

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**  
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**Lecture 44**  
**Lec 44 : Literary Posthumanism IV: Group Discussion**

Hi. Hi again. So we're back with more Literary Post-Cynicism. This is for week eight, which is on altered bodies, enhancements, and things like that. We will, in this particular session, focus on Becky Chambers, who is arguably more challenging among novelists because of the very minimalist kind of prose she puts together.

Novels that she's done so far and also a slightly different vision of the post-human that we have come to see. And I'll start with something which I think in many ways centers the novel's philosophical basis, if you want to think of it that way, as the question of purpose and meaninglessness. I don't know if you've seen in recent times there has been more work in the public domain about slowness, about slow economics, taking things slow and letting things happen. And the older idea that it's not meaningful if you work like that has been more or less now discredited. So in the novel in particular, the question of

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The human is actually the question of creatures having a purpose and the whole idea that you can just exist in a world, be wonder-struck at it, and don't really have to do very much. I thought that is interesting because the general idea is that animals lack purpose and humans do, therefore we are a more meaningful existence, shall we say, as compared

to the animals. You just need to live. That's what animals do, as somebody says. So, we can start off with that.

Anna? Yeah. So, if you think of the human as having purpose and the robot as having no purpose. I mean, sorry, the animal has just a life and not maybe a purpose in that life. Then the robot comes somewhere in between.

And because in Becky Chambers' 'A Psalm for the Well-Built', the robot is at the center of that text. So, he is the one who also demonstrates both purposefulness as well as the lack of purpose because he speaks about how robots do some things. So, they might devote themselves to looking at stalagmites for three years, five years. They might be looking at some beetle or watching the paint dry.

Yeah, so they do that. And that's the purpose, except that we would not recognize it as purpose because what does it gain anybody in doing that? As opposed to the human, and Dex is the example of the human who has purpose and who is sick of that purpose. And she tries two things and she's sick of both of them. So, is it really our defining trait that we have to have a purpose and that we fulfill that purpose?

And actually, it is something which should work. For us to think about as well, because when we think of today's world, when we look at how children are taught that you have to be passionate about what you're doing and that you have to do it, really what if I just want to look at stalagmites growing? And what if I don't have a purpose, or if that is the purpose? Becky Chambers is interesting because she is, in one sense, very much of our time. She is giving us the permission to be whatever we want to be. You don't necessarily have to fit in.

She is using all the right pronouns. She's doing all of that. And yet, she's also questioning each of those, even as she does it. So even this business is about having a purpose. And there is one point at which the robot

because they have this exchange. And I'll go back to what happened in the Winterson book as well, where Pink says, 'But you are a robot.' And at one point, Spike will tell Pink, 'You are human, and I don't hold that against you.' Over here as well, you have a line where Dex says rather, the robot says Moscap says to Dex that, 'We don't have to fall into the same category to be of equal value.' What does it mean to have value?

And that, I think, is where I would like to begin. It's a meditation on the idea of what has value or which of your actions can be seen as important, valuable, and therefore, you are valuable and important. And the refusal to abide by purposefulness does that take away your value? If I don't adhere to the principles of value, for instance, or purpose, for that matter. Because it's also agential at that point, isn't it?

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That I choose not to, and that's a very Bartleby situation. I choose not to have the same purpose as has been determined by, say, historical evolution, where humans have a goal-directed life that this is what we need to do, and then this, and then this. And that linearity is itself being called into question. But yes, over to Sharad about this point that Ana just made. Yeah, I have one slight addition to that point, because if you're talking about purpose, and if you have traditionally defined the human as being governed by or by the pursuit of certain kinds of purposes, important purposes or valuable purposes, not any random purpose.

And then we contrast it with the robotic purposes, let's say the study of stalagmites or the study of insects. We also need to take into consideration the fact that these robots were originally meant for a different purpose. And this is alluded to in the book, in the conversation between Dex and Mosschap. So at one point, and this is rather amusing in the exchange, when Dex is not able to carry the water tank to the source of water. And Mosschap volunteers to do it, and initially Dex

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they are quite PC about it, right? So, they do not want the robot to do it because that would be a kind of reinforcement of the older human machine or human robot, you know, equation that they have broken away from through the treaty or whatever. So, Muscap actually says, "What if I want to do this? Have you ever considered this?"

And that connects with your point about . In choosing to perform a certain action, there's also the establishing of a certain code of affiliation perhaps, which is not to do with one being master and the other being governed by, let's say, the human-machine binary. That hierarchy itself is being devised in terms of how the original purpose of the robot no longer holds. And now there is a different end to this kind of interaction between the human and the robot.

So I thought that was also interesting because it is eluding the purpose of the robot. Yes and it connects with something that we have seen before also in Ishiguro, I always return to Ishiguro's texts for this because I think he probes this problem of agency more than anyone else that I'm aware of, where for example if you have designed the robot to service human needs then to disallow the robo from fulfilling that would it not be a violation of their rights? So you have a double-edged premise. One, should you create robots whose job is to be servitors to humans? First question.

Second, if you have created them with the algorithms geared to giving service to the humans, then to deny them that would be a violation because that is against their capacity and agency to fulfill their job. Suppose it is my ardent desire to lift up this water tank. Or cook a meal. And now you say, no, no, no, robots should not do that. Isn't that a violation of robot rights?

Because the robots were designed to be. So there are two parts to this point that both Anna and you have made. One, you have moved beyond the initial intent or purpose

assigned to a robot. And the robot has also moved beyond that. And at some awkward moments, such as this little incident,

an older notion of purpose and agency and intention comes into play because uh it's like what do robots want oh we only want to serve you that's what we are designed for oh no no you can no longer serve us because uh we have established equality among between robots and humans but that's not what you are built for if you deny humans agency And if Robo sapiens are homo sapiens of a different kind, what people have referred to as para humans or alter humans. If they do all the functions of a human, why should they be treated as any less? So the question of agency is paramount also because the. The rights, the sorry, not the right, the responsibility for.

Carrying out your functions and, uh, Anna mentioned, uh, creatures who are things that are just your mechanical box interesting. And you can, I mean, we are reading the text together. What is their purpose? A repetitive set of actions mindlessly done, which is a very flawed model, uh, as we know. And then the others who say, 'Sorry, that's not our job.' So the question remains as to this encounter between humans and robots in a situation where the debate revolves around rights, responsibilities, and agency. Isn't it? So what do you have to say to that, Anna?

Is that a post-human vision? Yes, because when you look at agency within the text, you have two, I mean, two references made by Moscap about agency. One is to do with how the bodies of the robots are harvested. And he uses the word 'harvested.' And I was like, suddenly all my bells were ringing.

Their bodies were harvested by their peers, who reworked their parts into new individuals and their children. It brings together two or three things, right? That robots can have children. That there is harvesting of their parts, which are then reworked into new individuals. And there you have your post-human in one sense because it's, of course, a robot, but it's also a child, and it is a bringing together of various parts from various robots.

So is it the individual or is it a community? And they have remnants of their memory and I don't know whether you remember, we once read this book, Unwind? Unwind, yes. body I don't think I think it was unmind where body parts remember what they the person whom they once belonged to and it's the same notion which comes up over here that there are memories there are remnants of memory for imprinted yes imprinted since I don't know why but I get nervous when I go into the factory and that's most cap when he goes in yes it's a remnant it's a

memory which is there somewhere. So in that sense also it connects to the Winterson book where everything is imprinted with what it once was. So here also the robot's memories are also there like that. But yes, so it's post-human in this question of harvesting individuals, except that your agency question comes in here. When Watson M. Dex asks whether it's not a problem that when you're coming to the end of your shelf life and

the robot says, why does everything come to an end? We also do. And we haven't yet come to an end. I think there is one line that says something about how it is how the world works that things end. And in that sense, I thought it was very interesting because what we think of as human frailty and which the Winterson story tries to work around by saying that people can live forever by getting themselves genetically fixed, etc., etc.,

Here, wanting to end is also seen as part of the human, and it's seen as a necessary part of what defines you as human. And the robot will also end but will also go on. In that sense, it is both human as well as, I thought, true. Yeah, that's a little more complicated than what we thought it was at first reading, as I recall. Because at some point, there's also this...

Passage which I managed to recall and put down: everything else breaks down and is made into other things. Yes, you are made of molecules that originated in an immeasurable amount of organisms. You reach dozens of dead things every single day to maintain your form. And when you die, bits of you will be taken in turn by bacteria, beetles, and worms. And so it goes. We robots are not natural beings. We know this, but we are still subject to the parent God's laws, just like everything else.

So there is the cyclical nature of that. And this is increasingly a post-human theme. You see in even Richard Powers' Overstory that the dead support a lot of life. And there's this passage in the Overstory where the dead tree is lying on the ground, and there's an inventory of the life forms that a dead tree supports, starting with the fungal, the bacterial, and other microbial forms. So, yes, Cheryl, over to you about this particular idea: the repetition, the cycle, and

things that die and don't quite die. So if you're thinking about, let's say, sentience or consciousness as one of the characteristics that we consider as being exclusively human, and then we're talking about memory and how memory seems to be dispersed or distributed, recyclable or can be amalgamated also, derived from other sources and then carried forward as well. We have a different model of understanding consciousness and at one point actually Muscat says this is very resource heavy the whole business of being conscious. I thought that was really amusing also because it is talking about different kinds of intelligence there so It's not just about one particular form of sentience that we're looking at. We're also looking at primal instinctive or instinctual reactions, which is something that Moscap actually uses to explain Dex's discomfort with drinking water, the surface of which is covered with halogen.

Animal, being like an animal. the remnant of it. So there is the idea of imprint, things that you're not necessarily consciously factoring in in making choices. But there is, for want of a better phrase, perhaps your survival instinct that you inherit biologically. But there's also the question of agency, which is not necessarily to do with instinct, but with choice about how, even within the robotic community, and I'm using the word within quotation marks over here, there are different kinds.

So it is not a homogenous model of creation or creature, let's say. where you have different robots actually exercising their choice in what they want to pursue as their purpose. So, basically, there is, in some senses, the numbers and logic that govern the

robot, which, admittedly, is what is the founding principle of it, but actually, MOSCAP makes it very clear that that is not how the robot perceives. So, there is a distinction made at one point of time by MOSCAP between how it is made, which is numbers and logic, and how it perceives, which is more than the sum total of its parts. Yeah.

And that also has to do with a certain amount of consciousness, which was not governable by preliminary numbers and logical codes, and over a period of time, modes of perception change. So the parent God's laws I think that's what it's called the parent God's laws. It's a bit like Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics, what the robot can and must not do. But it's also to do with the fact that over a period of time, the perception of what those restrictions are has changed. So you think, okay, that's what you think they are.

But perhaps not. I want to move on to a slightly different trajectory. First, of course, T-Monk. Oh, sorry, Anna, you had your hand up. No, no, I didn't.

Okay. A tea monk. What's with the tea and what's with the monk? Why tea at all? It's interesting because tea has a particularly checkered imperial history, for one.

The idea of the monk is itself a little bit of a problematic category in many cultures. But I'm using those to move toward something else. And that is the question of nature in the text. And there are passages which describe what is the natural world that existed before you and which will continue after you. And there's at one point and this is something I'm speaking from memory that wilderness is the natural order of things, and it will outlast you.

I thought the conjunction of smart robots, the human, and the jungle was interesting. You know, in a supposedly post-human tale, it brought back memories of Octavia Butler, where things start all over again. You know, you work with minimal technology; the earth has been devastated, and what you thought of as evolution has brought this upon us, and as a consequence, we are reduced to the basics. And wilderness is the natural order of things.

And there is at one point the reference to the fact that Nature is not something that only happens in carefully curated enclaves between towns, something that pops up in empty spaces if you ignore them for a while. Even if you spend your whole life willing yourself to be deeply in touch with the ebb and flow, the cycles of the ecosystem as it actually is, you still have trouble picturing an untouched world. I thought that was an interesting one because it brought back the point we made in the Winterson discussion that's about wilderness, nature, and culture. Anything to say about that, Anna?

Yeah, so you're When you read the book and initial chapters where she is still in civilization, so to speak, and she lives in a city, one of those big cities, right? But it's also a city which is in touch with nature because... It's built of materials which are natural. It will revert to nature if left long enough.

And there are several features which we are told about within that city which are natural. And then you have the wilderness where nobody goes. The humans don't venture into the wilderness. Occasionally, somebody goes. They're never heard from again.

And it's part of the treaty that the robots live in the wilderness. And that itself is also, of course... in some ways paradoxical because yes robbers who are mechanical are living in the wilderness industry manufactured things and that they were made for the industry and then they finally one day they all got sentient and they put down their tools and they said we are out of here and they left that was really funny that is really strange but it's also interesting because In the text, it says that that was the one thing which finally made the humans understand that something had to change, that it could not go on the way it was going on. So, it's of course because I still remember the person who recommended this said to us that it is a utopian picture of a new world.

So, It is very utopian to believe that just because the robot said we wouldn't work anymore and they pushed off, everything changed, and humans got their act together and got it right. But when you think about the wilderness and the robots that inhabit it, they are comfortable there. They are larger than life. They're mechanical.

They cannot be hurt. Whereas when the human ventures into the wilderness, she is not badly hurt, but then, of course, there is the point where the road collapses, and there's no road left for her to go forward. At that point, she struggles in the wilderness, whereas the robot is very comfortable out there. It's its natural habitat.

So what happens? Becky Chambers also seems to invert these ideas or collapse them not even invert, but collapse the notions of what is natural, what is technological, and what can be deemed human. All of those come together so that there is a world which is available. And in which there are remnants of old human culture. So you have the hermitage as well as the factory which they go to visit.

And yet it is also a world wherein the robot is comfortable looking at insects, bird calls. There's one which has made a pursuit of bird calls. So I think it's a nice neat little inversion which takes place over there because the robots are more in touch with nature than the humans are. within the text and the fact that it points to again have we lost our ability to do so so we have set up massive cities large industrial barracks we have manufactured robots who for some reason take to nature like fish to water except that they are mechanical fish taking to natural water and the humans who supposedly originated Which is why I thought the idea of wilderness and the post-natural, because people have argued that the post-natural is the way things are now, because whatever is natural is at least partly mediated already.

And the robot which, quote unquote, fits the natural world, reorganizes what we understand as nature. What would you share on this particular thing? Yeah, so I was thinking if on the one hand there is a very clear topographical distinction in this world between the one continent which is split into half, one half which is occupied by the humans, the city with the capital C and other suburbs, and then very clearly, and Dex makes a transition, right, crosses across, and where the wilderness is, On the other hand, we also see, and I'm going back to Anna's point about how the city itself is now constructed architecturally from what it was during the factory age with a capital F and A. And there's this particular description about how decay is actually a built-in function of the city stars, the city that exists now. crafted from translucent season and mycelium masonry and so on and so forth.

The walls would in time begin to decompose at which point they would either be repaired by materials or reabsorbed into the landscape. So the point I'm trying to make is that We do not necessarily see the wilderness itself as being recyclable or their things, you know, take a natural or decompose on their own. The city architecture itself also has included the pile or the decomposable into its own ambit. So I thought that was also interesting.

So if we have the wilderness as the landscape, then the cityscape has also changed in certain ways. It's like what we talk about as what we call green architecture in that sense. But I thought the point about decay was very interesting because it also, again, we seem to be reading them together all over again. The robot that dismantles itself is not quite decayed because we associate the term decay with a natural process, with a for want of a better term, a biological collapse of things.

We don't expect the breakdown of machinery to decay. But when the machinery is overgrown with weeds, like in the case of the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, then you think of it as decay because there is rust, but there's also plant life on it. But I thought what was also interesting in the novel's attempt to speak in terms of what is built and what is not built, because it is the story of something being built. And there is a reference to humans as constructs also at some point in the novel. What is the idea about speaking in terms of something which has been built in the wild or contrasted with built in, say, the city?

You're on mute. You're on mute. Yeah. So, the title itself is the psalm for the Wild built.

Wild built. And who or what is the wild built over here? Is it that the robots are wild-built, or that the wilderness is? Or is it that humans have... And this is where again the primacy of the human comes into play that the humans let the robots walk away. They could have stopped it.

It could have gone otherwise. So in some ways, it's a very idealistic representation of the human itself that when the robots put down their tools and said, 'Done,' they let it happen. Workers' rights have been respected, yes. Secondly, when they drew that line in the wilderness and would not go into it, that line was maintained. I mean, it is utopian thank you but it's also unbelievable at some points in the text. But it makes for interesting reading because it complicates these questions as to how there is the possibility that the human might learn to let go, might learn to build wild buildings in the city as well as let the robots wild build.

And they are wild-built, right? Because they are all people who have been put together. They've been built with power, in the wilderness, with each other's body parts. So the example of the wild-built, when we are thinking about it, is also a praise song for things that have grown, that have been built in the wild and are themselves wild-built.

I'm going to use this to frame the final query comments for Sharad to wind up because it's a section on antibodies and enhancements. Is any of these enhancements either of the robot who is wild built, as Emma just pointed out, or is it the human who has enhanced humanity that has enhanced itself by letting things happen? And the word letting is itself

a problematic one because it appears to be according permission for something. So what is enhancement here? What is the post-human enhancement here?

So final remarks from you, Sharad. It's interesting that you should use the word permission because at one point during that exchange and that episode I referred to earlier about the water tank, carrying the water tank. Finally, Dex actually says that, okay, you do whatever you like. And Moscap says, I don't need your permission. And immediately Dex being Dex takes a step back.

Oh, I'm so sorry. Being very apologetic. No, I was just teasing you. I was messing with you. So if we think about it and we can connect the ability to, let's say, crack a joke, to use sentience and consciousness in a way to interact with, communicate with another person.

The other being, in this case, is the robot who is observing the human and how the human behaves. So, Dex is the subject of inquiry in a certain way. I thought it was also interesting because it flips the equation. So, you are looking at what the human is from the robot's perspective. And if we think about how it is humanity itself or the ability to respond to the other,

and also in a responsible fashion. If that is what we are thinking about as one of the characteristics of the post-human condition, let's say, of being able to incorporate and communicate with the other, then perhaps it is not so much about bodily enhancements, because they do talk about this that Moscap does not need to eat or sit, cannot in fact eat, because if Moscap eats, it's going to ruin the system, the wiring in fact. So, is it that which defines the terms of exchange between the two? Or is it the fact that Muscap can actually share a plate and then give the food on the plate back so that the ritual is completed? So, the ritual of commensality, if that is what makes us human and not necessarily our capacity to ingest and digest food, then he looked at a wider definition of human that's simply genetic, let's say, or biological.

So, I would think about it as the enhancement of the forms of communication rather than of body sensors. Yeah, that's interesting. That's why I thought this was a particularly interesting novel to sit alongside Winterson's, because both of them are rather unusual post-human tales in that sense. Well, we'll stop this for now. One second.

Thank you.