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The New (Warm) Humanism and Posthumanism.

A Reply to: Randall Auxier, "Cassirer: The Coming of a New Humanism"[1]

Randall Auxier delivered a paper at the Cassirer conference[2] (published in this issue of *Eidos*) in which he advanced what he calls "new humanism." To add to the discussion initiated by Auxier, in this paper I will critique (and thereby praise) posthumanism for its inability to move past the human. The gift which posthumanism gives us is clarifications on, and not radically new modes of, subjectivity. Posthumanists ask: "What happens if we retake those things which were banished by humanism and return them to theoretical considerations of ourselves as human?" My thesis is that posthumanism and new humanism are much closer than posthumanists think.

Humanism can be seen as an enormous cover-up and a tragic misunderstanding of what humans actually are. However, as Randall Auxier has argued, Western philosophy is responsible for far worse crimes:

> What were the principal tenets of this philosophy that accompanied the torture, murder and rape of the human and natural world? Its main ideas were individualism (a perversion of the quest for Socratic self-knowledge), scientific knowing, the primacy of analysis, and the myth of the progress of civilization. These ideas took over as a secular substitute for religious proselytizing and

1) I would like to thank Eli Kramer for the excellent work he is doing for *Eidos* and the academic community in Warsaw, and Randall E. Auxier for stimulating discussion during and after the Cassirer conference, for allowing me to read his paper prior to its publication, and for providing clarification on his views about humanism and post-humanism.

2) The conference titled *New Forms of Culture, Politics and Society. Cassirer and Beyond* took place on 19th of May 2018 and was organized by the Department of Philosophy of Culture, the Department of Philosophy of Politics and the Department of Social Philosophy (Institute of Philosophy at University of Warsaw), and *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*. For more information: http://eidos.uw.edu.pl/events/

> endowed the European mind with the most offensive idea ever conceived: that the measure of humanness (and therefore value) was rightly to be determined by proximity to European ideas and their enactment. Such a demonic idea led to an evangelical quest to remake every culture and every individual after the model of the kind of human being who was in fact the most devilish, insane, unclean, and inhumane type of human being.[32]

If this philosophy is the humanism that post-humanists are responding to, and indeed it is, then they are not quite post-*human*, but rather post- something distinctly and horrifically opposed to the human (or at least the wide range of actual humans).

According to Zygmunt Bauman, the humanists were not universalists, but particularists wearing the cloak of universalism.[4] They were not writing about humans, but rather a particular normative vision of humanity held by particular humans (the Europeans, in this case), who could gain universal status only by the military conquest and conceptual debasement (through culture and science) of humanity in its wide range of particularities. As Bauman writes about the Nazis, "There, the particularity of the Aryan race was proclaimed the universal principle of world order; and the road to transform that particularity into a universal principle was depicted as one leading through the extinction of all other, admittedly numerous, particularities."[5] This was the project of the Nazis, alongside all of the other European imperial butchers, and it had little to do with building a philosophy based on the importance and value of the human. Post-humanists are often quick to admit this, especially Rosi Braidotti, but they do not lay as much stress on the point as they should.[6] The discourse of humanism was never a universalist discourse, but rather particularism striving toward universalism through the use of violence. There are ideals – importantly, they should be understood as normative and particular ideals – which were expressed by humanists, and it is undeniably irresponsible to look at them outside of the context of the violence they led to. Many of them, such as the claimed ethnic superiority of whites and the rationalization of society, cannot be defended by any responsible scholar with an eye to the consequences of his or her work.

However, humanism also espoused other values and ideals, which one should not be so quick to dismiss. Just as we cannot deny the responsibility of humanists for their roles in the violence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we cannot shrink from the task of realizing worthwhile humanist ideals in the sight of what humanists have done. As Jürgen Habermas asks, are democracy and human rights still possible? We can (albeit without falling into Habermas' problematic views of rationality and the state) say yes. Democracy and human rights are still possible, but they require an educated recovery of those ideals from skepticism, and an understanding of the continued responsibility people have in our time. Auxier asks: "To whom does the future of human thought belong?"[7] If we follow Auxier's thinking, it is certainly not to those intellectuals who became so disillusioned as to be paralyzed in the sight of the tragedy of the twentieth century; nor indeed to those rare thinkers who had the intellectual prowess, but moral poverty, to then be shocked and disillusioned by their consequent recognition of the tragedy of human history prior to the twentieth century. As Auxier, writes, we still have the responsibility to attempt to realize ideals through culture, and to creatively and optimistically spend our time working toward more moral human-world relations. "We live in a world we never made, but we also

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3) Randall E. Auxier, "Cassirer: The Coming of a New Humanism," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* no. 5 (2018 – current issue).

4) Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

5) Ibid., 118.

6) Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

7) Auxier, "Cassirer: The Coming of a New Humanism."

live in the presence of genuine ideals it is our task to realize… The task of culture is the creation of the world, and the pursuit of freely developing personality between our condition and our ideal world.'[8] It is not skepticism or fear, but an educated and determined reworking of humanism (to which Cassirer set himself) which can answer, if only in part, the demands of the sight of our own evils. In taking up Cassirer's task, Auxier is one of the rare few intellectuals who has responded adequately to the recognition of how truly monstrous we humans can be, and still emerged with a workable and optimistic way forward.

For Auxier, we need to cultivate a form of human praxis which keeps our symbolic world in creative tension with our biological and wider material nature. The distance between the two is the space of our humanization of one another, and our personalization of what he calls "the world." This paper tries to bring Auxier's ideas to bear upon the posthumanists to whom he is responding.

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In his paper, Auxier does not spend extensive time on the issues that concern post-humanists. They are discussed implicitly through his engagement with Edward Skidelsky. In this section, because they are directly involved in my field, philosophy of technology, I will discuss the arguments to which Auxier is implicitly responding. Posthumanism tends to refer to two different bodies of thought, which both have emerged with a great deal of fervor in recent decades. The first is aligned closely with those who seek (technical) enhancements or changes to humans in such a way to exceed our limits. Nick Bostrom, for example, is of this posthumanism, as is Peter Sloterdijk (to a lesser extent). The second posthumanism seeks to move past the importance of the category of human, and is associated with scholars such as Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Dominic Pettman. For this second group of scholars, the human is a concept to be discarded, not a status to be moved past. However, it is not so easy to put it in such simple terms. It is always ambiguous among posthumanist scholars whether the posthuman is a description of contemporary reality ("we are now posthuman"), a description of historical reality ("we have always been posthuman, and never human"), or a task to be undertaken ("the posthuman is something we all ought to strive to be"). The third posthumanism includes those sons of humanism, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who flirted with and contributed to posthumanism, but inevitably returned to their roots.[9]

A combination of these uses of the word provides a more complete and sensible understanding of posthumanism, and it is much more interesting to use the word in a way which sees the common ground between its three uses. Posthumanism is an intellectual tendency which sees the human as unsatisfactory, both as a descriptive concept and as an actuality. It is in this sense a perennial human tendency, as, after all, we have always been unsatisfactory to ourselves. Moving past the human can take the form of the wish to see the human in a continuum with the non-human reality (such as the natural world, technology, etc.), or to use technology to exceed our human state of being. It is this conceptual framing that I will use throughout this paper.

Braidotti expresses both drives. She believes that the most interesting aspects of contemporary philosophy, and the conditions upon which it reflects, are the destabilization of the human as a category.[10] This

8) Ibid.

9) Foucault and Derrida, one might assume, are the most illustrative examples of posthumanists. This is precisely because they do not tend to stray too far from humanism. In more contemporary posthumanists, something similar is found, although less explicitly. To my point, see: James Schmidt, "On Foucault's Review of Cassirer's Philosophy of the Enlightenment," *Persistent Enlightenment* (blog), July 2, 2013, https://persistentenlightenment.com/2013/07/02/foucaultcassirer/.

10) Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

might be factually correct, but it would be better if it was not. The task of philosophy today is, rather than contributing to the destabilization of the human or looking for something post-human, to restore and clarify the concept of the human.

Robert Pepperell puts this impulse as follows:

> The posthuman era, then, begins in full when we no longer find it necessary, or possible, to distinguish between humans and nature. This does not mean that the categories of human and nature, or indeed gods, will cease to exert any influence over the conduct of global affairs. But it will mark the time when we truly move from the human to the posthuman condition of existence.[11]

This is a dangerous idea for a number of reasons. First, the way in which posthumanists seek continuity with the non-human world tends to be reductionist, or sometimes to be aligned with a "substance monist" metaphysics, which as Auxier readily identifies, can be implicated in the crimes of humanism. "The totalitarian systems that emerged in the nineteenth century and nearly destroyed the world in the twentieth are all forms of impersonalism, and all made possible by turning the knife that killed God toward human personality, serving some abstraction in its stead (whether Spirit, material conditions, or a narrow scientism). Pantheism made all this possible."[12] The posthumanist tendency to rely upon an anti-essentialist and anti-metanarrativist description of the world, and then to posit continuity between this impersonal stuff and humans, does not result in a destruction of hierarchies, nor does it ward against mass violence. As his paper demonstrates, Auxier's personalism, alongside similar ideas within process philosophy, such as Brüntrup's panpsychism, is able to do this because it abandons substance for process.[13] Substance monism, or pantheism, or new materialism, as presently understood, function as major limitations on the aims of posthumanism. Bauman, in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, also readily points this out.[14] As he writes, pointing to the example of Socrates, philosophers sometimes see themselves as seeing "a thousand times better than" ordinary people, "and this advantage [gives] the right and the obligation to pass judgements and enforce obedience to truth. One needs to proclaim the philosopher's duty – 'the care and guardianship of other people.'"[15] I think that Auxier might agree that impersonalist and substance oriented philosophies are more likely to be subject to Bauman's characterization than are process philosophies, because the former are not as attuned to the changing and personal nature of human beings and the world.

Second, by trying to escape our human condition, posthumanist scholars strangely (although they will never say this) refuse to accept responsibility for our human failings. They do so from the safe position of a posthuman ivory tower. To use the terms these scholars adopt, as (functionally, at least) posthuman cyborgs, or nodes within an assemblage, one might safely distance him or herself from the gas chambers. Posthumanists' obsession with creating new forms of subjectivity can be charged with looking for escape hatches from the responsibility we all bear for colonialism, for the slave trade, for industrial farming, for the degradation and destruction of the planet, for Latin American, African, and East-Asian Genocides, for the refugee camps in Europe and North America, and for Auschwitz.[16]

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11) Robert Pepperell, *The Posthuman Condition* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2003), 161.

12) Randall E. Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, (Chicago: Open Court), 246.

13) Godehard Bruntrup, "Emergent Panpsychism", in *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Godehard Bruntrup & Ludwig Jaskolla (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

14) Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

15) Ibid., 21–22.

16) Which, it must be noted, does not refer simply to the camps in and near Oświęcim, but stands for the whole butchery of the Shoah.

Third, posthumanism cedes definitional legitimacy to the old humanists. If philosophers are looking for a posthuman, this says that the old humanists were accurate in their description of the human. Because things were so bad, and because the human (when accurately described) looks nothing like the descriptions of the old humanists, these scholars suggest that we ought simply to give up on accurately saying things about humans. There is something dangerous in this. Auxier says, although he too is not quite explicit enough about this point, that what was called human by the old humanists was a very specific kind of human. At best, it was aloof and sheltered, and at worst it was among the most hideous and bloodthirsty monsters imaginable. In Bauman's language, it was a particularity which, through violence, attempted to solidify itself, and only itself, as the bearer of the title "human." One cannot refer to this thing as human (thereby excluding all other particularities), but rather call it a human among many. Collingwood wrote that "For men of the eighteenth century to make this mistake" of establishing the permanent and unchanging laws of human nature based on themselves "because their historical perspective was so short, and their knowledge of cultures other than their own so limited, that they could cheerfully identify the intellectual habits of a western European in their own day with the intellectual faculties bestowed by God upon Adam and all his progeny."[17] It is possible that we have moved, at least somewhat, past the limits of earlier European and American humanists. We should not distance ourselves from the crimes to which they contributed, but we should also be aware that we need not make all of their mistakes. If "human" is to refer wholly to Karl Haushofer, Auguste Comte, and the once-thought-enlightened bourgeoisie of European capitals, while the other particularities are to remain non- or post-human, posthumanists are playing with language in a way which gives service to those from whom they have tried too hard to distance themselves.

Fourth, it is not clear whether posthumanism is doing something *post* the actuality of human beings. In fact it is very clear that it is not, and we sit here, as humans, as living proof of that. Many posthumanists criticize humanism for its lack of focus on embodiment, and its claim of the universality of a human modeled after white upper-class European men. Posthumanists therefore advance a description of posthumans based on embodiment, diversity, and context; features, of course, which are genuinely human. This might simply be a semantic struggle, with posthumanists crying loudly for something radically new, while merely doing work to clarify the actuality of something which is really very old: The human. Arthur Bradley takes this as a bad thing, noting posthumanists have stayed firmly within Enlightenment humanism, simply driving towards a nicer next chapter.[18] Contra Bradley, this strikes me as a good thing, and confirms my view that post-humanists are, ironically, frequently the most effective partisans of a new humanism. "Quite simply, posthumanism again takes the form of a consciousness-raising exercise whereby human beings are summoned by the new social imaginary of the posthuman to recognise themselves as the embodied beings that they always already are."[19] What posthumanists describe in such perfect clarity is what humanists should have been describing for years. So in many respects, the sort of new humanism described in this paper has hardly any substantial disagreements with the work of Braidotti, Pettman, and so forth, and can be considered very close to their tradition. Despite their misguided wish to produce a new philosophical frame which (contrary to their intentions) cedes legiti-

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For reference, Oświęcim is the town in Southern Poland where Auschwitz is located. I use the term "Shoah" (השואה) in place of the term "Holocaust," as while the latter term is borrowed from Greek and refers to a sacrificial burning of an animal (thus causing confusion among Greeks and providing dangerous equation of the twentieth century genocide to a sacrifice), the former term is used by both the French and the Israelis and can be translated from Hebrew as "catastrophe," which I consider a more accurate way of referring to what happened to the Jewish, Roma-Sinti, and all other people who were victims of that era.

17) R. G. Collingwood, "Human Nature and Human History," in *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 224.

18) For more, see: Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

19) Ibid., 150.

macy to the old humanism, they ironically contribute to the sprightliness of the new humanism by expanding our understanding of what we are as humans.

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If posthumanists are doing the work of new humanists for us, is there any difference between us? The answer is yes, and no, and maybe. Posthumanists tend to be obsessed with moving towards something new. In a sort of philosophical depression (which is an unsurprising consequence of looking at one's surroundings), a new type of being is attractive. There is not, however, much precedent for saying a new type of being is, or will be, emerging. More probably, we will remain something similar to what we are now, and what we have been for centuries. Genocides and empires existed long before the Shoah, and they certainly exist today. It is not inconsistent with anything that we know that they will continue to take place. Is this cause for pessimism, or to run in despair from our human nature? No, not at all. Rather, it is impetus to fight even harder to mitigate the damage we know we are prone to cause. Posthumanists do not seem to see the continuities between present, past, and future, and as I have shown, their positions are not always compatible with one another, and it is this very incompatibility which draws them closer to new humanists. That said, new humanists ought to welcome them as intellectual allies, and to the aforementioned end of mitigating damage, as scholars who are producing important work. As Auxier often writes, the continuities are more pronounced than the discontinuities.

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