cannot or should not form the end point of any discussion. Crucially, this should also not to be misconstrued as an attack on science – nobody will deny the universal truth of

[34] Cf. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* [1486] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[35] Cary Wolfe, "Bring the Noise: *The Parasite* and the Multiple Genealogies of Posthumanism – Introduction to the new edition", in: Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. xi.

gravity to take the example that is usually referred to in this context (cf. the so-called 'science wars')[36] – it is an investigation into the truth-finding processes of science and the privileged role they play within social discourses that help secure the power of institutions and their politics.

It is in this discursive sense, then, that the posthuman and posthumanism have managed to capture the attention of the academy and increasingly the wider public (e.g. through popular science magazines, science fiction films, docufictions, social media and so on). There is now what one might call an 'ambient' posthumanism promoted by powerful corporations like Google, pioneer figures like Elon Musk, institutions like the Singularity University that are increasingly called upon to advise government administrations, and which are promoting a clearly *trans*humanist version of posthumanism based on the idea that accelerated technological progress can only be a good thing and that it will help 'us' take the next, 'natural', step to becoming (more) posthuman. There is, however, also a posthumanism that questions this belief and provides alternative, more sustainable, more ethico-ecological interpretations of the posthuman – which is one of the ways of reading the 'critical' in CPH.[37] In other words, CPH brackets the question of whether the posthuman is a good or a bad thing, or whether it is likely to ever exist. It is self-reflexive and thus wants to keep the figure of the posthuman open, but it also wants to contextualise, historicise and politicise it. In this sense, it is a specific discursive strain within the discursive field or formation around the posthuman, aimed at constructing a critical observer position, even though it is fully aware that this cannot be done from an independent or disinterested remove. In this sense, there is no 'metahumanism' just like there has never been a 'metalanguage', or some vantage point *outside* (of humanism) from which to evaluate the question somehow 'disinterestedly'.

CPH does not deny the transformative potential of the posthuman, but it also investigates the constructed inevitability that surrounds it. It does so, first of all, by looking at some of the discursive gestures or practices and methodologies that are being employed within post- and transhumanist discourses, and it also speculates about the need for new, more creative and more inclusive – more-than-human – forms of knowledge production in this regard. It is precisely in this context that the positioning (or 'posting') of the prefix 'post-' has to be seen in all its problematic ambivalence. What one should have learnt from the discussion around postmodernism and the postmodern[38] is that this prefix and what it aims to do to or to perform on what it 'posts' comes with its very own, and rather aporetic, dynamic. The claim that something is reaching or has reached its end (or should finally do so) is not a claim like any other, and especially not where such a well-established discursive formation as humanism is at stake. This is even more complex for a discourse like humanism, since humanism upholds the notion of an 'essence' or 'truth' of our species identity, and which is supposed to lie in 'our' shared humanity based on some human 'nature' (which, however, always remains to be defined or deferred, Derrida would say, in *différance*). There is no question, however, that the

[36] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[37] Cf. e.g. Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017).
[38] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992).

notion of humanity has a concrete history and that, in fact, it is the effect of a combination of humanism as an ideological discourse and modernity as a socio-historical formation. Humanism and humanist tradition (which dates back at least to Neoplatonic Christianity and the Renaissance with its rediscovery of Greek and Roman Antiquity as sources of knowledge) has had a quasi-monopoly as far as the question 'what is (hu)man?' is concerned. To position oneself after such a powerful tradition – post + humanism – means to embrace a conscious ambiguity that translates into two possible forms of accentuation: the undeniable experience that a certain humanism has reached its end (i.e. *post*humanism); and the certainty that this humanism, because of its own plurality, shapeshifting force and slipperiness cannot just be classified without remainders and repressions but instead needs to be 'worked through' in a critical, psychoanalytical and deconstructive sense (hence the other form of accentuation: post*humanism*). In both cases a simple supersession of humanism and its legacy is formally impossible since posthumanism necessarily *repeats* humanism in its posting gesture. In this sense the critical detachment that the prefix 'post-' promises is complicated by the fact that its root and thus its category is and remains *humanism and *human. Posthumanism cannot be a simple negation of humanism or a simple supersession and annihilation of it – an 'overcoming'. It can only by a reworking, critique, deconstruction, rewriting of the stem onto which it is grafted. This is only a problem, however, for those who think the history of ideas should work in the form of radical breaks and supersessions. While this certainly does not preempt any possibility of an eventual, *real*, break, it foregrounds the idea that even discontinuity (or the very fashionable notion of 'disruption') still depends on (or repeats) to some extent the existence and persistence of that which is being discontinued. Making sense of time (and change or transformation) necessarily depends on comparing and contrasting, on extrapolation, including 'reverse teleologies' (i.e. the idea that with hindsight, the 'present' was bound to be the outcome of a certain 'past'). It relies on narrative techniques like flash forward and flash back, anticipation and the like. In short, reading and critique are always aimed at coherence even where there may not by any and even while one may be actively looking for discontinuity and breaks.

CPH – that narrative that tries to provide a critical commentary on the transformations the discourse of posthumanism and the figure of the posthuman announce – is no exception to this. At one further (critical) remove, CPH is inevitably in the business of making sense, of negotiating claims, of analysing presuppositions and implications, of projecting scenarios into the future by extrapolating from the past. It is ultimately invested in a model of sedimentation and residue, in short, a 'geological' and 'genealogical' project. What CPH thus combines in its thinking (or that which constitutes its own critical continuity) is the technologically induced process of posthumanisation it tracks (i.e. the process of humans becoming 'other'), which is a process that needs to be taken seriously, and which needs to be radically thought through with all its implications, with both its potential and its dangers. At the same time, however, CPH also engages creatively and speculatively in conceiving entirely other forms and understandings of posthumanisation (among them, importantly, those that downplay the role of technology, or a posthumanism 'without' technology), or posthumanisms that are much 'older' but maybe just as radical, and which need to be (re)articulated by focusing on more general and more underdetermined notions like that of the 'nonhuman' or the 'inhuman', as

the initial crisis within humanism itself and the precedence of nonhuman others.[39] CPH can thus be said to be 'parasitical' in its relation to the various humanisms it deconstructively inhabits.

As Neil Badmington explains,[40] the ambiguity built into the notion of posthumanism is already at work in the radical plurality of meanings of humanism itself. While the antihumanism dominating the second half of the 20th century portrayed humanism as a conservative and old-fashioned ideology of Western 'common sense', there is also a humanism associated with secular and scientific traditions that is seen, not without some justification, as progressive. It is therefore no surprise that from the point of view of modern science, which has been critical of humanism from the beginning, the idea of a posthumanism might look somewhat belated. On the other hand, in prohumanist secularist circles there will be strong moral opposition to the very idea of a posthumanism, understood as an (unwanted) break with a humanist cultural tradition that is itself seen as progressive and radical and for which any kind of posthumanism would only constitute an attack or backlash against hard-won values like freedom from premodern irrationalism, or a regression in terms of Enlightenment ideals of progress and reason. CPH is aware of this complex dynamic. On the one hand, it needs to show that humanism despite all its accompanying undeniable cultural progress, as an ideology, has come to be criticised for its merely apparent and superficial claims towards universality while tacitly assuming and promoting the specificity of its (Western, liberal, bourgeois, capitalist) normativity. One might say therefore that humanism was never as progressive as it made itself out to be; and, as has become clearer at least since WWII and the ongoing process of decolonisation and the gradual weakening of Western imperialism, it is now increasingly met with opposition and resistance, in a globalised, multipolar world.[41] On the other hand, if one really is to break with a five-hundred-year-old tradition like humanism, which still enjoys considerable power and support, one has to make sure to protect and if possible appropriate and continue to make accessible the transformative potential that already exists *within* this tradition and avoid giving in to naïvely utopian claims and promises of 'revolutionary' change. Which means that a *critical* posthumanism requires an intricate political and ethical positioning, namely one which signals to the techno-prophets that their attitude despite all apparent utopian radicalism has a long history that needs to be remembered and worked through; and a position which reminds the skeptics that humanism never was as humanist as it claimed to be and that the current technological challenge merely represents the logical outcome of a process of posthumanisation with which humanism has always been complicit and which it itself helped to create. The task of this kind of tightrope-walk, as Badmington explains, is to look both back and forward at the same time, and to 'assist' humanism in its own self-deconstruction, so that 'we' will not be forced to repeat its mistakes.

As a first summary, then, one might say that CPH is a theoretical approach within the humanities and social sciences, which, arguably, are morphing into what one might call the 'posthumanities'. It maps and actively engages with the 'ongoing deconstruction of

[39] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
[40] Badmington, *Posthumanism: A Reader* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000).
[41] Tony Davies, *Humanism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).

humanism'. It differentiates between the figure of the posthuman and its present, past and projected avatars, like cyborgs,[42] but also monsters, zombies, ghosts or angels[43] and their 'posthuman bodies'.[44] It is also a social discourse (a material network of texts, practices, values, identities, institutions) which negotiates the pressing question of what it means to be human under the current conditions of globalisation, technoscience, late capitalism and climate change. The prefix 'post-' (in analogy with the discussion of the postmodern and postmodernism) has a double meaning: on the one hand, it signifies a desire or indeed a need to somehow go *beyond* humanism (or the human), which calls for some scepticism, while on the other hand, since the 'post-' also necessarily repeats what it prefixes, it displays an awareness that neither humanism nor the human can in fact be overcome in any straightforward dialectical or historical fashion (for example, in the sense: after the human, the posthuman). The qualifying term 'critical' in the phrase 'critical posthumanism' gestures towards a more complicated and non-dialectical relationship between the human and the posthuman, as well as their respective connection with the nonhuman and the inhuman.[45] Posthumanism in this critical sense functions more like an anamnesis and a rewriting of the human and humanism, a process of 'rewriting humanity', in analogy with Lyotard's notion of the postmodern project of 'rewriting modernity'.[46] In this process, CPH asks a number of questions that address the complications which arise out of this critical rewriting: how did we come to think of ourselves as human? Or, what exactly does it mean to be human (especially at a time when some humans are apparently quite enthusiastically embracing and promoting the idea that we are becoming, or might already to some extent, have become posthuman (e.g. most transhumanists)? What are the motivations for this posthumanising *desire*, when did it start and where does it come from? What are its implications for the future relationships and interdependence with nonhuman others (e.g. the environment, nonhuman animals, machines or technology, but also any form of spiritualism)?

The adjective 'critical' in CPH can thus be said to signify a number of things. It refers to the difference between a more or less *un*critical or popular posthumanism (e.g. in many science fiction movies or popular science magazines) and a philosophical, reflective, or theoretical approach (which is nevertheless inseparable from some of the transformative creative and technological practices the posthuman inspires), and which investigates the current forms of 'our' postanthropocentric desires – the yearning for the (in-, non-, post- etc.)human, the other, or for self-transformation. This desire articulates itself, on the one hand, in the form of an anticipated transcendence of the human condition, often imagined in various scenarios of disembodiment and metamorphosis;[47] on the other hand, it finds its expression in a more ecological rather than simply technological (one might say, an 'ecotechnical') form where this

[42] Chris Hables Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1995).
[43] Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human* (2002).
[44] Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
[45] Scott Brewster et al., eds., *Inhuman Reflections: Thinking the Limits of the Human* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
[46] Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (1991).
[47] Bruce Clarke, *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

desire can imply a (rather suspicious) attempt by humans to 'argue themselves out of the picture' precisely at a time when climate change caused by the impact of human civilization calls for urgent, responsible and more altruistic, *human* action.[48]

The other meaning of 'critical' in CPH concerns a re-evaluation or even a reinvention of some humanist values and methodologies (including the very question of what critique is and does), and which, in the face of a fundamental transformation provoked by digitalisation and the advent of ubiquitous computing and digital media platforms, appear to have become obsolete, or out of touch with new practices, identities, communities, cognitive patterns and knowledges and which are therefore in urgent need of revision (esp. critical methodologies which are related to traditional forms of literacy, reading, thinking and analysis). The question that is raised here is how to remain critical in the sense of developing reading and analytical techniques, forms of conceptualisations and subjectivities that are both self-reflexive and aware of their own genealogies (i.e. able to stay critically connected with humanist traditions, or 'stay with the trouble', as Donna Haraway calls it,[49] and which seem to threaten literal, literary and textual approaches in particular), in a time that is increasingly characterised as both 'post-truth' and 'post-critique'. For core disciplines in the traditional humanities like literature and philosophy this means that not only their humanistic knowledge base but also their main addressee, the humanist subject who is in need of *Bildung*, is fast disappearing as it is being more and more 'decentred'.

Studies of literature's 21st-century extensions and remediations, for example, are having to engage with the broader resonances of the idea that the literary is currently being overtaken by processes of digitalisation, globalisation and technology-and-media driven change. In this, arguably, 'post-literary' and maybe even 'post-literate' climate, a critical posthumanist approach needs to be both aware and wary of the contemporary desire to leave the humanist apparatus of literacy and its central institutions like literature with all its social, economic and cultural-political implications, its regimes of power and its aesthetics behind. Critique, however, is not the same as resistance, and an increasing part of the academy and the (theoretical) humanities in particular have been embracing this new context to form new, interdisciplinary alliances with the sciences and their own critical commentaries (e.g. the so-called 'critical science studies', informed by Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, speculative realism, or new (feminist) materialisms[50] – all allies of CPH with shared affinities despite their many differences). The emerging 'posthumanities' are thus having to engage with the positive but also the problematic aspects of the transformative potential that a new dialogue or alliance between the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences contains. The focus on the posthuman as a discursive object, on posthumanism as a social discourse and on posthumanisation as an ongoing historical and ontological process of transformation, allows the humanities, social sciences and the sciences – to create new encounters and test new

[48] Stefan Herbrechter, "'On not writing ourselves out of the picture…': An Interview with Stefan Herbrechter", *Antae* 1(3): 131-144; available online at: https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/12513/1/1-3-2014.1.pdf.

[49] Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* (2016).

[50] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

hypotheses that may lead to greater political and ethical awareness of the place of the human, the nonhuman and their entanglement, especially in connection with pressing issues like climate change, the depletion of natural resources, the destruction of biodiversity, migration, terrorism and global insecurity, or current and future biopolitics.

What is thus at stake in CPH is a rethinking of the relationship between human agency, the role of technology and environmental and cultural factors from a post- or non-anthropocentric perspective. Postanthropocentric posthumanities are still about humans and their cultures but only in so far as these are placed within a larger, ecological and ecotechnical, picture, as can be seen for example in the proliferation and institutionalisation of a variety of alternative 'humanities', like the medical humanities, the environmental humanities, the digital humanities. The digital humanities, for example, are informed by CPH in the sense that they address the role of new and converging media with their social and cultural implications, as well as their proliferation of digital and virtual realities and their biopolitical aspects (e.g. by investigating new forms of surveillance and commodification, the construction of new subjectivities and the merging of bio- and media technologies in the form of 'biomedia'[51]). It is becoming increasingly clear that the scale and the complexity of global challenges like anthropogenic climate change, human overpopulation, the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, intensified automation and virtualisation, and so on, require new forms of social, political, ethical, and ecological ways of thinking that can help ensure the survival not only of the human species but, also, the survival of multiple ways of being human, as well as the survival of other species, environments and ecosystems, and the survival of life in general.

CPH thus draws together a number of aspects that constitute 'our' early twenty-first-century reality and cosmology – our posthuman condition – and, at the same time, links these back genealogically to their beginnings and prefigurations within humanism itself.[52] The function that a genealogical understanding of posthumanism and approach to the posthuman serves is to refer back to the question of the post- and to what extent this signals continuity, or discontinuity – a break, overcoming, succession or indeed anamnesis, rewriting and deconstruction – as outlined above. Apart from asking *what* is the posthuman?, it also focuses on *when* is the posthuman?, what cultures does it belong to? This is why an important aspect of the criticality of CPH lies in its genealogical dimension. Genealogies are about ancestors, lineages, progeny and the knowledge they produce. They are historical in the sense that they trace past developments to investigate how 'things' have become the way they 'are' (or, at least, were thought to be at a certain time). Following Nietzsche and Foucault, genealogical analyses focus on the social and historical production of systems of knowledge, power and discourse. Their underlying methodology is to expose what is regarded as obvious, natural or unchangeable and to reveal it as constructed in the sense that it is the result of historical and political (or, one could say, cultural evolutionary, maybe even epigenetic) selection. Genealogies, however, are not about uncovering absolute truths or origins but are instead interested in the processes of knowledge production as such. While for Nietzsche, truth

[51] Cf. Eugene Thacker, *Biomedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[52] Cf. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, eds., *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), Herbrechter and Callus, eds., *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

famously was a 'mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms',[53] Foucault is primarily interested in the (human) subjectivities that specific discourses and social practices afford.[54] According to Foucault, individuals are subjected to power by mechanisms of control and dependence that are closely aligned with identity and self-knowledge, which means that they are subject to processes that involve identification and embodiment (i.e. 'technologies of the self'[55]) or indeed resistance to them, and which are not necessarily seen as coercive but, under modern, liberal conditions, as 'choice'.

The discursive knowledge that is inevitably perspectival, historically and culturally situated – and thus specific – recruits and positions subjects for whom this knowledge is supposed to make sense. Foucault is therefore specifically interested in the processes of legitimation as well as in their disruptions, discontinuities, contradictions and exclusions, in order to create possibilities for an articulation of alternative, 'subjugated' knowledges. Consequently genealogy is about transformation and change provoked by 'denaturalisation'.[56] A genealogical approach, in this sense, is necessarily critical in that it questions accepted truths, institutional power, strong notions of identity, normality and reality, by emphasising the power struggles that have led to their establishing and legitimation. In doing so, it opens up possibilities for counter-memories and alternative narratives. In short, by stressing historical contingency, genealogies begin to show alternative possibilities of how 'things' could have been otherwise or might still develop differently in the future. In connection with posthumanism and the posthuman, both Donna Haraway's re-reading of the cyborg figure from a feminist materialist point of view,[57] as well as N. Katherine Hayles's recovery of the lost histories of cybernetics and technological embodiment in *How We Became Posthuman*,[58] can be said to be genealogical in this sense.

This kind of genealogical approach in general has been very influential in transforming the theory and practice of historiographies that are often associated with new historicism and cultural materialism or postmodernism. Genealogy, however, is not predominantly an interpretation of the past through a present-day perspective. Its aim instead is to produce 'histories of the present', or 'effective histories' that start with contemporary problems or current issues.[59] Writing history is here understood as a process of producing power-knowledge that is based on selection and exclusion, narrativisation and emplotment, as well as subject-positioning.[60] Genealogy is an analysis of the specific connections of subjectivity,

[53] Friedrich Nietzsche, "From: On Truth and Lies in the Extra-Moral Sense [1873]", in: *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. & trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), pp. 46-47.
[54] Michel Foucault, "The Subject of Power [1982]", in: Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 208).
[55] Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1988).
[56] Cf. Barthes, *Mythologies* (1993).
[57] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991).
[58] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999).
[59] Mitchell Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1994).
[60] Cf. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

truth, knowledge and power, i.e. the 'discursive formations' at work in historiography and its political legitimation. This is exactly what is at stake in CPH's 'rewriting' of humanism and the reopening of the question of what it might mean to be human today.[61]

Foucault's antihumanism most famously expressed itself in the image of 'man', as a construct of humanism and the 'human sciences' (or, the humanities), and thus as a recent historical figure, that is about to disappear 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'.[62] The apparent apocalyptics of this statement should not detract from the fact that Foucault's aim was a genealogical rereading of the 'history of humanity' in the sense of "the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic of life".[63] Foucault's genealogical method in producing effective histories is strategic in that 'it introduces discontinuity into our very being – as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself".[64] In this sense, it remains pertinent for CPH in three ways:

> First, [as] a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, [as] a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, [as] a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents.[65]

CPH, however, importantly and significantly extends the remit of Foucault's framework by addressing its residual anthropocentric bias and by including nonhuman forms of agency and subjectivity.

The other important advantage of seeing CPH as a genealogical venture is that it creates an antidote to understanding posthumanism as an exclusively futural or future-oriented discourse. Instead, it adds an investigation into posthumanism's prefigurations. In other words, it tracks posthumanism across the ages and, in doing so, discovers what one might call 'early posthumanisms' or 'proto-posthumanisms'. In fact, it is possible and necessary for a rewriting of (the history of) humanity to work through the idea of human self-identity from its paleoanthropological beginnings in deep time right through to its past and contemporary constructions of the future.[66] Humanism and anthropocentrism go back to the Renaissance, but they also affect the worldviews of Greek and Roman Antiquity and the Middle Ages of course. Retroactively, via the concept of the Anthropocene, they also throw us back into 'deep time' and a time 'before humanity', as well as catapulting us forward into a speculative time 'without humans' either in the form of an evolutionary (technological) successor species or in

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[61] See also my "Genealogy", *The Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2020), available online at: https://criticalposthumanism.net/genealogy-entry/.

[62] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1966], trans. A. Sheridan Smith (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 387.

[63] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 86.

[64] *Ibid*., p. 88.

[65] *Ibid*., p. 351.

[66] See my "Deep Time", in: Herbrechter et al., eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, pp. and my *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

the sense of apocalyptic scenarios of human or planetary extinction events.[67] There is thus a growing literature on posthumanism and its relevance, prefiguration, genealogy throughout human and nonhuman time, from classical posthumanism,[68] to medieval[69] and early modern posthumanism,[70] as well as the Enlightenment[71] and beyond. Together these approaches to a prefigurative and genealogical understanding of posthumanism and the posthuman make for a rich tapestry that pays tribute to the fact that "if the limits of the human have always exercised both our thinking and our esthetic practices, then some aspects of what is now termed 'posthumanism' and 'the posthuman' go as far back as the beginning of the human itself".[72] However, if all these early posthumanist prefigurations do not add up to a new comprehensive 'history of the posthuman' this is because every single rereading also affects and remediates the whole idea of periodisation and succession as such.

One of the main reasons why CPH can thus be called 'critical' is precisely because of this affinity to a genealogical understanding of critique. As Foucault explains, critique is "genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think".[73] This means that genealogies are critical precisely because they operate as denaturalising critiques of ideas and practices that hide the contingency of human life behind formal ahistorical or developmental perspectives. For Foucault more specifically, "genealogies are usually histories of present subjectivities, for their critical impact depends on people still being immersed in the beliefs and practices that they denaturalize".[74] It is in this sense that

[67] Richard Grusin, ed., *After Extinction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[68] E.g. Emanuela Bianchi, Sara Brill and Brooke Holmes, eds., *Antiquities beyond Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[69] Cf. *Postmedieval – A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, inaugural double issue "When Did We Become Post/Human", 1.1-2 (2010) ff.; and Jeffrey J. Cohen Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), and Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011).

[70]Cf. early works on renaissance animal studies by Erika Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), and Fudge, ed., *Renaissance Beasts: Of Animals, Humans, and Other Wonderful Creatures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), and Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman, eds., *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002). See also posthumanist readings of Shakespeare in Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012), as well as early thinking about machines and computers in Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Sawday, *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine* (London: Routledge, 2007), and overviews like Jospeh Campana and Scott Maisano, eds., *Renaissance Posthumanism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

[71] Edgar Landgraf, Gabriel Torp and Leif Weatherby, eds., *Posthumanism in the Age of Humanism: Mind, Matter, and the Life Sciences after Kant* (London: Bloomsbury,
2019).

[72] Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. xv.

[73] Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, p. 46.

[74] Mark Bevir, "What is Genealogy?" *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2.3 (2008): 263.

CPH, explicitly or implicitly, understands itself as a critical denaturalisation of (liberal) humanist subjectivity or, again, as an ongoing deconstruction of humanism. In doing so, genealogy and CPH both "explore the conditions of possibility of contemporary beliefs and practices" and "uncover the historical contingencies that made it possible for people today to think and act as they do".[75] Genealogical critique understood in this way aims to open up what Bevir refers to as "novel spaces for personal and social transformation" by loosening the hold on us of "entrenched ideas and institutions; it frees us to imagine other possibilities" – which is precisely what the figure of the posthuman signals,[76] namely a counter-memory to the humanist tradition of anthropocentrism. In this sense, importantly, genealogy can be understood as 'effective' history, namely as a history that is opened up and oriented toward the future.

To conclude, one might say that CPH proceeds genealogically in the sense that it contextualises and investigates figures of the posthuman and discourses on posthumanism by placing them within "theoretical and philosophical developments and ways of thinking within modernity".[77] Its ultimate aim is to re-evaluate the human (esp. its exceptionalism, anthropocentrism, its 'nature'), and in doing so, it challenges the legitimation (the power-knowledge apparatus) of humanism and its late heirs. It seeks out discontinuities and counter-memories from which to tell the story of the human and its others differently, without, however, underestimating the power of the human desire for self-surpassment and perfectibility. While this is undoubtedly a political stance, CPH's *raison-d'être* is ultimately an ethical one. It is motivated by care – care for different human and nonhuman ways of beings. In this sense, whoever cares about human beings and their past, present and future might want to engage *critically* with humanism's anthropocentric ideology. CPH is genealogical as well as critical because it begins with a current problem, an urgency – the insistence of the posthuman in all its forms. Its objective is to write effective histories that would do justice to "the cultural malaise or euphoria that is caused by the feeling that arises once you start taking the idea of 'postanthropocentrism' seriously … and to think the 'end of the human' without giving in to apocalyptic mysticism or to new forms of spirituality and transcendence",[78] to return to the definition with which this preface began.

It can thus be said that it is, in fact, the *desire* of the posthuman that is both the subject and object of CPH's critique. It is a desire that constitutes 'us' and a desire that 'we' nevertheless cannot trust. In this sense, it is worth insisting that critique can never be detached, since it is necessarily involved, or entangled, with that which it critiques, or in other words, critique is complicit with this/its desire. A sympathetic understanding of critique, ever since Kant, however, will stress the fact that it has never just been the work of pure negativity to shore up the human against any hybridisation with nonhuman others, as Bruno Latour claims,[79] but that as a practice (i.e. critical thinking) it has always been and remains capable of dealing just

[75] *Ibid*., p. 272.
[76] Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (2013).
[77] Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, p. vii.
[78] *Ibid*., p. 3.
[79] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

as well with 'matters of fact' as with 'matters of concern';[80] or, in other words, that it is, in its generosity, both analytical and speculative, creative, dismantling and (re)assembling, motivated by scepticism and care, all at the same time. It is in this spirit that CPH still *cares* about the human; but this is a care that cannot exist at the expense of nonhuman others, and one that necessitates an urgent pluralisation and critique of Western normativity. It dismantles 'our' self-understanding, but not without reassembling 'the social' in postanthropocentric terms. It analyses and distrusts 'our' humanist reflexes and legacies with a view to speculating about alternatives and creating different futures.

[80] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 225-248.