




Proceeding Paper

We Have Always Been Post-Human: Towards a Marxist Account of Post-Humanism[†]

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[†] Presented at Forum on Information Philosophy—The 6th International Conference of Philosophy of Information, IS4SI Summit 2023, Beijing, China, 14 August 2023.

Abstract: The essentialist view of human nature holds that there is an a priori, non-historical essence to humanity, which is increasingly under the threat of rapidly developing technologies, especially human enhancement technologies. In contrast, the constructivist account of post-humanism asserts that since technology is a constituent component of humanity, there is no such thing as a non-historical kernel to human nature. However, this account lacks a solid foundation of ontology, leading to several theoretical difficulties it cannot overcome. Objective activity, a concept developed by Karl Marx, can be used to establish a non-metaphysical ontology on which a Marxist account of post-humanism can be built with better explanatory power.

Keywords: post-humanism; technology; human nature; objective activity; relation

1. The Constructivist Account of Post-Humanism

The rapid development and accelerating application of human enhancement technologies (as part of NBIC technologies) are fundamentally changing our understanding of the nature of humanity and of human-machine and human-technology relationships. This trend is theoretically reflected in the emerging school of thought collectively known under the umbrella term of post-humanism, designating an interdisciplinary field that spans the philosophy of technology, ethics, feminism, critique of political economy, etc.

Post-humanism seeks to challenge the following views about human nature and the relationship between man and technology: (1) there is some sort of a priori, non-historical essence or kernel of humanity that distinguishes humans from nonhuman objects and ethically prioritizes the former over the latter; (2) human enhancement technologies are tainting and threatening human essence; (3) technological optimists believe that human dignity can be defended against encroaching technologies, while techno-pessimists lament its inevitable loss. This view about humanity and its relationship with technology is not only essentialist (hence metaphysical), but also anthropocentric.

In contrast, post-humanism generally holds that there is no such thing as a non-historical human essence or nature; technology has always been present throughout the development and history of human beings and has always been a constituent component of humanity; in other words, technology is not external to humanity but is its defining characteristic. This is what I call the constructivist account of post-humanism (hereafter referred to as CAP).

CAP leads to two corollaries: (1) there is no reason of principle to think that anthropocentrism or anthro-chauvinism is valid, as technology is constitutive of both humans and nonhuman objects and (2) techno-optimism or techno-pessimism is missing the point, which is to investigate the details of how technology actually operates and changes humans as they are, so that we can better anticipate and respond to the challenges human-enhancing technologies may bring about.

This paper argues that although CAP has relatively successfully grasped and expressed the task of critically rethinking human nature in relation to technology, a task



Citation: Zhang, Z. We Have Always Been Post-Human: Towards a Marxist Account of Post-Humanism. *Comput. Sci. Math. Forum* **2023**, *8*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cmsf2023008014>

Academic Editors: Zhongzhi Shi and Wolfgang Hofkirchner

Published: 10 August 2023



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highlighted by the advancement and progress in technology of this era, it can hardly be said to have been equally successful in accomplishing this task. Although it reveals the crude and metaphysical nature of the essentialist view, it has its own theoretical difficulties to overcome. These difficulties are mainly manifested in the following three aspects.

First, CAP does not pay adequate attention to the non-historical nature of technology (and technological objects) itself. The inadequacy is mainly reflected in the fact that it does not explore what makes technology technology, nor does it clearly define the difference between technology and technological objects. This inadequacy means that according to CAP, technologies and technological objects remain external to humans, and the intrinsic connection between the two and the necessity of connecting them have not been duly emphasized or clarified.

Second, CAP fails to account for the criteria with which humans can be distinguished from nonhuman objects, including technological nonhuman objects. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that technology constitutes both humans and nonhuman things. However, we do not usually put them on a par, which means we have, in fact, presupposed that there is a difference between them. It is true that increasingly complex technological complexes (especially AIs or robots, which are becoming more and more similar to humans in terms of cognitive functions) are challenging the established demarcating line between humans and nonhuman objects, but new distinctions are still to be determined and provided. Even if the distinction is to be canceled, the cancelation itself needs to be justified. It is too simplistic, if not non-scientific, to conclude that technology and man are ontologically equivalent from the fact that technology constitutes man.

Third, by holding technology and man equivalent, CAP may lead to a new version of MacCullochism in political economy, i.e., the view that both human laborers and nonhuman objects like low-level animals and machines participate in the production of value of commodities. As Karl Marx pointed out, this view denies that living labor is the only source of value and justifies (or at least can be used to justify by political economists) capitalists' appropriation of surplus value created by human laborers.

The reason for the above-mentioned difficulties is that CAP lacks a critical and thorough reflection on its ontological foundation. This lack manifests itself in the following two aspects.

First, to the extent that it simply identifies technology as a constituent of humanity, it does not account for how humans, technology, and nonhuman objects emerge as they are and how they have historically developed and evolved after their emergence, and so it fails to account for the fundamental difference between humans and nonhuman objects. To the extent that it simply (though correctly) emphasizes the mutual shaping and creating between man and technology (as well as technological objects), it still presumes the existence of man and technology (along with technological objects) before the very process of shaping and creating, which leads to the paradox that products precede producing and to the possibility of taking a non-historical view of technology and technological objects.

Second, to the extent that it replaces and dissolves old categories such as "human" and "technology" with new categories such as "post-human" and "cyborg", CAP is in fact reducing the individual to the universal, which is none other than the very way metaphysics would deal with the problem of human nature. To the extent that it believes that with the new categories, there is no longer the need to specify the criteria for distinguishing between old categories such as humanity and technology, CAP is, instead of answering the question directly, actually explaining away the question concerning the distinction between humans and nonhuman objects. In other words, what CAP does is replace the old dogma (that man has some sort of non-historical essence) with a new one (that man has neither the non-historical nor any kind of essence).

In short, CAP correctly sees technology as constituent to humanity, but its account of the constitutive process still presupposes a metaphysical stance and approach.

2. The Marxist Account of Post-Humanism

This paper argues that in order to overcome or avoid the theoretical difficulties CAP engenders and encounters, it is necessary to establish a solid non-metaphysical ontological foundation for post-humanism. The concept of “objective activity” developed by Karl Marx in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* [1] (p. 154) provides a suitable theoretical resource for the construction of a Marxist account of post-humanism (hereafter referred to as MAP). Regarding the relationship between humans and technology (as well as technological objects), this concept consists of two important points.

First, the objective activity logically precedes its products, which include both humans and nonhuman objects (part of which are technological objects). As objective activities unfold, products that are born in, participate in, and react to objective activities in specific ways can be theoretically (and later intuitively) identified, recognized, and described as humans or nonhuman objects. Two points are worth emphasizing here. On the one hand, there is no absolute, insurmountable division between the objective activity and its products. In fact, they are different aspects manifested by the same process. More precisely, what actually exists is the objective activity, and its product is nothing but that which emerges when the objective activity is analyzed and described in a theoretical manner. On the other hand, the reason for emphasizing that the objective activity logically precedes its products is to highlight the misleading nature of the usual practice that first presupposes the existence of humans and nonhuman objects and then discusses the activities in which they are involved, i.e., presupposing that beings precede their being, or that products precede their production.

Second, the criteria for distinguishing humans from nonhuman objects lie in their relation to the objective activity (as well as the relations contained in the objective activity) in which they are born and situated. Although both humans and nonhuman objects are born in, participate in, and react to the objective activity and the relations it contains, humans are active, conscious, and reflective in relation to the objective activity and the relations it contains, while nonhuman objects are passive, unconscious, and unreflective when faced with the objective activity and the relations it contains. Moreover, humans can and do develop new objective activities via their understanding or apprehension of old objective activities and construct new relations based on existing relations, while nonhuman objects are merely hung in or thrown into them. In a nutshell, humans grasp, use, build, and change the objective activity and the relations it contains in a way that nonhuman objects cannot.

In addition to helping distinguish between humans and nonhuman objects, the second point enables us to distinguish between technology and technological objects. Technology is the way humans actively, consciously, and reflectively construct and change the objective activity and the relations it contains in which humans find themselves and which they can understand and utilize. A technological object is a nonhuman object that takes form or comes into being in the process of humans actively, consciously, and reflectively constructing, changing, participating in, and reacting to the objective activity and the relations contained in it.

The second point also allows us to better understand a view held by CAP, the view that man and technology (as well as technological objects) shape and create each other. The process in which man actively grasps, uses, establishes, and changes the objective activity and the relations it contains (a process that is itself part of the objective activity in which man is born) is, at the same time, the process in which man produces, uses, and innovates technology (and technological objects). Technology, once produced in the process, becomes part of the objective activity that continues to unfold and shape humanity. Thus, the process in which man is born and develops is also the process in which technology (along with technological objects) is born and develops. In this sense, it is not so much man and technology mutually shaping and creating each other as man and technology both being involved in and contributing to the same objective activity that produces them.

The second point also leads to two corollaries. First, there is no unbridgeable gap between humans and nonhuman objects. An object (or a technological object) would count as a human being if it can grasp, use, establish, and change the objective activity (along with the relations contained in this activity) in which it is born and finds itself in the same way a human being does. Second, the way in which humans and nonhuman objects deal with objective activities and the relations they contain is historically changing, and although, in the future, new categories may be needed or crafted to describe humans and nonhuman objects as we know them today, it is premature to do so or to declare old categories such as humans and objects obsolete now, as the way man and objects deal with objective activities and the relations they contain has not changed fundamentally so far, and technological objects like machines have not become as competent as humans in the ability to deal with objective activities and relations they contain.

The main ideas in MAP can be summarized as follows: (1) we have always been post-human, and neither humans nor nonhuman objects have a non-historical abstract essence, not simply because technology is constituent to humanity, but because both man and technology are products of or different aspects of the same historically unfolding objective activities and (2) humans (post-humans too) cannot be equated with nonhuman objects, and the two are distinguished by the way they deal with objective activities and relations contained therein in which they are born and to which they react.

In terms of explanatory power, MAP is equivalent, if not superior, to CAP, but the former does not engender the theoretical difficulties encountered by the latter. In terms of the ability to predict, artificial general intelligence (AGI) can serve as an example here. According to MAP, the guiding principle for developing AGI should be to improve its ability to grasp, use, establish, and change the objective activities (in which AI is embedded) and the relations they contain. Associationist and symbolist approaches to AGI are philosophically grounded in empiricism and rationalism, respectively, that is, in metaphysics, and are therefore prone to theoretical incompleteness or self-contradictions similar to those CAP is faced with. As to what impact the metaphysical foundation will lead to at the practical level, only practice can tell.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Reference

1. Marx, K.; Engels, F. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*; Prometheus Books: New York, NY, USA, 1988; p. 154.

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