

Chapter # 13

DE-CENTERING THE HUMAN: CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM AND THE REFIGURATION OF EDUCATIONAL FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

My starting point is critical posthumanism as a post-anthropocentric deconstruction of both cultural and technological determinism. This paper aims to lay the groundwork for critically examining the possible refigurations of the broader purposes of education. I will be looking into (1) the adoption (or resistance to adoption) of technology in schools and also into (2) the need for decentring the human, rethinking the position of other-than-human actors and their role in shaping knowledge and practices within (post-)educational contexts. My approach challenges the official or commonly accepted understanding of social reality, political relations, and conceptual categories by examining alternative viewpoints (e.g., “traditional” education vs. education in light of technological innovations), thereby offering an analysis of fundamental concepts. By employing a posthumanist lens, I foreground several “failures” of humanist assumptions, including the framing of education as a purely human-centered project and the presumed clear ontological separation between the human and the nonhuman. A still prevailing narrative suggests that digital technology inherently makes education “better” (i.e., more efficient, more accessible, etc.); however, the question arises of how well education is equipped to deal with present complexities, one of them being how to treat educational technologies so as not to mask their agency and power.

Keywords: critical posthumanism, postanthropocentrism, technology, human, post-education.

1. INTRODUCTION

I aim to interrogate the conceptual – and, inevitably, practical – entanglements between what we mean by “education” and what we mean by “the human” today, in the context of globalization, technoscience, late capitalism, and climate change. The central question guiding this contribution is how to reimagine education as a stage populated not only by human actors, but also by nonhumans, among them technological ones, that are assuming leading roles.

My primary starting point is critical posthumanism, a theory that examines the relationships among the actors in the so-called cybernetic triangle: humans, animals, machines (or technology, information systems, etc.). These relations are, in the light of contemporary rethinking and various posthuman, even transhuman, possibilities, reconfigured and rethought, together with the consequences of this reconfiguration. Donna Haraway discusses “three crucial boundary breakdowns” (Haraway, 1991), where the temporal and spatial coordinates no longer allow border wars to be easily won. There is pleasure, she says, in the confusion of boundaries, but also responsibility in their construction (Haraway, 1991).

It is worth noting that there are several strands of posthumanism, differing in their views on the ontology of the human, the relationship to technology, visions of the future (including techno-utopias), and related questions. A detailed discussion of these perspectives, however, lies beyond the scope of this contribution. The same applies to the specificities of transhumanism, which envisions the enhancement of human abilities through various technological additions and modifications, and is, in this regard, an extension of the humanist agenda, as put by Siân Bayne. Transhumanism is about “seeing the human as something that has the capacity to become better and better through scientific progress” (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017). And this is precisely what gets complicated in the posthumanist framework.

A brief explanation of what is meant by “technology” is in order. Technology is not merely a tool or an instrument, as it is often described, but an entity that has profound effects on the fabric of our societies, on who we are, and on who we are becoming in the process of using technology. Technologies do not simply help us with tedious tasks; they are not only fun, but they also reshape our identities. This is all the truer with the recent advent of the next-generation AI (chatbots and the like). In short and very much to the point, “Technology is the active human interface with the material world” (Le Guin, 2005).

At present, as digital technologies become ever more perceptibly constitutive of educational experience, I argue that education, edtech, and policy need to be thought together, as co-constructed and co-constructing. This also means that education is “always enacted through technology, and teachers cannot avoid learning to use it. Some technologies are so embedded in educational systems that they are almost invisible” (Fawns, 2022). This embeddedness of old technologies is even less visible in today’s era of AI, which is understood as something completely different (which it is, on many levels). However, technology has always been part of education, albeit in forms that appear “simpler” when viewed from today’s perspective, e.g., boards, chalk, pens, projection devices, and the like.

So, if we set aside the hype surrounding AI for a moment and look more closely, it becomes clear that “our distinctions between ‘technology-enhanced’ and general learning, or even digital education and general education, are somewhat artificial (Fawns, 2022).

Another overlooked factor is the increasing normalization of market logic as equivalent to ethical and epistemological frameworks. The technology used in the classroom, as said, is not only (or not predominantly) classroom gadgets/tangible devices, but “rather something much broader, that encompasses the imagined benefits of data, vast data collection infrastructures, complex data-driven technologies and their associated expertise, and the scaled effects of algorithmic and networked systems” (Knox, 2019). Such technology is “fuelling a capitalistic desire for data” (Knox, 2019). The result is a subtle but consequential alignment of educational goals with datafication and optimization, a dimension that policymakers too often fail to adequately foreground. And then there are the environmental costs of the digital (the use of rare metals, exploitation of natural resources, pollution, and the like), which amount to the lack of a broader understanding of the socio-technical systems (Knox, 2019). All these points clearly speak against technology as being a “mere” tool and against thinking that the role of technology is instrumental.

2. POSTHUMANIST DISCONTENTS

Posthumanism, as is often the case with such terms, can mean many different things to different people and is frequently accompanied by doubts about its relevance. On the one hand, there are fears that this might mean the human era is coming to an end, as the “post-” might imply, raising the question of alternative ways of being human. On the other hand, there is scepticism that these ideas are merely a repetition of earlier philosophical and

anthropological debates. David Edward Rose has the following on this: “How is posthumanist theory different from postmodern critiques of the subject? It is in the emphasis on the impact of technology. Human-modifying technology has a distinct effect on modern social and economic arrangements and the self-understanding of the subject” (Rose, 2023).

I start from the understanding of posthumanism as the need or aspiration of non-hegemonic ways of conceptualizing the human today. As put by N. Snaza et. al. (2014), posthumanism “allies itself with the politico-pedagogical projects of feminism, postcolonialism, anti-racism, and queer activism as it confronts the systematic dehumanization of people under the hegemonic Western form of political right”.

The term is used for contemporary theoretical positions of research in various disciplines or sciences (philosophy, literary studies, science and technology studies, communication studies) (Bolter, 2016). This also brings a new epistemology that is not (anymore) based on dualisms, known to Western thought. N. K. Hayles says that there is the prospect of breaking out of old frameworks and opening up new possibilities of how to be human and what kind of human. It does not mean the end of humanity, but rather the end of a certain conception of man, a conception that was at best considered to be “a fraction of humanity that had the wealth, power, and enough free time to conceptualize itself as autonomous beings fulfilling its will through individual action and choice” (Hayles, 1999).

Furthermore, this is “not to be confused with a nostalgia for another human, or a new humanism. Instead, it is part of a new theoretical paradigm emerging from all these challenges to humanism, humanity, and the human, and which are causing the erosion of traditional demarcations between humans and nonhumans and are calling for alternative ways of thinking” (Herbrechter, n.d.).

I stand on a position – in line with feminist posthumanities (cf. Ferrando, 2019) – that humanist hierarchical conceptualizations clearly show that all humans do not belong to the same category of humanity. This must be rigorously questioned, along with the notion of human exceptionalism (i.e., the primacy of humans over nonhuman animals), as it shapes epistemic privileges and, consequently, the knowledge produced through these processes (Vendramin, 2023).

The prefix “post-” (as in posthumanism) does not signify a complete break with the main part of the term, but rather is a sign of the ongoing deconstruction of what it “prefixes”. It is a kind of “conceptual parasite that inhabits humanism itself and tries to get it to address its own contradictions” (Herbrechter, 2018). Posthumanism is not about what comes after humanism in a chronological progression, but about rethinking epistemological and ontological questions related to “being human” (Pedersen, 2010). This definition neatly sets aside concerns about how to interpret the “post-” and whether it signals a rupture or the obsolescence of humanity. It simultaneously emphasizes a shift in perspective that encompasses multiple dimensions: political, ethical, and epistemological, among others. The need for this shift stems from the human no longer being understood as the central agent. The emerging models of power and responsibility foreground entangled agencies of human and non-human animals and technology.

It is now clear that posthumanism is not a completely new “discourse”, but a way of recognizing and integrating a wide range of different critical approaches (feminism, anti-colonialism, technology studies, ecology ...), which are “directly based on challenging how humanism has limited politics and education” (Snaza et al., 2014). Closely related to this is the need for a political-pedagogical commitment to projects such as feminism and postcolonialism, understood as forms of resistance to the systematic dehumanization of people (Snaza et al., 2014).

In this regard, Stefan Herbrechter (n.d.) names various questions that need to be addressed and eventually answered, such as: “What does it mean to be human? What is the role of technology in evolution and hominization? Is a postanthropocentric world picture possible, desirable, or even necessary?” Besides, the claim that “we have always been technological” (Snaza et al., 2014) encapsulates the idea of the co-evolution of humans and technology. This indicates that “at no stage in the process of hominization can you reach a point where you have, on the one side, the human, and, on the other side, the technical” (Herbrechter, 2018).

The questions raised above extend well beyond the field of education; they must be considered within a broader social and cultural framework. Nevertheless, they remain crucial for shaping the future role and forms of education.

3. POSTHUMANIST EDUCATION OR POST-EDUCATION?

All this brings us to the question of how to define education in light of changes at several levels in our societies and traditions. Can education, say, side-track the role of teachers, schools, curricula, socialization, etc., contrary to the understanding that education means “‘pure’ human relationships between teachers and their students, or amongst constructivist social groupings” (Knox, 2019)? Formal education in the West, as Helena Pedersen (2010) argues, is firmly rooted in humanistic ideals, which also means thinking about life from the perspective of a single species. Similarly, Nathan Snaza points out: education is understood as a practice of humanization. But this also entails, in principle, the possibility of dehumanization, since the human as a social construct is defined in relation to various non-human Others (Snaza, 2013).

If education makes us human, it is high time we (re)define what human is, considering various de-humanized and even non-human Others that have hereto been relegated to a lower step on the hierarchical scale of our anthropocentric world. It remains to be seen to what extent and how these changes will take place and how they will “reform” the definition of education and education itself in an ongoing process. (I am not talking here about changes brought in by digitalization and the like.) If education means leading the subject (student, pupil) into humanity and being fully human, what kind of subject is envisaged as the outcome of such education (Snaza, 2013)? At the same time, which is not at the forefront here, but it is a pertinent question, we should ask ourselves what the re-imagined end(s) of the human might be and when/if human stops being human (Callus & Herbrechter, 2012).

Humanistic ideals view knowledge and learning as constructed and achieved. This is in contrast to posthumanist stance in which learning is understood as a mutual contagion between human (teacher, learner, child, student), nonhuman entities or material resources (classroom, computer, textbook, subject matter), even time (weekdays between 8:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.) and spatial engagement (the adult moves about the room, the students work at their tables) (Pedersen, 2016; Strom & Martin, 2022). All these “factors” “intra-act to enable the recognition of the adult in this space and time as ‘teacher’” (Strom & Martin, 2022). So, knowledge emerges through entangled pedagogical practices involving learners, teachers, technologies, curricula, spaces, and policies.

N. Friesen (2018) speaks of educational posthumanism and sees a lot of problems if we embark on a posthumanist ship unconditionally:

For better or worse, education cannot be anything else but predominantly human. [...] To the degree that posthumanisms deny human agency and responsibility, they also “post” the project of education; to the degree that they affirm these human characteristics, they cannot be called posthumanist.

He continues: “Through its denial of the centrality of human agency and choice, posthumanism also requires us to reconceptualize the most fundamental assumptions and understandings of education itself” (Friesen, 2018). While I cannot but agree with the call to reconceptualize education, I am less convinced by the way responsibility is addressed. Posthumanism does not deny human agency or responsibility; rather, it reconceptualizes them as relational and situated and emphasizes ethical accountability toward the entanglements with the non-human.

But, still, there is also a rub. Either we accept the predominant role of humans that shape the educational processes and proclaim posthumanist tenets to be misplaced, or we admit that in these specific times, we can no longer limit ourselves to seeing education and learning as exclusively human-centred in one way or the other.

But this thing that disrupts or that will substitute the heretofore known education clearly needs a name. Do we need to introduce the term post-education here? There are other possibilities, according to David Edward Rose (2023), such as posthuman education, human post-education, or post-education humanism. Take your pick, says Rose, but of course, we are still at a speculative level. I suggest post-education here as I see fit to foreground the entanglements between humans, technologies, and environments. Nonhuman agents (AI, data, and ecosystems) are included as active participants in learning, allowing us to envision learning as a fluid, networked, and collaborative process entangled with both human and nonhuman actors, rather than confined to classrooms or traditional hierarchies. This is the essence of posthumanist thought: nonhuman actors actively participate in the shaping of knowledge, thereby decentering the human subject and expanding the possibilities for learning (cf., e.g., Braidotti, 2019). For example, a human teacher’s agency could “come up against the workings of data to conduct another, and different, kind of teaching which is neither human nor machinic but some kind of gathering of the two” (Bayne & Jandrić, n.d.).

Or, we might opt for as-if-education as proposed by Richard Susskind (2021): *quasi-education*, *as-if education*, meaning something like education, but not quite (Susskind himself is not particularly happy with this solution). Let us regard this as an attempt not to name different things with the same words, although it is hard not to use labels, designed for humans, to describe what is going on when machines deliver outputs. Susskind (2025) points out that the basic error is failing to recognize that AI systems do not mimic human reasoning (this is an all too-human-centric view) and that we should perhaps change our prevailing mindset, which is still very focused on task substitution.

I want to return here to the question of human (and humanity) and the definition of it, as this has a profound effect on how to approach the issue of education. Do we – if we opt for a transformed definition of human (a moral human being) and education (purposive and normative that it is) – lose the education’s addressee (Herbrechter, in Friesen, 2018) and with that the edifice that supports humanity? I suggest that posthumanism has the potential to bring about positive transformations in education in several ways. According to Snaza et al. (2014):

First, it forces us to reckon with how resolutely humanist almost all educational philosophy and research is. Second, it allows us to reframe education to focus on how we are always already related to animals, machines, and things within life in schools [...] Third, [...] it enables us to begin exploring new, posthumanist directions in research, curriculum design, and pedagogical practice.

To briefly comment on and emphasize these three interconnected benefits of posthumanism: first, it invites us to reflect on new possibilities for educational research and practice, including a critical examination of the exclusions within humanism concerning both human and non-human Others. Second, reframing education in light of posthumanist thinking could serve as an enrichment, ideally without losing sight of the core of education itself. Third, since pedagogical practice must engage with technology on both conceptual and practical levels, posthumanism may open up new possibilities for improving educational approaches. The overall aim is “to question what happens when the liberal subject, subject of and subject to modernising education, is humbled, *enfeebled* (italic mine) and put in question” (Rose, 2023). This is ultimately about a transformation in how we understand ourselves and our relations with other-than-human entities, with technology placed at the center of this inquiry. While the focus here is on digital technological change, it is important to acknowledge that education will also be shaped by other emerging contexts, such as the use of cognitive enhancers (“smart drugs”) and potential genetic interventions.

It could be argued, at least conditionally, that changes emerging on the horizon are less a matter of the supposed previously non-existent technology in schools and more the outcome of new sensibilities to think beyond the human. However, this shift is not always immediately detectable, as it is often obscured by the focus on the advent of the latest developments in AI.

4. CONCLUSION

One of the main contributions of critical posthumanism to the current educational debates is posing some very relevant questions that are “far from techno-utopian or techno-dystopian, but instead involve an entirely new understanding of the relationship between education, technology, and the human” (Herbrechter, 2018). This might also mean de-essentializing all three, along with the general problematization of thinking “in essences and universals” (Mambrol, 2018), to find “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway, 1991).

The question that currently invites more speculative answers is, then, how can posthumanism help change educational theory and practice, and how can it “enrich,” “change,” or even “improve” practices of knowledge acquisition and communication? Since posthumanism includes postanthropocentrism and since educational institutions are the primary places where people are “indoctrinated” into anthropocentrism (Herbrechter, 2016), there are far-reaching consequences of dismantling the latter. It is too early to conclude that non-human actors will be included in the educational processes; however, there is an ongoing need for the *Anthropos* to step down from the position of being a measure of all things. Posthumanism also stresses that human dominance is not an inherent attribute, but a negotiated position within a system (Pedersen, 2010).

It is counterproductive to view technology either as a threat or as a final achievement capable of solving all our problems, educational or otherwise. This is especially true as some problems undoubtedly have not yet arisen, and we do not know what they will be and how to start solving them (Susskind, 2025).

Discussions of pedagogy driving technology, or vice versa, reinforce a false dichotomy. Pedagogy is not just a method; technology is not just a vehicle for implementing that method (Fawns, 2022). The adjustments that will eventually be required in our educational practices include the meaningful integration of technology, understood here in the narrower sense of digital technology, into schools (the process triggered by the recent pandemic), as well as identifying the social and educational problems we have and why we have them (Jamison & Haraway, 1992).

It might well turn out that virtual or digitally transmitted experiences do not always offer “the same kind of experience one has in a lived experience”, as technology transforms both people and their experiences (Jamison & Haraway, 1992). This is accurate, but there are two ways of looking at this: either lived experience is better and more attuned to the goals of education, or not. The important thing to stress in this context, according to Siân Bayne, is the following: the digital should not be viewed as a substitute for familiar interpersonal practices (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017; similarly, Susskind, 2025). The digital can be even said to be “a privileged mode, one in which new ontological positionings, and new dispositions toward teaching and toward knowledge might be explored and delighted in” (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017).

So, by way of conclusion, I suggest making the following points. Firstly, rethinking and reconfiguring education in terms of what kind of education is the norm, and what kind of education might be the aberration. For now, we are seeing “the on-campus as the norm and digital education at a distance as a kind of deviant position” (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017). And this does not refer solely to the topography of teaching (e.g., “here” vs “at a distance”), but needs to include the modified role of the teacher. Secondly, we need to rethink education as “a process of in-duction: leading the pupil into being ‘human’” (Snaza, 2013). What “it means to be human is constructed differently at different historical moments, by biology, philosophy, political theory, and educational institutions” (Snaza et al., 2014). Some of the past constructions, such as human as white, male, heterosexual, etc., have already been dismantled. Thirdly, now is the time to rethink the present-day definitions and boundaries between our anthropocentric selves and other Others, which will result in changed onto-epistemologies, or, better still, in new ethico-onto-epistemologies (Barad, 2007) – i.e., concerning ethics, being, and knowing and regarding them as no longer separated (Barad, 2007).

In light of what has been said here, it is clear that the move toward posthumanist thinking profoundly shifts the notions associated with the human subject. Therefore, to speak of the posthuman and the end of education (Herbrechter, 2018) (i.e., as we have known it) means to consider several postanthropological questions that are not necessarily technoutopian or dystopian, but involve a reflection on, or perhaps a new understanding of, the relationship between education, technology, and the human (Herbrechter, 2018; see also Vendramin, 2021). This affects the “remnants” of humanism that underpin the entire concept of education as a process of guiding students toward humanity, toward becoming human. Perhaps this is an opportunity to critically re-examine human agency and pedagogical entanglements, emphasizing, with Karen Barad (2007), how all the elements involved are mutually constitutive.

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