

Background: There is increasing interest in, and concern about, a set of ethical issues in relation to both environmental and technological developments that seem to make the future status of the ‘natural’ human being problematic. These concerns come from a number of different directions:

- “planetary health” and “one health” which hold that in the era of the Anthropocene, human health is intimately bound up with the health of other species, ecosystems and the planet;
- ecofeminist criticisms of exclusion of women, and by extension other ‘others’ including other species, from the purview of ecological concern;
- vigorous bioethical debate concerning human enhancement, with positions ranging from caution that the essence of what it is to be human is being lost, to arguments that there is an obligation to pursue all forms of enhancement, with the emergence of the ‘transhuman’ on an inevitable path to a posthuman future;
- critiques of anthropocentrism as neglectful of the moral status of other species and anthropomorphism for illegitimately attributing human values to non-human species;
- debates concerning artificial intelligence and the possible migration of autonomy/sentience/moral responsibility from organic to digital platforms;
- actor-network theory which does not privilege human actors over any other actants, but instead sees persons, institutions, symbols etc as nodes in complex systems;
- posthumanities which declare the ‘end of man’ and promotes critical theory, freed from the colonialist biases of enlightenment humanism.

The posthuman: These concerns do not necessarily see themselves as part of a common set, but they share the characteristic of extending the frame of ethical concerns beyond the human. In some cases this extension is only modest – for example, planetary health justifies concern for other species and ecosystems on purely instrumental grounds as necessary to protect sustainable human well-being. In other cases, the emphasis is on being aware of a new emerging situation which may presage a different, less human-centric, future. In the most radical stance, the argument is made that a posthuman future has already arrived (or perhaps was always there).

Terminology is not yet fully settled. For some the main organizing principle is the Anthropocene. Others prefer to discuss a ‘nonhuman turn’ in sciences and humanities. ‘Transhuman’ and ‘transhumanism’ has an active fan base. For yet others, ‘posthuman’ is the best term. The main criticism of posthuman is that it implies forward movement from human to posthuman, however within the posthuman field there are those who use the term while explicitly rejecting a teleological interpretation.

If it is the case that the various concerns noted above are converging, then it may be that ‘posthuman’ is the most adequate term to capture this development.

How would 'posthuman bioethics' differ from current bioethics?:

If, for the sake of argument, it is assumed that the posthuman has arrived, it is worth thinking what this would imply for conceptions of bioethics. Taking the classic principles of bioethics the following changes in emphasis might be necessary:

- The concern for autonomy would apply not only to humans but also to other species and to abstract entities such as ecosystems. The challenge would be to identify what constituted an expression of choice, including in relation to non-animal living things or inanimate objects. This principle might need to be recast in terms of attentiveness to not foreclosing the options for non-expressive entities to develop.
- Beneficence - here challenges would include that a much wider range of possibly competing benefits would have to be identified and balanced;
- Non-maleficence would apply to a wider range of entities. Interestingly, it may also require constraints on emerging entities including that they 'do no harm', although the challenge would be to construct enduring constraints. What constitutes harm may also need to be rethought, for example eating 'others' might be required, notwithstanding a moral value given to all living and non-living things.
- The scope of justice would also widen with corresponding challenges in determining the value of different claims to equitable distribution. It is possible that notions of illicit exploitation would come to the fore.

Current project and next steps: Residency at the Fondation Brocher (www.brocher.ch) for 3 months (until the end of April 2017) under the title "Taming Frankenstein's new monster: a framework for posthuman ethics". The purpose of this residency is to develop the ideas of a framework for posthuman ethics and test their salience and applicability with a number of institutions around Lac Léman. A deliberately multidisciplinary network of interested institutions and researchers will be proposed to further elaborate an agreed framework. Such a framework could be finalized and validated at a workshop, potentially hosted by the Fondation Brocher or another appropriate sponsor, in mid-2018.

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