

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 28
Lec 28 : Posthuman Subjects I

In what we have already looked at in the preceding weeks, we understand that post-humanism, as a school of thought, calls into question the supposed autonomy of the human. It rejects the idea that the human is self-bounded as a unified, coherent entity restricted to itself. Rather, it sees the human as co-evolving with technology, co-evolving with the non-human, and co-evolving with the non-living. It sees the human as entangled with technology, the non-human, and the non-living. This means, essentially, that the human subject is not really the center of the universe.

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Posthumanism as a school of thought calls into question the supposed autonomy of the human and the self-bounded nature of the human. Instead, it sees the human as co-evolving with technology, the nonhuman, being entangled with them.

The human subject is *not* the centre of the universe.

Posthuman subjectivity is rhizomatic, networked, interlinked with other humans, the non-living and the nonhumans.

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So, as we have mentioned and reiterated several times in the previous weeks, the human subject not being at the center of the universe means that the human has been de-centered. What is post-human subjectivity in that case? Post-human subjectivity is not solely located within the human form or within the human person. Post-human subjectivity is rhizomatic. It's networked, interlinked with other humans, interlinked with the non-humans, and interlinked with the non-living.

So, we have a notion of the human as distributed in its subjectivity. Not packed into one particular body or form. Not packed into one specific unit which we identify as the human. It believes as in, post-humanism believes that our consciousness, our sense of who we are, our sense of identity,

All of these proceed from being part of a larger network. Hence the term rhizomatic network. Spreading like a rhizome, like grass. Grass, as you know, spreads like this. Rather than growing like this, it spreads laterally on the ground.

And grasses are rhizomatic; they are rhizomes. The term, of course, became popular with Deleuze and Guattari's work on this. But we'll set that aside for now. Enough to understand and accept that Human subjectivity cannot be seen as restricted to the human form or within the human form, but is made up as an assemblage.

The term assemblage is a favorite among critical theorists of the post-humanist variety. Like rhizomes and rhizomatic, it seems to indicate a collection rather than a unity. It's a coming together of various things. Why am I spending so much time on this? It's because this is a radical view of humans.

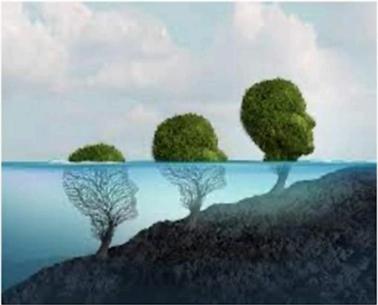
Now, there are, of course, critics and scholars, especially in philosophy, who note that this way of thinking has always been present in certain traditions, in philosophy, in certain cultures of the world, like the indigenous, aboriginal, and Asian cultures, where humans have been represented, seen, and thought of as connected to other forms of life, adapting to and living with becoming with, another famous post-humanist phrase the non-human as well. So, post-human subjectivity is rhizomatic. Subjectivity itself, defined by Rosi-Braidotti, is a collective assemblage that encompasses human and non-human actors, technological mediation, animals, plants, and the planet as a whole.

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Subjectivity itself is

'a collective assemblage that encompasses human and nonhuman actors, technological mediation, animals, plants, and the planet as a whole'
Rosi Braidotti



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This is an important definition. It's one that circulates most widely. Subjectivity is a collective assemblage that encompasses human and non-human actors, technological mediation, animals, plants, and the planet as a whole. If you pay attention to Braidotti's

comment, what she's saying is, The human being as a self, as an identity, is who he or she is through multiplicities and hence the term assemblage of the coming together of, and you might want to take a look at the list, human and non-human actors, technological mediation, animals,

plants, and the planet as a whole. How does that work? By being connected to several creatures, several life forms, and several objects, the human becomes a part of the planet as much as the planet becomes a part of the human. It has interesting consequences. And you can see here already a trajectory that will take us into environmentalism.

And we have already looked at the intersection of post-humanist thought with environmentalist thinking and environmentalist activism. So, it's important to understand here that Braidotti, like several others, is refusing to say or perceive the human as determining the rest of the world. Braidotti and the post-humanists refuse primacy of place to the human because they see the human itself as mutually constitutive with the planet. What do we mean by mutually constitutive?

By mutually constitutive, we mean that humans are made up of several things, and those several things are made up of even more things. And we are part of a much larger picture, a much larger, maybe the word 'organism' is not perhaps appropriate, but some larger entity. This has consequences, as I said, because if you are a part of the planet, if you are who you are because the planet is a part of you,

Would you harm it? Astrida Neimanis, the Blue Humanities scholar, and Cecilia Åsberg, names I've mentioned before, have also pointed out that human bodies are largely made up of water. So is the planet. The point that Neimanis, Åsberg, and others in the Blue Humanities or oceanic humanities make is that we contain as much water as the Earth in terms of proportion, the human body being what it is and the planet being what it is. We come, as in life emerges from the oceans, as we now know evolutionary biology tells us that.

Which means And this is where it becomes and sounds a little bit quasi-mystical. This means the early flows of the ocean are still within us. The early beats, the waves, the rhythms of the oceanic waters are still within us. Which means, again, that we are part of the planet.

The planet is what makes us what we are. If the planet is part of us, as I said a few minutes ago, would we harm ourselves? Would we harm the planet? Because in harming the planet, we harm ourselves.

And if we harm ourselves, we harm the planet. We are a collective. We are an assemblage. So what is the nature of the subject today? And so we are going through various kinds of subjective forms.

In the digital era, humans are network entities. Our identity, our cognitive process, perhaps even our emotions, are merged with the devices we use, the data we share, by which I mean data we give and the data we receive, and the feedback loop wherein the technological networks in which we participate provides us feedback. That's us in the digital era. That we are inextricably enmeshed, our identity, our cognitive process, with

the devices we use, with the data sharing that we engage in, and the feedback we receive from the technological networks in which we are embedded. Our sense of location, our sense of direction,

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The Subject Now

1. In the digital era, humans are networked. Our identity, even our cognitive processes, are merged with the devices we use, the data we share, the feedback we receive from the technological networks that we participate in.
2. Our sense of location, direction are mediated.
3. Our memory is increasingly assigned to a device/prosthetic memory
4. Our 'self' is now made up of our bodies, our online presence, our online work and our socializing that also occurs online, because these digital presences, sense of belonging and work also shape who we are.

Our subjectivity is posthuman now: mediated by the constant technological roles we play, actions we engage in and their effects on our perceptual apparatuses.

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are both mediated. Note the fact that we need a GPS to find our way more and more often than we used to. That our memory is itself now stored in a device. Can we remember phone numbers, postal codes, addresses? No, we cannot.

Because we have increasingly assigned this job to a prosthetic device. If memory is what makes us human, and now our memories reside in the machine, does that mean we are less human? If our sense of our world, including our ability to find directions or navigate through city streets, all that ability is now dependent upon a device or a software or an app, does that make us less human or more? If we are the sum total of the data we share, give and receive, does that make us less human or more? You see, the point is that our notions of who we are, our notions of the subject have changed drastically.

Ourself as we understand it, made up of our memory, memories is now a conglomerate of our bodies, our online presence or our avatars, our online work and a lot of our digital presence, digital belonging and digital work. So our self is made up of our flesh and blood bodies. but also our digital presences. Our sense of belonging comes from that.

Our sense of who we are comes from that. So our subjectivity is post-human because we are mediated by the constant technological roles we play, the actions we engage in, and in their effects on our perceptual apparatus. Like I said, our sense of direction, our sense of our ability to move and navigate through spaces is now, we look at our device. Okay, that's how we go. So this is our turn left, turn right.

We have no clue as to how much of our perceptual cognitive processes have been altered by our extreme dependence on this. I'm not making a moral judgment on this. It's entirely up to you people to think about this. But ask yourself this. How much of our innate ability to navigate through traffic, to find directions, look for landmarks, has been transmitted to and dependent upon the device?

Turn left. Where is left? Oh, left. Then turn right. Okay, turn right.

It's the device that tells us. If you ask earlier generations of people, they'll tell you that even without a device, there is a sense of direction. And it was a phrase that was very commonly used: a sense of direction. Now, we don't need a sense of direction because the thing on your car's dashboard or your handheld device tells you. You do know that a road going this way and swerving slightly will get you there.

That was what was called a sense of direction. Now, we don't need that sense of direction because the device does it for you. Like I said, we don't remember phone numbers. We don't remember routine postal addresses, names, because the machine does it for us. We don't need to remember that.

Those are the kinds of things we think of as trivia that we no longer use. But what we are not asking, not wondering, is: does it change our cognitive abilities? Does it change our perceptual apparatus in terms of how our mental processes work now? Think of something else too. Simple calculations in math we no longer do.

We rely on our phone's calculating system, software, to do that. And if you ask your parents or your grandparents' generation, they would do mental math. They would do this in minutes, in seconds, because they processed numbers in their heads. And if you talk to them about how for everything you need to pick up the device and punch into it, they will say, but why? Why?

You should be able to do it in your head. More and more of us are unable to do that in our heads because we rely on something. Which means, in the generational shifts that increasingly trust and rely upon technology, the human subject is losing certain aspects of their subjecthood. Like I said, it's not a moral point. We are also gaining other

Methods of thinking, we are becoming more and more aware of our digital situatedness, our digital belonging, and so on and so forth. So, as I said, it's not a moral point, although people who are anxious about humans do bring this up periodically. So the subject now, as we continue, new forms of the human force us to redefine subjectivity and the human subject. And we have looked at some of these examples when we examined and discussed disability studies. What is the subjectivity of people with corrective processes, implants, and technological interventions that help them to lead normal, functional lives, of course?

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The Subject Now

New forms of the human force us to redefine subjectivity and the human subject. For example:

- What is the subjectivity of persons with corrective prosthesis, implants and other technological/pharmacological interventions that help them lead 'normal' functional lives?
- What is the subjectivity of persons with *enhanced* abilities due to prostheses and other interventions?
- What is the subjectivity of persons in Persistent Vegetative States (coma)?

If the human subject is defined traditionally as autonomous, then are the above persons autonomous?



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If they have implants, including pacemakers, Are they human as we understand it? Or are they human plus? Then, what about people who need those devices to lead adequately functioning lives? As in, these are corrective prostheses, right?

They fulfill the requirements you need to walk, talk, or keep your heart going, right? Which means that They rectify a certain lacuna in the body, which enables them to then lead a fairly adequately normal life in the given systems that we inhabit. There are, of course, the other versions of this, and that's enhancement. What about people who enhance themselves?

It's not yet a very real... feature in terms of genetic modifications it's a subject of great science fiction of course so on the one hand there are people who require corrective prosthesis and then there are people who have enhanced abilities due to those prostheses and other inventions other interventions You must have read recently, in the last week or so, it happened in early May, about the Neuralink where a quadriplegic with a computer chip has been able to do a lot more with his body because of that chip. It's a corrective implant. It corrected a dysfunctional or malfunctioning body and enabled this person to make minimal progress, able to sit at a keyboard and type and do things.

Now that's corrective processes. What if those processes enable you to be further developed, growing in abilities in various domains? Then, what is the subjectivity of humans who are in persistent vegetative states? What we call comatose. Are they people?

Would they be called human? If they have very low electrical activity in their brains, if their physiological processes are taken care of by machines, would they be persons? What is the human subject here? So, look at the categories we have identified. Humans whose bodies now have prosthetic and other implants to help them lead a minimally functioning life, corrective prostheses.

People who have enhanced their abilities with prostheses. People who are in a coma. Various kinds of human subjects. How human are they? If the human subject is defined as autonomous, then are these people, are these persons autonomous?

Autonomous. Big question, isn't it? And it's something to keep in mind. Further, we now know that we coexist with various forms of non-human life, including the bacteria in our stomachs, and we have referred to this before. But our agriculture, on which we depend, because that's where your food comes from, our agriculture depends on

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The Subject Now

A recognition that

- we co-exist with various forms of nonhuman life – including the bacteria in our stomach,
- our agriculture and our very lives depend on various nonhuman life forms, including fungi and plant and animal life,
- the soil, air and water we depend on contain chemicals and nonhuman life forms.

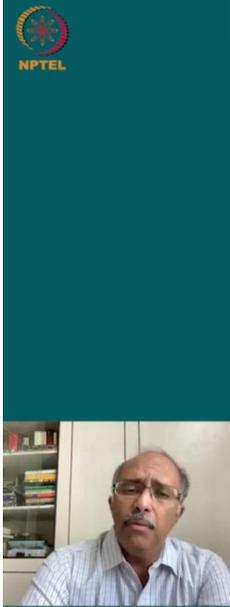
• The recognition that human existence is dependent upon other life forms and even the non-living calls into question what we understand as the human subject.

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various non-human life forms, including fungi, earthworms, and other plant and bacterial forms of life. The soil, the air, and the water that we require, on which we rely, contain chemicals and non-human life forms. Again, human existence therefore depends on these. So, for the fertility of the soil, you need your earthworms and your microbes that keep the soil fertile. You need things that clean the water.

By taking away the toxins, they clean the air by removing the toxins and, of course, the bacteria in our stomach that help digest the food. So the recognition that human existence is dependent upon life forms and even the non-living calls into question what we mean by the human subject. Are we just one, or are we more? Are we unitary, single, and coherent, or are we made up of multiples? We now know that our bodies and the body's life processes depend on various chemicals, enzymes, hormones, glandular secretions, neurotransmitters, and the calcium that makes up our bones and teeth.

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The Subject Now

We now know that

- Our bodies and its life processes are dependent upon substances – whether chemical bases, enzymes, the various glandular secretions, the neurotransmitters that control our moods and our brain's activities, the calcium that makes up our bones and teeth,
- Our bodies share more with the oceans and the seas – because the human body is principally made of water.

The human body and its various processes depend on *inanimate* matter which makes up our bodily matter.

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So the human body's life processes depend on nonliving chemicals. Our bodies share more with the oceans and seas because the human body is made up considerably of water. And I've cited both Astrid Leimanis and Cecilia Asberg on this, about the primal conditions of the human form, which is aqua, which is water. The human body and its various processes depend, therefore, on inanimate matter. Inanimate matter constitutes our bodily matter.

Think of the irony of this. Inanimate matter makes up the animate matter. That we are alive, we are alive because of the non-living within us. Because of the chemical constituents within us. That surely constitutes irony of a very large kind, doesn't it?

Human subjectivity, then, is intersubjective. It is aware of the self as expanding outward. Remember the term I used: rhizomatic. The self expands outward toward other objects, toward other material matter. Christine Daigle refers to and employs the term 'transjective.'

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The Subject Now

Human subjectivity is

Intersubjective: aware of the self as an *expansion* outward, towards other objects and material matter

Transjective: 'a being constituted by its dynamic subjective and material entanglements, one that emerges on the basis of this dynamic flux' (Daigle)

Here the subject's being/embodiment is linked to other materials (a material entanglement)

This also makes the human ethically linked to others.

Their selves, their bodies, their entanglements, their locations, their temporalities, and their ways of existing in a collective—subjectively and materially—will vary to a great degree.

Christine Daigle

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Which is a being constituted by its dynamic, subjective, and material entanglements. And it emerges from this flux. Which is to say, basically, the human body is transduced in the sense that it's the result of material as in matter and dynamic entanglements with other forms and other processes. Which means the human subject is linked to other materials.

The human subjective depends on other materials, and that ought to give us pause for thought. Does it mean, then, that the human is also ethically linked to others? Does it mean that we are subjectively, materially part of a collective? If we are part of a collective and you remember the point I made earlier about the planet, if we are alive, if we are constituted by the planet, would we harm the planet? If we are part of a collective, if we are kept alive because of the collective, would we harm the collective?

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References

Braidotti, Rosi. "Posthuman Critical Theory." *Journal of Posthuman Studies* 1.1 (2017): 9-25.

Daigle, Christine. *Posthumanist Vulnerability: An Affirmative Ethics*. Bloomsbury, 2023

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Which means our redefinitions of the human subject call for a redefinition of what subjectivity itself is, because subjectivity is distributed, results from a rhizomatic network, is mutually constitutive with other life forms including the non-human and the non-living and therefore entails a certain ethical relationship with the world. Post-humanist theories of subjectivity are focused on this particular question. Does it entail not just a different subjectivity, but a different relationship with the world?

Thank you.