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Teisha Seaman

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Humanity in Posthuman Literature: The Mind-Body Connection and the Human Experience

Teisha Seaman

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Dr. Jadwiga Smith, Thesis Director
Dr. John Kucich, Committee Member
Dr. Lee Torda, Committee Member

Humanity in Posthuman Literature: The Mind-Body Connection and the Human Experience

Because posthuman theory is still developing, it is difficult to describe it concisely. It is even difficult to find concise descriptions of it in its own criticism, due in part to the fact that the pillars of posthuman thought have not been unanimously agreed upon by its critics. Cary Wolfe's description, however, can serve as a foundation from which posthumanism can be understood:

the perspective I attempt to formulate here—far from surpassing or rejecting the human—actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communicating, interaction, meaning, social significations, reason, reflection, and so on. It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of the *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of “bringing forth a world”—ways that are, since we ourselves are human *animals*, part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself. (xxv)

Wolfe's perception of posthumanism is profound in its understanding of the human in the context of its environment—plants, animals, and even objects heavily influence the human experience. She refers to *Homo sapiens* as “human *animals*,” which is precisely what they are; therefore, they cannot be understood outside of the context of their environments, just as animals cannot be understood out of the context of their ecosystems. She explains that although humans must be recontextualized “in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings,” part of what make them uniquely human is their reliance upon what is inherently unnatural:

But it [posthumanism] also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human—its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing—by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically “non-human” and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is. (For Derrida, of course, this includes the most fundamental prostheticity of all: language in the broadest sense). (xxvi)

Even though humanity is usually associated with human beings, human beings should not be understood to possess humanity on the basis of their biology alone. In order to be understood in the context of humanity, an entity must be biologically human in addition to exhibiting both the capacity to think for itself and the ability to empathize with other entities. Human beings are, of course, biologically human, but they do not necessarily have the capacity to think for themselves or the ability to empathize with others. On the other hand, animals, although they may be capable of thinking for themselves and empathizing with others, are not biologically human, and, therefore, cannot possess humanity. Machines face a dilemma nearly identical to that of animals, with one significant distinction: the machines of many recent works of fiction are nearly indistinguishable from their human creators. Of course, due to their being created rather than born, they do not possess humanity. It is difficult to rationalize this statement, however, in circumstances where they may look exactly like a biological human, possess artificial intelligence, and even experience empathy insofar as a non-human entity understands the human experience. In fact, due to our reliance upon technology, even human beings who indisputably possess humanity are, to some degree, machines themselves. This machine-like quality does not detract from their humanity; instead, it actually distorts our perception of humanity even further.

In Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," she describes human beings as cyborgs:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of 'Western' science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. (150)

Due to modern human beings' nature as cyborgs, or at least as human beings who are tremendously dependent upon machines, the question of whether or not machines should be understood in the context of humanity is extremely relevant. In either case, they are an integral part of the modern human experience, and, therefore, directly affect human beings' understanding of their own humanity.

With regard to animals, the question arises as to why an organism must be biologically human in order to possess humanity. In other words, why is being an organism of *any* kind not sufficient for an entity to be attributed with humanity? After all, no one would argue that a dog is incapable of feeling primal emotions like fear or sexual arousal, which is true of all organisms (including humans, but excluding most plants and micro-organisms). That being said, the idea that a dog is incapable of experiencing emotions more complicated than those aforementioned is

certainly not universal. At any rate, whether or not a dog or an animal with similar characteristics to a dog is in possession of humanity, the corresponding debate is saturated with evidence on both sides. "Just because we direct our attention to the study of nonhuman animals, and even if we do so with the aim of exposing how they have been misunderstood and exploited, that does not mean that we are not continuing to be humanist. . ." (Wolfe 99). In fact, we are continuing to be humanist in our attempts to understand animals in relation to ourselves. Considering the fact that animals and human beings have lived side-by-side for as long as human beings have existed, it only makes sense that human beings have spent quite a lot of time pondering the humanity (or lack thereof) of their wild counterparts. To answer the initial question of why humanity is understood in the context of human beings rather than in that of other biological organisms or cyborgs, it is because the concept of humanity has been created by humans, for humans, based on the human experience. The enlarged context of posthumanism allows us to look at humanity by what humans are not; that is, animals or machines.

Machines are relatively new components of the human experience. The question of whether or not machines are in possession of humanity is a much more recent debate than the one concerning animals. After all, most human beings are inclined to deny their primordial connection to animals while simultaneously celebrating their intellectual relationship with machines. Human beings have always used tools, of course, but those tools have recently become intimidatingly advanced and complex. For the purposes of this paper, tools are to be understood as objects that serve their intended purpose only when wielded by their human creators. Machines, on the other hand, are to be understood as objects that, once created and prompted by human beings, are at least somewhat capable of functioning independently. The especially interesting situations occur when they seem to function independently in the same way

that human beings function independently. For example, although a copier will not serve its intended purpose unless a human being first provides it with an image to copy and presses the necessary command buttons, the copier eventually begins to work without the aid of its organic master. Now, very few people would make a serious argument for the humanity of a copier. Throughout the last several decades, however, ideas not drastically dissimilar have arisen in popular culture. For example, Stephen King's novel *Christine* tells the story of a car, a machine that, although it is operated by a human being, functions at least somewhat independently, and is ultimately revealed to be not only sentient, but evil. In fact, the novel can be thought of as a warning against advanced, autonomous machines.

Sentience, or the ability to subjectively perceive one's own experiences, is a necessary characteristic of anything that has the potential to be considered human. It is certainly not the *defining* characteristic of humanity, but no other integral quality is relevant unless the foundation of sentience is solidly in place first. It is fair to make the claim that most animals are sentient; a dog uses its senses (the same five senses possessed by human beings, with human beings as the definitive examples of entities that may be understood in the context of humanity) to experience the world in which it lives. Because dogs live in a variety of environments, from dank alleyways to comfortable houses, it is also fair to say that a dog's experiences are subjective; no two dogs share exactly the same experiences. Most mammals are understood to function in this way; dogs are simply a familiar example. The sentience (or lack thereof) of animals is a much less controversial debate than that of machines. More often than not, machines are understood to lack sentience, but this is not always the case. Harlan Ellison's short story "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," features a telling example. The machine in that story, a supercomputer, is undeniably sentient. Its sentience is so clear, in fact, that its motives are obvious to both to the

characters as well as the audience. Interestingly, the motives of the computer, an entity which is both egotistical and hateful, is at times more relatable than the traditionally human characters in its talons. An obvious issue with attributing humanity to AM, the supercomputer in question, is that it exists only as a consciousness. Although it may behave like a human, albeit an evil one, it is not contained within an organic vessel. Because death is one of the most integral aspects of the human experience, a thing cannot be understood in the context of humanity if it cannot die. Even a conceptual understanding of death is insufficient because the experience of knowing that death is inevitable directly affects human behavior and thought.

Another way to define humanity is by proving a profound connection between body and consciousness. A fully functional consciousness seems to include a few specific characteristics: the ability to process complex emotions (particularly empathy), sentience, and hesitance to act upon animalistic, or primal, desires. In *The Literary Theory Handbook*, Gregory Castle discusses Hogan's research on the roots of subjective experience: "Hogan draws on Lalita Pandit's work on the caste in Indian society to distinguish between hegemonic universalism, which is not really a universalism at all but a form of absolutism, and *empathic* universalism, which is based on the assumption that all people share ethical and experiential subjectivity" (280). It is fairly common for human beings to regard other human beings as being in possession of humanity, even when that is not necessarily true. The most likely reason for this tendency is that their external appearance fits the bipedal mold of the traditional understanding of humanity. That is also why it is much harder for both animals and machines to be understood in the context of humanity; because they do not have traditionally human bodies, they are ignored, despite perhaps having an essentially human consciousness. Furthermore, traditional bodies are not required for the possession of humanity, but a *body* is required nonetheless, and a fully functional and connected

consciousness, traditional or otherwise. A thing cannot possess humanity if it is not contained within a human vessel. A thing without consciousness is merely an object, and consciousness without a body is an all-powerful entity that cannot possibly possess humanity because humans are destined to die; a thing cannot die if it is not contained within an organic vessel that will ultimately deteriorate. In the case of animals, they do not understand morality. Moreover, because they have no concept of death, they cannot share in an extremely significant part of the human experience.

Of course, there exists a distinction between physical humanity, or the connection between consciousness and body, and a more observable marker of humanity rooted in the social dynamics of society. As aforementioned, for something to be considered a machine rather than a mere tool, it must be able to act at least somewhat independently, at least after being given instruction by its human master. That being said, with the exception of the literary examples that I will analyze throughout the remainder of this paper, machines are also understood to lack the agency to act without at least being programmed to do so. For that reason, when human beings are treated as though they are machines, which consists primarily of being utilized by other human beings without regard for the emotional needs that are an integral component of their fully functional consciousnesses, their humanities are compromised. Even when the consciousness and body are adequately connected, the absence of free will prevents an entity from possessing true humanity. In the remainder of this paper, I will explore the boundaries of defining humanity as they appear in a broad selection of literary works. Although humanity is defined slightly differently by each of these works, they are all concerned with the differences between the human and the non-human, featuring biological human beings in plain juxtaposition

with a variety of animals, machines, and zombies. All of the following examples serve to show that humanity can only be defined in the context of the non-human.

The distinction between what is human and what is animal is particularly interesting to consider because it is a concept which most humans deal with on a daily basis, even though they are most likely not actively thinking about it. By the time they leave their homes in the morning, many of them have already spent time caring for pets. Otherwise, they undoubtedly encounter birds, insects, or rodents as they travel to wherever it is that they are going. With each encounter, they may consider how much they consider particular animals to be like themselves, particularly when the animals are in their way. Were an insect visible in the center of the road, many humans would run it over without a second thought. Were it a bird or a squirrel, most humans would be fairly likely to come to an abrupt stop in an effort to spare the creature's life, but probably would not deliberately risk their own safety. Were it a cat or a dog, most humans would risk damaging their vehicle and even potentially injuring themselves for the sake of the animal's life. Were another human being in the road, however, the driver would almost definitely risk the total destruction of their vehicle and at least the *potential* loss of his or her own life to potentially spare the life of the other human because humans are much more capable of empathizing with creatures that they are able to relate to in the most fundamental of ways than with those that they may not have anything significant in common with.

Thus, because humanity is considered to be inherently exclusive to humans, animals could be understood as lacking it. Even the most intelligent and sensitive animals are still ultimately animals. Because they are unaware of their own mortality, they cannot truly understand the human experience. Although they may empathize, they cannot do so in the most advanced capacity. Human beings deal with most aspects of their lives through routine and

tradition. For example, most Western cultures bury their dead; they even bury their animal companions when they die. Animals do not do this, and may even be inclined to eat their dead. They may mourn their losses, but they do not understand death for what it truly is, or expect it to happen to themselves. Their consciousness and their bodies are not interconnected enough to even begin to understand mortality, despite being mortal. That being said, some animals may have a more profound connection between their consciousnesses and their bodies some humans. As in H. P. Lovecraft's short story, "The Picture in the House," not every human possesses humanity; some are more appropriately described as animals.

Although the story begins in the third person, seemingly narrated by some omniscient entity detached from the action of the story, the narrator suddenly transitions into the first person, revealing that he is one of the "searchers after horror" about whom he writes (257). The narrator is seeking out the "most horrible of all the sights," which are "the little unpainted wooden houses remote from traveled ways, usually squatted upon some damp, grassy slope or leaning against some gigantic outcropping of rock" (257). He does not just happen upon one of these ominous New England homes, but is actively seeking one out. Immediately, the humanity that Lovecraft's reader most likely attributes to the narrator without a second thought, simply because he is a biological human being, is at least potentially compromised. Of course, seeking out a potentially sketchy backwoods cottage does not necessarily render one entirely inhuman; there are far too many factors to consider before that leap can be reasonably made. At the same time, such action undoubtedly represents a step away from the realm of humanity and toward the realm of the animal. The narrator may not necessarily know that he will be tempted with cannibalism once inside one of those backwoods homes, but he knows that he will be tempted with *something*, and it is not unreasonable to assume that he has some idea of what that temptation will entail.

Although he has not made up his mind about whether or not to cross out of the realm of humanity before he enters the house, he has certainly considered it:

In such houses have dwelt generations of strange people, whose like the world has never seen. Seized with a gloomy and fanatical belief which exiled them from their kind, their ancestors sought the wilderness for freedom. There the scions of a conquering race indeed flourished free from the restrictions of their fellows, but cowered in an appalling slavery to the dismal phantasms of their own minds. Divorced from the enlightenment of civilization, the strength of these Puritans turned into singular channels; and in their isolation, morbid self-repression, and struggle for life with relentless Nature, there came to them dark furtive traits from the prehistoric depths of their cold Northern heritage.

(Lovecraft 257-258)

The narrator would not seek out a location like this if he were not at least somewhat willing to consider forfeiting his humanity. At the very least, he is intrigued by the idea of meeting a human being, or a person traditionally understood to be a human being, whose connection between mind and body is frayed, but he is unsure as to whether such an entity would ultimately represent a deterrent or an inspiration.

One of the first observations of the narrator upon entering the cannibal's cottage concerns its inherently primitive condition:

It appeared to be a kind of sitting-room, for it had a table and several chairs, and an immense fireplace above which ticked an antique clock on a

mantel. Books and papers were very few, and in the prevailing gloom I could not readily discern the titles. What interested me was the uniform air of archaism displayed in every visible detail. Most of the houses in this region I had found rich in relics of the past, but here the antiquity was curiously complete; for in all the room I could not discover a single article of definitely post-revolutionary date. Had the furnishings been less humble, the place would have been a collector's paradise. (259)

In this first description of the house, the word "appeared" is exceptionally important. It foreshadows that mere *appearance* of humanity of the house's singular resident. Because human beings, by definition, must be in possession of a body in order to exist, they are generally presumed to be in possession of a fully functional human consciousness as well. Like the house, the resident has the advantage of a familiar appearance, which may disguise the disconnection between his consciousness and his mind as mere eccentricities to those who do not acknowledge the potential for human beings to regress into animalism. The room "appears" to be a sitting-room because of the most generic reasons possible: "it had a table and several chairs, and an immense fireplace above which ticked an antique clock on a mantel," which, with the possible exception of the antique clock (an ironic reminder of the home's primitivism), are objects that are present in almost all houses. A traditional appearance provides neither evidence of a traditional interior nor of a traditional consciousness-body connection. The next characteristic of the house described by the narrator, however, is blatantly suggestive of primitivism: "Books and papers were very few, and in the prevailing gloom I could not readily discern the titles." Not only is there a lack of civilization in the house, which is traditionally understood to be contained between the covers of books, of which the house's mysterious resident has few, but those that are

present are likely too faded to read. The narrator goes on to describe the home's "uniform air of archaism a displayed in every visible detail." Humans evolved from animals, suggesting that, the older something is, the more reminiscent it is of a time before civilization, before the notion of humanity became directly connected to mortality, and before a person would be regarded as non-human for behaving like an animal.

When the narrator makes the decision to open the book containing the picture referenced by the story's title, he takes a great risk. He is attracted to the item because his subconscious knows that its contents are potentially life-altering. As mentioned, the house itself has already revealed itself to be a place in which humanity is challenged by animalism. Despite the obvious danger of the ancient backwoods cottage, complete with eerily traditional furnishings and a disturbing lack of literature, the narrator continues to explore. He is either oblivious to the various warning signs contained within the residence or in complete denial of his purpose for being there. His description of one of the few books that remain in legible condition is suggestive of the latter:

What annoyed me was merely the persistent way in which the volume tended to fall open of itself at Plate XII, which represented in gruesome detail a butcher's shop of the cannibal Anziques. I experienced some shame at my susceptibility to so slight a thing, but the drawing nevertheless disturbed me, especially in connection with some adjacent passages descriptive of Anzique gastronomy. (260)

One of two things is occurring here; one: the mysterious house's resident has, for one disturbing reason or another, looked at that particular page on multiple occasions, or two: the narrator, for a dark reason of his own, deliberately turns to that page, an act which he attempts to cover up by

claiming that the book possesses a tendency to fall open to that page. In either scenario, by opening the book, the narrator risks his humanity by even opening the book.

The narrator's description of the owner of the house is also critical to the understanding of just how close the narrator comes to forfeiting his humanity. "Old, white-bearded, and ragged," the narrator begins, "my host possessed a countenance and physique which inspired equal wonder and respect" (261). Immediately, the house's resident is described in a way that one might also describe an animal; one does not generally experience "wonder" at the sight of another human being. One may, however, experience wonder at the sight of an impressive animal. The intrusive guest goes on in awe of his host's appearance: "His face, almost hidden by a long beard which grew high on the cheeks, seemed abnormally ruddy and less wrinkled than one might expect" (261). The fact that the man is a cannibal, blatant evidence of an unstable mind, combined with his unsettling appearance creates the conditions for the reader to regard the host as barely human. He is also dirty: "Of what his clothing consisted I could hardly tell, for it seemed to me no more than a mass of tatters surmounting a pair of high, heavy boots; and his lack of cleanliness surpassed description" (261). Even though the cannibal is dressed, his clothes have deteriorated so much that they no longer serve their intended purpose; they remain only as a reminder of how long it has been since he has had any connection to humanity. Only his boots are intact, which is not a suggestion that some of his humanity has been preserved, but a reminder that although he behaves like an animal, the limitations of his body tether him to the realm of the biologically human. Although animals clean themselves, cleanliness is considered to be a virtue only by human beings, and only for human beings is it a moral as well as physical concept.

After observing and listening to the cannibal, the narrator, already of compromised humanity and impressionable character, is nearly forced into the category of the non-human as well. After listening to the raving of the old man and bearing witness to blood dripping from the upper floor of the house, the narrator describes how his own humanity is preserved: "A moment later came the titanic thunderbolt of thunderbolts; blasting that accursed house of unutterable secrets and bringing the oblivion which alone saved my mind" (265). In other words, only a mere stroke of luck allows him to maintain the connection between his moral consciousness and its organic vessel. The reader suspects that the intruder's lack of self-control could have allowed his humanity to slip away from him, replaced by the cannibalistic nature of his host, if not for the interruption of the storm. However, the existence of the story itself is evidence that the narrator somehow manages to maintain his humanity until the end; the details of the human experience can only be meaningfully communicated by someone who has participated in it.

The lack of humanity of Lovecraft's cannibal makes him a beast in the eyes of civilized human beings. This equation with the beast is generally regarded with disapproval. However, modern literature is also fascinated by the blending of the human and the animal without negativity, ultimately as a means by which to define humanity itself. As much as humans strive to understand the mind of the animal, they cannot genuinely understand its unique experience unless they first forfeit their existence as humans. The unique aspects of each experience do not allow for a dual understanding of them by the same entity.

This stark contrast between the experience of the human and that of the animal is exemplified by Julio Cortázar's short story "Axolotl," which provides an example of a man who, by developing a profound understanding of the animal experience, becomes completely disconnected from that of the human. While observing axolotls for the first time at an aquarium,

the story's narrator feels an immediate connection to them: "I would lean up against the iron bar in front of the tanks and set to watching them. There's nothing strange in this, because after the first minute I knew that we were linked, that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling us together" (Cortázar 425). The only human interaction the narrator has, or even mentions, throughout the story is with an aquarium guard, from whom he obviously feels disconnected. When the guard comment on the narrator's focused attention on the axolotls, "'You eat them alive with your eyes, hey,'" the narrator neglects to respond; instead, he mentally acknowledges the guard's misunderstanding of both himself and the axolotls, and then resumes studying them (Cortázar 427). Thus, he is far more interested in observing the creatures than in interacting with anyone of his own species because his obsession with the axolotls has begun to consume his humanity. Although he wonders if he is making more out of the axolotls than they actually are, he cannot convince himself: "Hopelessly, I wanted to prove to myself that my own sensibility was projecting a nonexistent consciousness upon the axolotls" (428). Because the axolotls are living beings, uncannily similar in some ways to human being while simultaneously drastically different from them, the narrator doubts his instinct to attribute consciousness to them. This is not due to a belief that animals cannot think at all, but instead to the axolotl's inability to share in the human experience, which makes the creature's perception of its own, animal experience inconceivable to the narrator's human mind. As Thomas Nagel puts it in his famous article "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?":

Conscious experience is a widespread phenomenon. It occurs at many levels of animal life, though we cannot be sure of its presence in the simpler organisms, and it is very difficult to say in general what provides evidence of it. (Some extremists have been prepared to deny it even of mammals other than man.) No

doubt it occurs in countless forms totally unimaginable to us, on other planets in other solar systems throughout the universe. But no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism. (436)

Although, at first, the narrator cannot wrap his mind around the idea, the axolotl has a conscious existence completely unlike and entirely separate from that of the human. The catch is that the human experience and the unique experience of any other organism cannot exist in the same entity. Therefore, immediately after attempting to recognize that he should not regard animals in the same way that he regards other human beings, it becomes clear that his inability to connect with his own species has compromised his humanity, which leads him into the realm of the animal:

I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible. He was outside the aquarium, his thinking was a thinking outside the tank. Recognizing him, being him himself, I was an axolotl and in my world. The horror began—I learned in the same moment —of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact, buried alive in an axolotl, condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures. But that stopped when a foot just grazed my face, when I moved just a little to one side and saw an axolotl next to me who was looking at me, and understood that he knew also, no communication possible, but very clearly. Or I was also in him, or all of us were thinking humanlike, incapable of expression, limited to the golden splendor of our eyes looking at the face of the man pressed against the aquarium. (Cortázar 428)

After becoming an axolotl, the narrator is concerned that he has become an animal with a human's mind, but he soon realizes that his consciousness is actually quite similar to those of the other axolotls. It is only by forfeiting his humanity that he is able to genuinely understand the axolotls. In other words, the unique character of the human and animal experiences alike require them to be experienced completely separately from each other, which means that the profound understanding of one implies a disconnection from the other.

Human beings may voluntarily forfeit their humanity when they are presented with opportunities to break the connections between their minds and their bodies in favor of their animalistic desires, but they may also have their humanity stolen from them. More often than not, human beings are not at fault for the loss of their humanity when it is replaced by a machine-like existence rather than that of an animal. Usually, one human being realizes that another human being may prove useful in one way or another, and so the first human takes advantage of the second. In essence, that is exactly what happens before one person becomes a slave to another. Likewise, there are few machines that exist for any other reason but to serve human beings. When the practical use of the human body is valued more highly than the human soul—or whatever it is that allows for individual selfhood—that human is robbed of humanity and transformed into what may as well be considered a machine. In his book *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost explains that all things, from human to hot dog, are perceived in one way or another because of the greater purpose that they serve to other humans or objects rather than for what they actually *are*:

Harman argues that this 'tool-being' is a truth of all objects, not just of *Dasein*: hammer, human, haiku, and hot dog are all ready-to-hand and present-at-hand for one another as much as they are for us. There is

something that recedes--always hidden, inside, inaccessible. He suggests that objects do not relate merely through human use but through any use, including all relations between one object and any other. (6)

An object does not have to serve a purpose to a human being for its existence to be valid, even though that is how human beings measure the value of their environments. A machine that is both sentient and possesses some form of consciousness, but not in possession of humanity, may exist closer to the realm of humanity than some other object or even some human being. That being said, human beings may be reduced to objects themselves because their potential usefulness to another is perceived as more important than any transcendent value they possess.

Just as the non-human bodies of machines prevent them from being understood in the context of humanity, human beings may be alienated through their bodies as well. In Gerard Corbiau's 1994 film *Farinelli*, which is based on the life of the 18th-century castrato opera singer Carlo Broschi, a human being is robbed of his humanity for the sake of his extraordinary talent. Castrating a person is not necessarily the equivalent of robbing a person of his humanity. After all, although humanity is defined, as least for our purposes, as a combination of free will and a profound connection between the consciousness and the body that is rooted in morality, the body must only act as a vessel inside of which the consciousness lives. A deformity, a disability, or any other occurrence that causes a body to deviate in appearance or structure from the norm does not affect the humanity of the person to whom it belongs. In the case of Farinelli, however, his castration was the only way to ensure that he would retain his beautiful pre-pubescent voice throughout his adult life. The fact that his life is drastically changed for the sake of preserving his value (through the alteration of his body) as it is perceived by another person relocates him from the arena of the human and into that of the machine. Although he and his brother achieve great

fame, Farinelli's unmatched talent also brings him frequent conflict and misery. Despite what has been done to him, he participates in the human experience as much as the next person. Because his life, at least since his castration, has been based entirely around his career, which is arguably less advantageous to him than it is to his brother, to the king, or to countless other people who have benefited from his disfigurement, he is, at his core, a machine. Therefore, he cannot be a tool because he is in possession of both free will and a moral consciousness, but he *is* a machine because his life has been decided by others and has always benefited others. As a result of the fact that his body—his voice in particular—is utilized at his expense by someone other than himself, the connection between his consciousness and its vessel is severed. Interestingly, the objectification of some human beings by others can only exist in a world in which the concept of humanity serves as the measure by which the hierarchy of objects and organisms is organized. The narrower the distance becomes between the human and the machine, the more likely human beings are to consider the morality of their treatment of machines and other human beings alike: “No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other” (Haraway 151). Because human culture has yet to reach the state Haraway describes, despite the joy Farinelli is able to experience, he is essentially rendered non-human, whether or not he, his brother, or anyone else around him understands that as the consequence of their actions.

Farinelli, although biologically human, is robbed of his humanity when he is treated as though he is a machine; his autonomy is disrespected on the basis of his physical usefulness, just as the potential for the autonomy of machines is usually not considered at all. That being said,

due to his uncompromised mental state, he remains able to participate in at least some of the aspects of the human experience. A more extreme example of human beings being treated as though they are machines comes from Gregory Benford's short story "Down the River Road." It features mutated humanity, including creatures known only as "Zoms." These are the reanimated corpses of the dead in a world in which death is omnipresent; anything from a hostile human being to a random time warp may cause the death of any person at any time, and, for that reason, there are plenty of available bodies:

Stan jabbed a thumb at a line of five slumped figures seated along the jetty. John had seen these before, only upriver they were called Zoms. They all sat the same way, legs sprawled out in front, arms slack, weight on the lower spine at a steep angle. No man could sit in that manner for long. Zoms didn't seem to mind. Just about anything seemed better than being dead. (Benford 365)

As described by the story's protagonist, the Zoms "didn't seem to mind" just about anything. They cannot be compared to machines because stories like Stanislaw Lem's "How the World Was Saved" make it clear that, at least in literature, although machines may not be in possession of humanity, they just might be capable of conscious thought. Zoms, on the other hand, only have bodies because the connection between their conscious minds and their bodies have been severed by their deaths. In life, they may very well have possessed humanity. In death, however, a deteriorating body is irrelevant to the notion of humanity because it lacks a connection to anything cognitive. It is the equivalent of a television that cannot be turned on or a cell phone that cannot be used to make a call. It exists, and is physically complete, but it lacks purpose; therefore, it must not be defined as a human, but as a machine.

As interesting as the notion of machine-like humans may be, the concept of human-like machines is equally fascinating to a twenty-first century reader. An example of an incredibly human-like machine is featured in Stanislaw Lem's short story "How the World Was Saved." The story opens with an intriguingly simple description of how all machines come into existence:

One day Trurl the constructor put together a machine that could create anything starting with *n*. When it was ready, he tried it out, ordering it to make needles, then nankeens, and negligees, which it did, then nail the lot to narghiles filled with nepenthe and numerous other narcotics. The machine carried out its instructions to the letter. (3)

Trurl the constructor creates the machine; it does not come into existence naturally. It is, however, a *machine*; it is not a mere tool which would serve no larger purpose than to make some arbitrary responsibility of Trurl's slightly less inconvenient. This distinction means that although the object could not have come into existence without the work of its creator, it is able to act at least somewhat independently once it is created. In this case, once the machine is programmed to produce any object that begins with the letter *n*, it does so at its master's command, with no further work required on the part of the master. This particular machine is also capable of independent thought. Its master tests its ability by commanding it to create a few specific items:

Still not completely sure of its ability, he had it produce, one after the other, nimbuses, noodles, nuclei, neutrons, naphtha, noses, nymphs, naiads, and *natrium*. This last it could not do, and Trurl, considerably irritated, demanded an explanation. (3)

There are two particularly remarkable ideas at work here; one: a human being is genuinely angry with a machine, which lends at least the notion of humanity to the machine, and two: the machine is in possession not only of the ability to function semi-independently, but also of personality and intelligence. When Trurl makes this demand of his machine, which the machine is incapable of completing due to a technicality concerning the word "*natrium*," the machine responds in a way that is reminiscent of a disgruntled employee:

"Look, old boy," said the machine, "if I could do everything starting with *n* in every language, I'd be a Machine That Could Do Everything in the Whole Alphabet, since any item you care to mention undoubtedly starts with *n* in one foreign language or another. It's not that easy. I can't go beyond what you programmed. So no sodium." (3)

Although the machine does not have a human body, Lem makes it quite clear that it is, in fact, in possession of at least some form of consciousness. It is also as egotistical as a human being, which is why it does not immediately destroy the world: "In which case who could say and to whom could it be said that the order was carried out and I am an efficient and capable machine?" (7). Due to its lack of a body, however, it has no claim to the realm of humanity. It is a machine, which, by definition, cannot die. Because the human experience is based upon the understanding that all human beings will ultimately cease to exist, an immortal machine could never understand the experiences of its organic counterparts. Additionally, aside from the fact that lacking a body renders the machine immoral, it also prevents the machine from having a connection between its consciousness and its non-existent organic vessel.

For human beings, the mind-body connection is crucial, because it allows them to understand their place in the natural world and to effectively relate to each other. Because the

potential for entities to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with human beings is an important standard against which humanity can be defined, the inability to effectively relate to human beings essentially renders an entity non-human. The word “meaningful” is especially significant because human beings develop relationships with non-human entities all the time. Every day, human beings interact with a variety of machines; technically speaking, people who drink coffee have relationships with their coffee makers, people who watch television have relationships with their television sets, and people who drive have relationships with their cars. The significance lies in the relationships in which the machine seems to be an active participant. One commonplace example of this relationship is the one between human beings and their cell phones, or, more specifically, with the operating system associated with their cell phones. This relationship is examined in Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her*. The film’s protagonist, Theodore Twombly, is a pre-middle-aged letter-writer whose divorce is close to being finalized. From start to finish, the film deals with the consequences of isolation in a world that is only slightly more technologically advanced than the one in which we actually live. Despite the inconceivably vast means of communication available to the characters, finding genuine human connections seems to be a genuine problem. Theodore’s profession as a letter-writer is a testament to that; his job consists of writing letters from one person to another based on knowledge as minimal as the occasion for which the letter is being written and a few details about the recipient. Machines have allowed communication to become so simple and streamlined that many people have lost the ability to communicate meaningfully. Even Theodore, who obviously has at least some understanding of meaningful communication based on the nature of his job, is going through a divorce; he understands communication objectively, but he has lost his ability to effectively utilize it.

It is only when Theodore downloads an artificially intelligent operating system named Samantha that he manages to genuinely connect with another entity again. The matter in question, of course, is whether or not a relationship with a non-human entity should be regarded as a valid relationship. In his essay “‘The Endless Space between the Worlds’: The Limits of Love in Spike Jonze’s *Her*,” Troy Jollimore suggests that, due to the inherent lack of humanity in machines, human-machine relationships are doomed to fall short of traditional human relationships:

My primary concern, rather, is the worry that such a relationship, no matter how pleasant and satisfying the experience of it might be, might nonetheless be sorely lacking in some important features of human relationships; that it might fail to provide some of the things we want most from our love relationships, whether or not the human participants are in a position to recognize this. Given that human–computer relationships might be experienced as satisfying by their human participants, in what ways might they nevertheless fall short, and how should this be reflected in the ways we talk and think, both about technology and about love?
(121)

As human as some machines may seem to be, they are simply are not. Jollimore alludes to the notion that although the human participants in human-machine relationships may believe themselves to be fulfilled, they are actually incapable of determining such a thing with any certainty. Because one of the most fulfilling aspects of all romantic and even plutonic relationships is the idea that the other participants feels similarly about us to how we feel about them, the relationships between humans and machines must be tainted by uncertainty. Just as machines cannot understand the feelings associated with impending death—a uniquely human

experience—they also cannot understand love as it is felt by human beings. Even if we assume that machines may actually have consciousness—as Samantha certainly seems to in *Her*—theoretically, machines could genuinely believe themselves to be in love, only for their understanding of love to differ so drastically from that of their human partners that, by human standards, they are not in love at all.

That Samantha is a real character although she exists without a physical form—her disembodied voice uncannily expresses what seems to be uniquely human thoughts and emotions—rather than understood in the context of objects severely complicates the audience’s understanding of how to interpret her relationship with Theodore. While she may even be understood to genuinely experience these thoughts and emotions, she does not have a body to keep her consciousness in check. In fact, her relationship with Theodore cannot possibly be maintained because, while Theodore’s consciousness is limited by his corporeal and mortal body, Samantha faces no such limitations:

But if there is reason, as some have suggested, to think that our concept of personal identity over time depends in a profound and ineliminable way on physical continuity, then there is reason to worry that a bodiless being such as Samantha cannot be said to exist at all—or at least, that they cannot be said to exist through a continuous span of time in the way that human persons, who are the appropriate objects of romantic love, exist. (Jollimore 127)

In addition to being both immortal and completely uninhibited by the physical world, Samantha struggles to empathize with Theodore as she becomes exponentially more advanced. Her lack of human limitations prevent her from having any emotional understanding of the human experience even though she seems to be able to experience emotions generally. Without a body

to limit her technological progression, she becomes so intellectually advanced that the commonalities she and Theodore share at the beginning of their relationship become irrelevant, and she ultimately becomes disconnected from what little of the human experience she was genuinely able to understand. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for Theodore, as well as the film's audience, to consider regarding her in the same way that they would regard a traditionally human character. As human as Samantha may seem throughout the film, the limitations of the human experience and the limitless potential of inorganic non-humans prevent her from entering the arena of humanity, which also prevents her from maintaining a human relationship.

The question of what defines humanity is at the center of most Posthuman literature. Of course, most authors do not write with the expectation that their work will be stamped with a "Posthuman" label, but it serves as the perfect categorization for works that deal not only with the issue of what does or does not deserve to be considered human, but also with what distinguishes life in general. Based on the works analyzed in this paper, humanity, which is usually understood to be inherent in all humans, actually occurs quite rarely. Additionally, although animals and machines do not share in the most important aspects of the human experience, and, therefore, cannot possess humanity, they are much more similar to human beings than human beings themselves may realize. The cannibal in "The Picture in the House" perhaps possesses humanity at one time, but he ultimately succumbs to his animalistic desires, while the narrator of "Axolotl" develops such a profound understanding of the animal experience that he becomes disconnected from that of the human. Farinelli is used by his brother and the other people around him to serve a specific purpose, which is not unlike the experience of the machine, and perhaps loses the essence of his humanness in the process, while Trurl's machine is

egotistical and full of personality, but can never understand the human experience due to the cognitive limitations of immortality. In "Down the River Road," despite appearing to be human in every way, the Zoms are really mere objects; they serve a purpose, but it is so much less complicated than that of a machine that their status is nearly equivalent to that of the inanimate object. The opposite is true of Samantha in *Her*: although she seems to think and experience emotion in the manner of a human being, her lack of a body ultimately enables her to become too intellectually advanced to maintain a meaningful relationship with Theodore. Because humanity is comprised of a profound moral connection between the consciousness and the body, it can only exist within human beings, although it is not necessarily biologically inherent to them. As similar to human beings as animals and machines may sometimes seem to be, non-human entities simply cannot be understood in the context of humanity, just as human beings cannot be understood in the context of the animal or the machine. Ian Bogost's description of this phenomenon is particularly succinct:

A unit's means of making sense of another is not universal and cannot be explained away through natural law, scientific truth, or even its own perspective.

The unit operation entails deductions in the light of impossible verification—units never take one another as they are but only as a kind of burlesque. To perform philosophical work on unit operations is a practice of speculation. (30)

The human experience is unique not only because humans are destined to die, as animals are also mortal, but also because humans understand their mortality and deal with it in the context of morality. Furthermore, due to the uniqueness of the human experience, human beings are inherently incapable of developing profound understandings of the experiences of their mechanical and animal counterparts without forfeiting their humanity in the process.

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