



Critical critical posthumanism in human geography

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Abstract. In this brief contribution, I reflect on some of the newest tendencies and fashions in social theoretic thinking in the field of human geography and beyond. Human geography attracts its scholars, thinkers and audiences with its engagement to contribute to a better environment and a better world. As such human geography as a discipline is a political project, with high societal relevance. In this human engagement with the world around us, the relationship between the human and the spatial environment is of central importance, and thorough scientific conceptual reflections are crucial in a discipline that is not just political but also scientific. Geographers traditionally excel in sophisticated conceptualisations of our physical and social environment but have rather neglected the conceptualisation of the other end of this relationship, the human being and becoming. In the current debate on the various versions of posthumanism, we observe that one easily resorts to rather simplistic categorisations and qualifications of what we envision as posthuman utopias or dystopias, with sometimes also dangerous ethical consequences. In this contribution, I try to argue that, if we dig a bit deeper, with the help of the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner we gain a more nuanced and sustainable as well as ethically responsible view of the role of the posthuman self in the geography of today's world.

1 Introduction

Human geography as a discipline has been through many different phases and paradigmatic changes, which somehow have always also reflected the historical and geographical societal realities of the times in which they took place. For a long time, geographers were fascinated by the natural world around us with its enormous diversity. Understanding the influence of these diverse natural conditions on human life and human practices was seen as the core disciplinary endeavour and ambition. The way human beings jointly coped with these manifold circumstances was seen as the basis of our evolutionary cultural adaptation to these diverse conditions. From then on, human geography was focused not just on our adaptation to our natural habitat, but also on how we related to, were determined by or contributed to the cultural settings and structures of these situations. Not just the (non-human) materialities of the natural conditions but also the creative (human) cultural aspects were seen as determining. More and more, the role of human action and human agency moved into the centre of attention in geography. As a typical modernist motive, the makeability of the world around us and the

celebration of human reason as the basis of our scientific and technological progress as means to the final mastery over nature became the dominant way of thinking. And indeed, until today, this has held a huge fascination and has provided us with the hope that we will be able to overcome the crises nature confronts us with, e.g. the Covid-19 crisis. On the other hand, we have also experienced the downside of many human accomplishments in the form not only of the enormous destructive and violent powers of these technologies, but also of some of the colonising and discriminating cultural powers in modernity. As a reaction, the much more structural views of early modernity were replaced with more critical, disenchanting and nuanced views of *late* modernity.

At the same time, cultural makeability or social constructivist sentiments were also developed further into what is often described as *post*-modernity. In the context of post-modernity, almost no limits to the imagination, or to the assumed potential realisation of a utopian world, are set. In the face of the latest atrocities of human injustices and conflicts as well as of the awareness of the effects of the Anthropocene, it is only in newer forms of post-structuralist thinking that a renewed interest in the material aspects of our

(post)human existence emerges. Indeed, these newer forms are an attempt to escape from the pitfalls and limitations of the supposed all-encompassing powers of the human being and activities. This explains the sentiments of the current posthuman thinking in our discipline. These sentiments are often broadly shared and create a new “mainstream” of thinking. In this way, posthumanism becomes a critical fashion, and surfing the current waves of fashionable thinking makes one feel comfortable, accepted and up to date, and for some, it is the basis of building an academic career. By becoming a kind of new social movement in scientific thinking, posthumanism also gains power to make a difference. If geographers want to make a difference in society and in the way we think about it, this is of course a real asset.

However, looking back on the history of these different newly emerging schools of thinking, one also gets the impression that geographic theorising is entangled in an ever-oscillating wave-like movement in which we move from over-emphasising one aspect to over-emphasising another aspect. This somehow also suggests that we do not make any real long-term progress in getting things “right”. We only move from overcoming one deficit to creating the next deficit, and so forth. It then also becomes tempting to wave away the critiques of these new schools of thinking as just a repetition of moves. The Aristotelian “golden” middle way (*aurea mediocritas*) consequently seems a natural way to go. Given the political urgency of the societal issues at stake, it is, however, also dangerous to neglect the critical potential of these new movements. At the same time, imagining oneself in the comfort zone of such a new social movement also carries the danger of not being self-critical enough and overshooting the mark. To avoid that we fall back into a repetition of moves, we need to be critical about some critical movements, such as critical posthumanism, to make sure that they do not make the same mistakes as the ones they are criticising so that they do not create the next deficit. A well-thought-through and nuanced critical approach might be more effective and bring us further. To avoid any misunderstanding, this critical stance against new critical movements, like posthumanism, is not a kind of reactionary repressive reaction but rather an attempt to avoid the repetition of earlier mistakes and an attempt to constructively reflect on a meta level about these movements, to keep them moving and to bring them forward, in a conceptually more consistent and sustainable way.

This documents the need for a more thorough and critical engagement with the past and present schools of thinking and their main thinkers: not in the sense of creating new hegemonies or bubbles of supposed “truths” or “one-sided over-simplification” of specific schools of thinking but in the sense of understanding them in their context or as Korf et al. (2022), in the introduction to this special issue on German theory state, as “provincialising” them. The aim of this provincialisation is not to create a map of the different epistemological islands but to open up a real debate between

these positions for “entangled theorising”. The current wave of posthumanistic thinking in geography is a key topic in this respect and worth a fresh look at from this “German theory” perspective (Dörfler and Rothfuß, 2023).

In this contribution, I, therefore, will attempt to add some self-critical nuances to the posthuman school of thinking in human geography by first (Sect. 2) trying to identify the specificities of this posthumanist thinking. As I will show, there are different versions of posthumanist thinking. I will then focus specifically on critical posthumanism. To understand its proponents’ critique, I will then, second (Sect. 3), focus on the “humanism” of the philosophical anthropologist that this posthumanist school of thinking seeks to scrutinise. Its proponents’ understanding of philosophical anthropology in that respect seems rather superficial and incomplete. I will also criticise the kind of utopian thinking inherent in the hitherto critical posthumanist school of thinking. The tendency towards these kinds of utopian claims can be seen as one of those too easy and too self-comfortable and uncritical ways of criticising. I will address this deficit again in Sect. 4 by referring to the work of one of the classical German theorists, Helmuth Plessner, and his concept of the “utopian standpoint”. Without claiming a full-fledged reconceptualisation of posthumanist thinking in human geography, these pointwise criticisms might lead to a more nuanced as well as more radical critical posthumanism, without getting rid of the humanistic basis of critique. I, therefore, hope to constructively contribute to the debate about how to criticise and rethink societal conditions and human actions from a critical posthumanist perspective, in such a nuanced way that it avoids falling back into trench warfare between different positions and without throwing the baby out with the bathwater but instead recognising and mobilising the critical potential of different positionalities both between and within human beings in a more-than-human approach.

Before we can delve into the depths of the theoretical conceptualisations of the relationship between human beings and the physical (non-human) aspects of their existence and activities, let us first address the nuanced differences in which the posthuman is conceptualised.

2 What is posthumanism?

Posthumanism is one of those many “post” prefixes we know from social theorising, which tend to describe a new way of thinking by defining negatively what it *is not*, instead of describing positively what it *is* (Jansen et al., 2021). Posthumanists, therefore, describe themselves as “in contrast to” or “in opposition against” and as such are a product of the political ecology of social scientific theorising. Especially in the framework of current mainstream social constructivist thinking (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1999) in human geography, we self-evidently cannot avoid defining meaningful concepts without referring to these contrasts and op-

positions (Derrida, 1982a:3–27). Meanings are not naturally given but the result of the complicated relational network of differences (Lyotard, 1984; Derrida, 1982b:111–136) and of the political economy of meaning-making. Still, it does make a difference if one defines them in “post-” terms or as “assemblages” of different aspects borrowed from a multitude of perspectives and approaches.

Also in the field of geography, posthumanism is seen as an ambiguous term. As Lorimer (2009:344f.) states,

its “post” prefix hints at the arrival of a new epoch – as “post” humanism it claims to identify a new mode of being in the world that departs significantly from the conditions of humanism. As post “humanism”, the “post” radicalises its suffix to suggest a new model of politics and philosophy; however, it does so in a fashion that echoes its antecedent’s critical ethos. Posthumanism thus refers to the populist diagnosis of a new era, a new mode of critical enquiry.

He describes how posthumanism has been conceived by human geographers in at least three ways: some have adopted it as a new and fresh perspective, which tries to overcome and get rid of the, in their view rather one-sided, human-centred model of human subjectivity. Others are worried about the turn away from humanism and the critical potential that provides. Badmington (2004:1344) also designates them as “neohumanists”. A third group of human geographers, in his view, questions whether we have ever been human in that sense and questions if posthumanism is therefore so new at all. So there is still substantial debate about what posthumanism in the field of geography entails. This debate was ignited at an early stage in geography by an exchange between Noel Castree, Catherine Nash, Neil Badmington, Bruce Braun, Jonathan Murdoch and Sarah Whatmore (Castree and Nash, 2004). This debate, however, mainly focuses on political aspects, and it mentions the different philosophical underpinnings of the different posthumanist positions but does not scrutinise them thoroughly. In the end, they somehow gather behind the still very open compromise concept of a “more-than-human geography” suggested by Whatmore (1999, 2002, 2004, 2005). In this panel, I intend to contribute to the scrutinisation of some of the philosophical underpinnings without claiming that this closes the debate. On the contrary, I aim to open up a few new perspectives on these different positions and, therefore, re-address some of their political implications and develop the idea of more-than-human geography further. Critique of posthuman approaches is not new at all, but here, I prefer to address and spell out some critical aspects in a nuanced way without using the rather crude and sweeping vocabulary that, for example, James (2017) uses.

So there are no simple definitions of what is meant by posthuman. Many different terms are used to describe the diverse opinions and positions concerning the posthuman. In a

broad sense, there is some degree of consensus about the distinction between transhumanism and posthumanism. Posthumanism can be subdivided into technological posthumanism and critical posthumanism (Adorno, 2021; Falcon, 2023; Herbrechter, 2018; Herbrechter et al., 2022; Loh, 2018). Both transhumanism and posthumanism take the traditional conception of the human being as a starting point.

Transhumanism, also known in the geographic literature as “hyperbolic posthumanism” (Lorimer, 2009:345), is mainly interested in enhancing, optimising and improving human capabilities to form our world. Science and technology are seen as promising tools to extend the power of the human being. This reaches from modest technologies, such as our spectacles with which we overcome our visual deficiencies, running blades used in para-athletics or my diabetes monitoring system helping me to keep my blood sugars within range, towards the speculative imaginations of cyborg creatures with superpowers as we know them from movies and comics. If we extend these conceptualisations of the enhanced human being from the individual human being to the human community, we might also include all kinds of technologies, such as parking allocation systems in smart cities, all other kinds of flow-guiding tools or directive gears as well as public transport systems, and self-driving cars, and also more institutional or organisational “techniques”, such as health care or educational/training systems as well as intelligent houses and garbage recycling systems and also high-tech weapons, drone warfare, the internet as global outreach to knowledge and information, etc., which all help us deal with and gain power over our environment. The conception of what makes us human is not questioned but is thought about further. All these instruments and tools help us to *transform* our current human being into the “Human Being 2.0” or “x.0” as a further step in the evolution of the human being. Also in Human Being 2.0, it is still the human being who is in charge. Lorimer (2009:345) notes that the political underpinning of this approach is based on a (neo)liberal conception of the sovereign individual in a capitalist context.

Posthumanism, in contrast, does not want to extend and enhance our traditional understanding of the human being but questions if the conceptualisation of the human being up to now, which is characterised by typical distinctions such as culture vs. nature, subject vs. object, human vs. animal, life vs. death, civilised vs. uncivilised, intelligent vs. not intelligent, reflective vs. instinctive, rational vs. irrational, open vs. closed, agentic vs. structured or cognitive vs. affective, should be questioned and possibly be redefined. So in posthumanism one does not try to enhance well-known human capabilities and characteristics but attempts to overcome them and replace them. This implies a new definition of what it means to be human.

In technological posthumanism (Badminton, 2003:11; Herbrechter, 2013:10, 19; Nayar, 2014:2–5; Philbeck, 2014:174–176; Krüger, 2021), one tries to invent a new, more superior artificial superspecies, which could *replace* human-

ity. One might say that technologically this is the superlative of transhumanism but without the human actor. Think of robots taking care of the elderly, artificial intelligence and algorithms making human beings obsolete. These posthumans would be able to think; take decisions; show affect and love; or, alternatively, maybe make the need for love, creative thinking or reproduction superfluous. The typical things which humanity values, seeks or assumes to be a human right from this perspective may become redundant. However, one might ask how this “redundancy” is defined? How can we judge redundancy without a pre-given value criterion? Even in technological posthumanism, there seems to be an implicit “humanistic residue” determining the objective for further development (Loh, 2018:11, fn. 2). The difference between transhumanism and technological posthumanism, therefore, becomes rather gradual. The technological tools and features with which in transhumanism the human being equips and enhances itself also transgress the usual limits and qualifications of the human being and therefore redefine what is seen as human (Sorgner, 2016; More, 2011; Rothblat, 2011). For certain, however, in technological posthumanism, technology becomes much more than just a means and turns into an aim and purpose in itself. In practice, this approach tends towards what is called a singularitarianism,

a movement defined by the belief that a technological singularity – the creation of superintelligence – will likely happen in the medium future, and that deliberate action ought to be taken to ensure that the singularity benefits humans. (Grossman, 2011)

This perspective also coins its own opposition in the form of what Lorimer (2009) and Castree and Nash (2004) describe as “apocalyptic posthumanism” or an environmentalist movement trying to conserve nature as they traditionally know it against the threat of these new apocalyptic developments. As Lorimer (2009:346) notes, this opposition “results in a reactionary and either religious or neo-humanist politics of fixed identities framed around an eschatological trajectory of decline and doom”.

In critical posthumanism (Barad, 2007, 2012; Braidotti, 2016; Falcon, 2023; Herbrechter, 2018; Nayar, 2014; Wolfe, 2010), technology, including cultural and institutional “technologies”, is certainly a characteristic feature of the human being which to a large part also determines the way we understand human being and how we as human beings understand the world around us. Progress in the development of these technologies and cultural assets also allows us to overcome the limitations and categorisations of what in essence is supposed to be human. As such, critical posthumanism is less interested in constructing a new model for the human being and rather more interested in the deconstruction of the hitherto essentialised criteria for being human. From this perspective, on the one hand the prefix “post-” is indeed more justified, as it negates and questions hitherto used categorisations, instead of positively defining a new humanity.

On the other hand, one could ask why this deconstructive tendency makes sense and what purpose it serves. And it is here where we see how a glimpse of what is supposed to be a “better” human being implicitly flashes up. A very open characterisation of what is human is preferred above all limiting and excluding categorisations. As such, critical posthumanism is rooted in a typically human emancipatory motive, a motive to gain power over or to overcome suppressive powers. Also this version of posthumanism, therefore, does not break loose from what we believe to be typically human (Barad, 2012:30; Braidotti, 2014:43; Wolfe, 2010:125). The deconstructivist intentions of critical posthumanism are a continuation of the post-structuralist tradition, denoted by Lorimer (2009:346) as “deconstructive posthumanism”, while at the same time, they extend this approach away from critiquing the mainly linguistic structured realities towards a critique of both linguistically and materially (embodied) structures (Barad, 2012; Braidotti, 2014:190; Wolfe, 2010:97), which in the terminology of Lorimer (2009:347) could be described as “vitalist posthumanism”. As mentioned above, the critique can take the form of showing alternative possibilities, or critique can serve the purpose of judging and expressing selective preferences for one of those options. The latter, as I show later in greater detail, is indeed the practice of critical posthumanist analysis when they contrast dystopian and utopian posthumanist realities (Hayles, 1999:5), notwithstanding their claim (Badminton, 2003:15f.) that they want to refrain from positively formulating a better alternative. This judging and therefore labelling and categorising character of critical posthumanism is also exemplified in the ethical and political implications that critical posthumanists connect with critical posthumanist reflections.

Especially Barad (2015) brings the normativity of this deconstructive endeavour to bear. For her, and I cannot agree more, every kind of knowledge, irrespective of if this is natural or social scientific knowledge and irrespective of if it is about ontological or epistemological insights, is highly political and normative (Barad, 2015:207). Criticism per se is a creative and responsible task.

“It is not exhausted in a blanket denial” as the rather negative connotation of the prefix “post-” in posthumanism is suggesting. The acting individual has responsibility due to the structure of being, which is always already shared with a counterpart or bound to a counterpart. (Barad, 2015, in an interview with Jennifer Sophia Theodor, quoted in Loh, 2018:158)

This resounds the call for responsibility advocated by Jonas (1984), Young (2011) and Levinas (1992). Similarly, another prominent proponent of critical posthumanism, Haraway (1985:35), notes that every questioning of categorisations and b/orderings by necessity establishes new differentiations, for which one needs to be accountable and take responsibility. Loh (2018:159) quotes her from an inter-

view with Penley and Ross (1991:4) where Donna Haraway tellingly expresses this:

Politics rests on the possibility of a shared world. Flat out. Politics rests on the possibility of being accountable to each other, in some non-voluntaristic “I feel like it today” way. It rests on some sense of the way that you come into the historical world encrusted with barnacles. Metaphorically speaking, I imagine a historical person as being somehow like a hermit crab that’s encrusted with barnacles. And I see myself and everybody else as sort of switching shells as we grow. . . . But every shell we pick up has its history, and you certainly don’t choose those histories – this is Marx’s point about making history but not any way you choose. You have to account for the encrustations and the inertias, just as you have to remain accountable to each other through learning how to remember, if you will, which barnacles you’re carrying. To me, that is a fairly straightforward way of avoiding cynical relativism while still holding on, again, to contingency.

The normativity of the critical posthumanist tradition also shows in its declared goal to not just rethink but also overcome the classical humanistic definition of humanity, in the form of the idealising capabilities or attributes such as “responsibility” (compassion, empathy), “freedom” (autonomy) and “reason” (rationality). In this classical conception of the human being, the special abilities of the mind and soul in their relationship to the materiality of the body and the world around us play an essential role. Both the mind and the body have their limitations and require continuous learning and care to unfold full humanity. Critical posthumanism has the declared goal to overcome these limitations not just by extending them through technological tools or by replacing the human being with some kind of mechanical superintelligence, but also by emancipating them from the idealistic definition of the human being in favour of a more inclusive definition of the human being and a related more open world view.

In the emancipatory endeavour to create a more inclusive humanity, critical posthumanism explicitly opposes the philosophical anthropological tradition, which is accused of essentialising these humanistic traits. Loh (2018:149), like many others (Falcon, 2023:19; Greenhough, 2014; Lorimer, 2009; Philo, 2016:4; etc.), even states that overcoming philosophical anthropology is the fundamental objective and driving force of critical posthumanism. Strangely enough, the critical posthumanist movement also acknowledges that it is still very much rooted in humanistic values described by this philosophical anthropological tradition. Nevertheless, its practitioners do not discuss the diverse positions of the philosophical anthropological classics such as those of Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen and Helmuth Plessner in

much detail (Fischer, 2006). Critical posthumanists are also not very explicit about the specific humanistic values and how these determine the normative framework of their new “barnacle”. Nevertheless, in their deconstructive diligence, they first roughly construct their philosophical anthropological “other”, before deconstructing it. One may question if the construction of this other does justice to it or how far this might also be a kind of straw man or windmill one seeks to fight.

Until this point it has been easy to feel sympathetic to the emancipatory ambitions of the posthumanist project. But as we notice, at the same time, we also need to critically scrutinise this approach to make sure it stands on strong feet. In this contribution, I, therefore, want to formulate a constructive critique of critical posthumanism. I will do so by first (Sect. 3) going into the idealising aspects of dystopian and utopian qualifications made in the framework of critical posthumanism, in search of their (post)humanistic roots. I will then (Sect. 4) point to a philosophical anthropological approach, which was largely neglected by critical posthumanist thinkers and does not seem susceptible to many of the posthumanist critiques. This approach might even contribute to the formulation of a positive and constructive alternative to or further development of critical posthumanism in which the relation to humanistic values is much more clear – even though, in accordance with critical posthumanist thinking, these values cannot be essentialised. Finally, in the Epilogue, I will conclude that both post-structuralist deconstructivism and this specific philosophical anthropological approach are to a fair degree indeed cutting into the same notch, by taking a *true* utopian standpoint, and would even enable us to radicalise the critical stance of critical posthumanism or rather of a more-than-human approach.

3 Posthuman utopianism

Critical posthumanism seeks to create a more inclusive world and less exclusive categorisation of the human being and the human world view (Hauskeller, 2014). The usual labels used to scrutinise these alleged humanistic categorisations and world views are “utopian” or “dystopian”, but as a subtext of these labels, one might also say “good” and “evil”. By adopting a critical posthumanist perspective, many scholars assume movement from evil to good when moving from humanistic exclusiveness to posthumanistic inclusiveness. But is this really the case? Utopia and dystopia in the first instance seem mutually exclusive and incommensurable. They attempt to formulate *concrete* criteria and attributes which allow them to qualify them in one way or another. In their explicitness, they are positioned and placed in reality and they construct a situation with a final “end”. “This is what and how they are or should be . . . period.”

However, if we look more closely at the meaning of the utopian or utopia, we see that the words imply a state of af-

fairs which is *not* concrete or a final situation at all. A utopia is by definition a non-place, a no-man's-land, an other land or an unreal imagination, on which we tend to project many good attributes and qualities – a final blueprint for a better society. But it is only a blueprint and not a reality. In the same way, a dystopia is an unrealistic imagination, a non-existing situation which represents all those things we find abhorrent or unjust. In this way, they indeed must be mutually exclusive. But how can these explicit exclusive categorisations serve the description of the dreamt inclusiveness of critical posthumanism? Don't these critical posthumanist utopian thoughts mistake their imagined utopia with a real situation? Aren't they essentialising their much sought-after inclusiveness in such a way that it becomes exclusionary? What for one person is utopian is for another dystopian. What looks utopian now is unveiled as dystopian tomorrow. So how can utopia be defined?

It is this inherent entanglement of the utopian and dystopian that the classic authors about utopia tried to put forward. Huxley (2006) [1932], for example, described the dystopian attributes of a technical utopia in his book *Brave New World*, and similarly, Orwell (1949) in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes the monstrosities of a similar kind of dystopia caused by the utopian but oppressive fetishism of centrally managed communal values. But we do not even have to go that far back. The Dutch philosopher Achterhuis (2016:9–10) describes a concrete and *real* Dutch utopia, in the form of the Dutch village Nagele, in one of the polders regained from the sea: this Dutch example is especially interesting because it was created almost from scratch: the ideal situation to create an undistorted real utopia. Nagele in its design was subdivided into seven small boroughs, each with the same distance to shopping facilities, the church and the school. When you have seen one of them, you have seen them all. In Nagele, everyone was supposed to be equal and happy. The design of the village had the objective of making its inhabitants better people. Nagele was supposed to be egalitarian: a kind of socialism without oppressive equalisation and only with moderate differences. Everyone enjoyed the same conditions which should make them happy. You could sense this at each street corner. No house was higher than the other (Fig. 1), demonstrating values of inclusiveness, which we also recognise in critical posthumanism.

This enthusiasm for a seemingly better world is of course highly appreciated and supported, and it can be affirmed also in the endeavour of critical posthumanism: a heart-warming experience, which indeed can create hope and confidence but might also make us blind to the contingency of these designs. When I showed this picture of this envisioned real utopia on the occasion of the Philosophy Festival GRID in Amsterdam in 2021, where I presented an earlier version of this paper, it provoked laughter in the audience. How could we ever consider *this* to be utopian? Today we consider this to be a ridiculous idea. Indeed, what this example shows is that these kinds of imaginations of real and concrete utopias fail.



Figure 1. The realised “utopia” of Nagele (source: Rijkswaterstaat/Afdeling Multimedia https://www.archieven.nl/nl/zoeken?mivast=0&miadt=2606&mizig=269&miview=gal&milang=nl&micols=1&mizk_alle=nagele, last access: 11 December 2023).

Notwithstanding the high expectations, indeed Nagele also failed, as every real “utopia” must fail. Currently, the municipality of which Nagele is a part would rather discard Nagele in totality and turn it back into an agricultural area. All traces of Nagele will then disappear. It shows that it is impossible to make utopia concrete and real. Every utopia carries its dystopia. They do not exclude each other but are inherently intertwined and are only shown to be different perspectives on the same situation. This is also a relativising lesson to be learned from the real utopian posthuman designs for a better future.

But if we acknowledge that, can we then maybe still design a more flexible and adaptable utopia? The Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys and his design of New Babylon (1959–1978) recognised this inherently dystopian aspect of each fixed utopic design and tried to take that into account. The New Babylon he initially imagined was a community

designed for an awakening “new man”, freed from nature by the wonders of technology, freed from all functional constraints and able to devote his entire life to travel, adventure and creativity: the ideal of *Homo ludens* (the playing human being). The old way of life, the *ora et labora*, would be replaced by a fully mechanised and artificial world in which nature and time had been eliminated and creating freedom for everyone. (Kennedy, 1995:9)

Today we would probably describe it as a critical posthuman utopia.

In this vein, we can take into account that the ideal place for such a community, in Nieuwenhuys' view, cannot be a single fixed ideal utopian place but should be designed as multiple places or as a chain of different buildings and rooms providing space for all kinds of purposes, swarming through the landscape (Fig. 2), in which the users and inhabitants

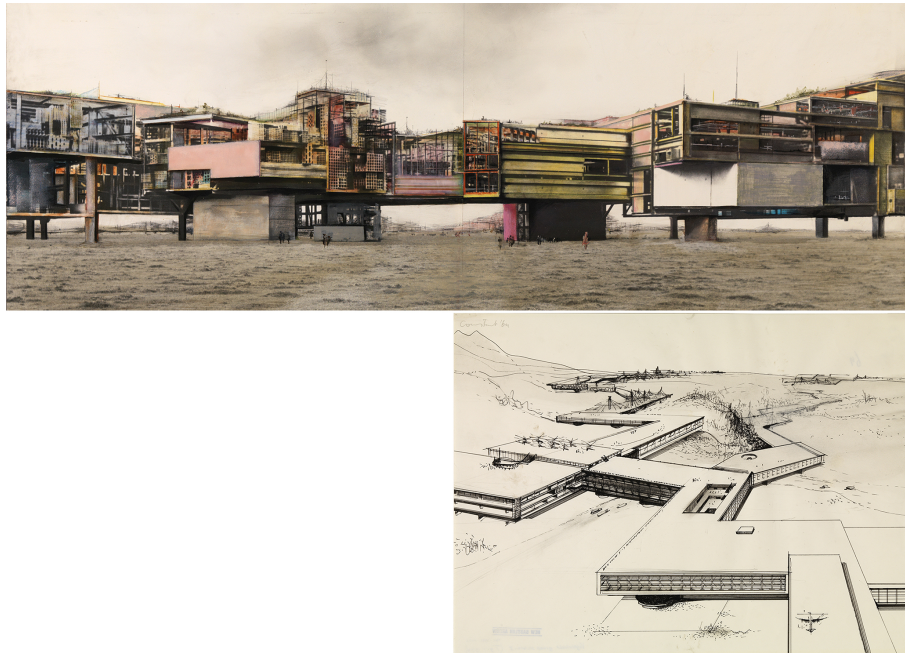


Figure 2. View on New Babylonian sectors, 1971 (above), and landscape with sectors from a bird's-eye view, 1964 (right) (<https://stichtingconstant.nl/>, last access: 11 December 2023).

could roam around from one temporarily utopian place to the next. The original idea of housing in which the inhabitants are more or less pinned down or “homed”, and definitively placed, in exclusive spaces, in his view, needed to be overcome. In this view, there was no final and definitive utopian home. Instead, the inhabitants should be conceived as nomads, constantly on the move, roaming around, in perpetual search of an even better place, the “next” better place.¹ Each specific part or building in this string of buildings would therefore differ in functionality, form and atmosphere.

This description of the New Babylon seems to have great similarities with what Bruce Braun, in the initial exchange about posthumanism in geography (Castree and Nash, 2004:1354), describes as human beings as created by the relations with the world in their current situation, having no definitive essence but, as an “in-folding” of the world, an effect of ongoing and ceaseless ontological play (Harrison, 2000) or choreography through Nieuwenhuys’ New Babylon. After initially displaying his designs in the form of 3D models, Constant Nieuwenhuys shifted to depicting these diverse spatial experiences, which the New Babylon represented, in the form of paintings (Fig. 3). While doing so, he noticed that the inhabitants, the human beings, he depicted were somehow also a bit lost, isolated and uneasy in this labyrinth of compartments, of emergent new utopias. In his painting *Terrain vague [III]* (1973), his utopian dream of a



Figure 3. *Terrain vague [III]* 1973 (<https://stichtingconstant.nl/work/terrain-vague-ii>, last access: 11 December 2023).

happy society seems to have again turned into a dystopia, into a nightmare of an evil society (Heynen, 2002:118). Thinking through and working through his utopian imagination, he experienced that it is impossible to objectify and make even this flexibly evolving and emergent utopian idea concrete. So every actualisation and objectivation, every spatialisation

¹ Strikingly, these ideas seem to parallel current mobility approaches (Scheller and Urry, 2006; Adey, 2017) as well as the nomadic subjects of the posthuman thinker Braidotti (1994).

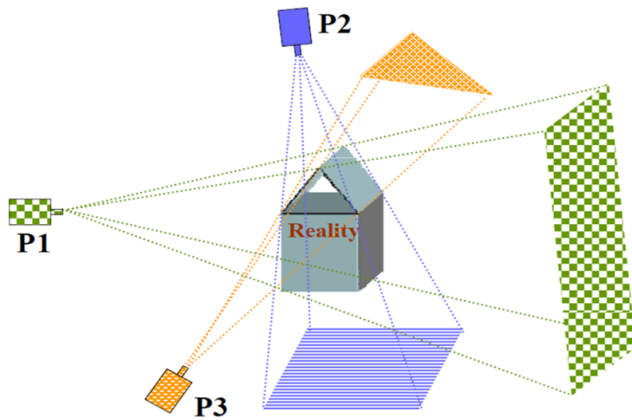


Figure 4. Positioned perspectives (source: Weichhart, 2000:488).

and historicisation, and every containerisation of our human being contingently pin us down in a certain way, excluding other possibilities and alternatives. This could also be true for the critical posthuman reconceptualisation and redesign of our human being.

Although the categorisations with which critical posthumanists conceptualise their utopia are slightly different than the ones used in this example, the main thrust of overcoming discriminatory differences and transgressing the borderings of the dualities we use in describing ourselves and others is in certain respects similar. Even though in the first instance the posthumanist ambitions arouse fascination and support for a better world, they also seem to fall into the same trap, by assuming that they have found the holy grail on earth, instead of recognising that they may have made a few steps forward while at the same time in their design of utopia they also create setbacks and new dubious differences and exclusions, which make our qualification of a better future rather ambivalent and situational. It is important to acknowledge the situational, historical and geographical perspective we have on our current and future world and therefore also on alternative futures. This situational perspectivism is illustrated in Fig. 4, which I borrowed from a presentation of a fellow geographic thinker, Weichhart (2000:488).

Irrespective of our positioning and perspective, we are never able to design an all-encompassing utopia which does not exclude other perspectives or positions (P). In the same way, we cannot design a utopian self or (post)human being in concrete terms because, as soon as we make it concrete, we are positioning ourselves and assume one perspective which makes us blind to other positions and perspectives. Utopian designs are inherently incomplete and insufficient. These are the kinds of utopian designs which I would like to describe as real “utopian” designs, in which I explicitly put the attribute “utopian” between quotes, as these designs are by necessity ambivalent and “dystopian” as well.

The design of these critical posthuman utopias, even if they sound so sympathetic and topical given our current sit-



Figure 5. Emotional anger culture: Greta Thunberg (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVIRompc1yE>, last access: 11 December 2023).

uation, somehow nevertheless contradict the utopias’ own philosophical underpinnings. Braun (in Castree and Nash, 2004:1354) states that “[i]t was precisely to avoid such unintentional returns to the ‘human itself’ that many scholars in the social sciences and humanities – geographers included – have turned to philosophers such as Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze, and Serres (see Whatmore, 2002)”. Human beings in the eyes of these writers were seen as an effect of their relational situation, and therefore, the human has no essence, and never did, and was “post” from the beginning and in the middle of multiple becomings (Castree and Nash, 2004:1354). The real utopist endeavours of many critical posthumanist thinkers do not seem to take that message to the end by neglecting the multiple and continuous becomings of the ethical principles behind these endeavours. They, according to Lorimer (2009:352, but also see Braidotti, 2019:467f.), seem to be tempted by Marxist and feminist thinkers to not fully embrace the immanence and fluidity of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s philosophy and to stick to their concrete ethical positioning and real utopian designs. In this way, they are still firmly positioned within the Enlightenment ethos of progressive critical theory and their humanist predecessors (Lorimer, 2009:353).

Neglecting the critical view on critical posthuman utopias, especially in our current societal situation, may be dangerous. Especially as these real “utopian” designs cannot be separated from our current societal situation and static position. Today we seem to live in times of many limited truths, and “alternative facts” and in times in which the mediated digital means of communication sometimes lead to hypes and amplifications of distinctions or to intolerances concerning these differences. In extreme cases, this also leads to different versions of what is nowadays described as identity politics, populism, cancel culture, new tribalism and the emergence of illiberal democracies (Žižek, 2018). In this respect, academia is not that different from society in general.

Especially when real “utopian” models with high moral stakes are put forward, they can easily become rather dog-

matic; rigid; intolerant and exclusive; and insensitive to their inherent limitations, contradictions and dystopian aspects. This is rather detrimental to the potential positive effects of the utopian, difference-transgressing efforts they start from. When I recently listened to a highly inspiring podcast² about posthumanism, the provocative question was raised of whether, from a critical posthumanist perspective, one could imagine a posthuman capitalist society. Without hesitation, this led to an absolute and categorical “no”. The utopian and dystopian cards seemed to be shuffled already and clear and new b/ordering and therefore excluding categorisations made up. I was baffled by this blunt answer even though I have always been a committed opponent of the often-acclaimed utopian force of the free market (see also Achterhuis, 2010). Can one be so explicitly rejective if one strives for maximisation of inclusiveness? I then started to become intrigued by what they mean by “more inclusive”. Of course, I would immediately affirm (in the sense of Braidotti, 2019) their qualifications and inclusive ambitions, which also inspire my thinking and doing, and I would under certain circumstances also support their forceful expression and performance, as one sometimes needs to shout out to be heard. But at the same time, I also became aware of how exclusive and dystopian some of these ideas are. And the occasion of that podcast also did not seem to be an exception.

Societal debates, including academic debates, seem to become less civil and increasingly contain a certain degree of “wokeness” from both progressive and conservative sides. The world seems to be subdivided into black and white, without any in-between, and these distinctions are expressed and performed with harsh claims and emotional disqualifications (Korf, 2022). The left-wing critical thinker Stegemann (2021) describes this anger culture as detrimental to any kind of constructive and progressive debate. Norris (2020) resounds, albeit in a bit more nuanced way, the same argument for the academic debate as well. This does not come as a surprise, since we cannot assume academia to be insensitive to or separate from the societal Zeitgeist. It is also part of the critical posthumanist argument that we should not confine ourselves to cognitivism and we should allow more space for our corporeal emotions, irrespective if whether those are love or anger or laughing or crying (see also Plessner, 1970, about laughing and crying), but it does make a difference if this leads to blunt categorisation and exclusions (Neiman, 2023).

This exclusionist tendency seems to confuse the real “utopian–dystopian” character of our b/orderings with the undetermined character of a true utopia, This indeterminacy or “non-place” character of a utopia in a true sense acknowl-



Figure 6. Cancel culture: Banksy, Essex Street in Boston’s Chinatown (<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=67746713>, last access: 11 December 2023).

edges the contingency of our current situation, judgements and opinions and always tries to transcend these to reach an even more inclusive future. This is where I would have expected more from critical posthuman thinking and doing. Utopia, as I understand it, is at best a desire, a tendency, a driving force, an imagined objective, an Archimedean or God’s-eye viewpoint, or a view from nowhere. It is a desire not for a concrete real utopia with its inherent dystopian aspects but for the all-inclusive but un-localisable utopian non-place. Utopia is indeed by definition a non-place and should not be confused with specific actualised and objectified designs for a better future. Utopia, therefore, must by definition be undetermined, unspecific and virtual if it wants to be transgressing and inclusive and comprehensive. The utopian standpoint is “somewhere” as well as “nowhere”. The real drives and desires behind utopian thinking are focused on a target beyond our real (contingent) “utopian” designs and positionings.

At this point, the rather neglected philosophical anthropological point of view comes in again. Instead of being the opposed other of critical posthumanism, which critical posthumanists believe should be overcome, or in today’s terminology maybe even should be “cancelled”, this philosophical anthropology might appear to be one of the strongest proponents of a critical posthumanist approach. It may be even more radical in its critical endeavour than critical posthumanism, as this philosophical anthropology stresses the unfinished and open-ended, non-essentialist, emergent character of the human being, continuously seeking a better positionality and open to including the non-human and the other.

²“Kritischer Posthumanismus mit Janina Loh”, *Neue Welten – der Utopie Podcast* (“Critical Posthumanism with Janina Loh”, *New Worlds – the Utopia Podcast*): <https://neuewelten.podigee.io/7-6-kritischer-posthumanismus-mit-janina-loh> (last access: 11 December 2023).

4 The forgotten philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner

Instead of being the “other” or the “enemy” of the deconstructive approach of critical posthumanism, the version of philosophical anthropology I want to suggest here can be seen as aligning with many aspects of the critical posthumanist endeavour, and concerning its conception of a utopian standpoint, philosophical anthropology might even be more nuanced and constructive in a more practical sense than critical posthumanism. In many of the linguistically oriented deconstructive approaches such as Foucault’s discourse theoretical approach, it is not so much about the denial of anthropological features of the human being but about the historicisation and dynamics of its representations (Seyfert, 2012:66–67; Fischer, 2017). No single discursive formation of the human being can fully grasp the continuous becoming of the human being. They only highlight those aspects which seem to change in the face of what at that moment seems societally prudent. Certain aspects, however, change faster than others. The psychological, sociological, linguistic and ethnological aspects seem more volatile than biological and other more corporeal aspects of the human being on which philosophical anthropological reflections tend to focus. But, following Driesch (1921:446, fn. 1) and Bergson (2001 [1889]:32), in both aspects, the human being is not seen as rigidly essentialised but rather as dynamic and undetermined. The driving force behind these changes is not just an external societal power play, nor is it only an internal autonomous force of life (*vis vitalis*). Not only is it an empirical object, which can be described and categorised from the outside, but, at the same time, it is also an enabling unobjectified subject. According to Krüger (2019:487–488), the human historical temporality (and geographical spatiality) emerges in between the human being as an empirical *object* and the human being as a transcendental *subject*. The human being “spontaneously and unconsciously alienated himself as a subject in objective relations, from whose appropriation he was to emerge again individually and collectively as a subject becoming conscious of himself”. This is constructive differentiation, which Bergson and Driesch conceptualise as “interval” or “suspension” or “interruption” (Fischer, 2006) – the in-between or difference between stimulus and response.

The philosophical anthropologist Plessner (2019) uses the concept of “border” to address this, while Deleuze (1993:91) use the term “fold”, which they derive from Leibniz. These borders or folds are not seen as absolute and untransgressible distinctions of alterities but rather as open and liminal. In any case, each differentiation also includes its contingency and its transcendence. In all cases, they all address the uprooting of what we usually understand as classical anthropological essentials. According to Plessner, the human being is on the one hand historically and geographically, materially and socially positioned – in his terms “centrally positioned” – but on the other hand also already beyond himself and *eccentri-*

cally positioned (Mulder, 2019). As such, for Helmuth Plessner, the human being is essentially inessentialisable, or as he denotes it, the human being is the *Homo absconditus*. In this respect, one might say that the concept of the human being and human life, as Helmuth Plessner conceives it, is posthuman avant la lettre. This point of view, however, clearly pertains to the difference between diverse forms of life in our world. Plants, animals and human beings in certain respects indeed differ. As such it is also telling that Helmuth Plessner ideal typically addresses the specific (dynamic) qualities of the human being, without positioning the human being as superior to or better than any other form of existence. Posthumanism in his terms would imply that indeed every categorisation and essentialisation of the human being needs to relativise and needs to be thought of as a continuous becoming and re-positioning, not because human beings are equal to any other kind of being but rather because it is an *essential* attribute of human beings that they cannot be *essentialised*. They cannot find a final home and are always, at the same time, also eccentrically positioned beyond where they are at that moment. Irrespective of how one describes their current position, this position cannot be described as a real concrete utopia, or as an ideal *home*, as the human being simultaneously has a true utopian standpoint beyond any qualities of our current situation.

[F]or behind every determination of our being lies dormant the unspoken possibilities of otherness. (Plessner, 1999:109)

Helmuth Plessner describes the typical human eccentric positionality through three fundamental anthropological laws: (1) the law of natural artificiality, (2) the law of mediated immediacy and (3) the law of the utopian standpoint. Through the eccentric positionality of the human being, he loses his natural position and pre-given relationality with the world, which creates the need to enhance ourselves artificially and causes us to lose our direct relationship with our surroundings and with ourselves and experience it only indirectly, mediated through our current bodily existence and expressive positioning which is not necessarily or fully intended or of our choosing. We experience ourselves from a neutral utopian standpoint as essentially contingent and as inherently *deconstructive* beings, which are in constant need to (re-)construct themselves. Nennen (1991, 1995) even describes the human being as *Homo discursivus* and traces this special human trait back to evolutionary principles. Instead of assuming a new real and concrete ideal utopian home, the utopian standpoint Helmuth Plessner is presupposing is much more radically inclusive as it does *not* attempt to define or concretise this utopian standpoint but assumes it as an inherently transcendental point of view without any attributes and any exclusivity. It is a true utopian non-place or in-between place or place in the nowhere. It defines a specific human openness to everybody and an openness to everything, or to any kind of other, irrespective of what kind

of nature. As such, this is a strong and radical inclusivity which goes far beyond the usual critical posthumanism, which does not seem to reach beyond designs of concrete and real utopias and which does not seem to be aware of the inherent dystopias and contingencies related to their (central) positionings or their convictional “truths”. These presumed restricted real utopias of critical posthumanist positionings always create new dystopian exclusions. The utopian standpoint, which Helmuth Plessner describes as typically human, however, defines an inclusive *Mitwelt* or shared world, as a condition of the possibility of taking the perspective of the other and adopting the moral principle of including and recognising others as if they were oneself (de Mul, 2019:79–80; Heidegren, 2021) and the moral basis for dialogue. In this way, it also relativises our centric positioning and our autonomy to determine our fate (Lindemann, 2014:96–104). It is not just “bonding” but also “bridging” as Plessner (1999) in his terms describes it in *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*.

At the same time, this typically human eccentric positionality also brings us further away from “home” and makes us constitutively homeless, resulting in a utopian hope to transcend this tragic aspect of the human predicament and to find a blissful home (Plessner, IV:419, as quoted by de Mul, 2019:81). So, this characteristically human radically inclusive utopian standpoint does not disqualify the attempts of critical posthumanism to establish a concrete more inclusive conception of the human being in our everyday life. Instead, it conceives these attempts as necessary and unavoidable and as one side of the dual aspectivity of our being human. But exactly because the human being *dialectically* emerges in between our centric and eccentric counterparts, these attempts are both from a centric perspective positive positionings and from an eccentric perspective inherent failures. So, they are positive attempts to deconstruct and overcome hitherto exclusionary categorisations in our everyday life that attempt to create a real and more inclusive real utopia, while at the same time, they are by necessity also creating new dystopian exclusions, seeking new deconstructions that search for even more or different kinds of inclusiveness. Certainly, this kind of philosophical anthropology cannot serve as the other of critical posthumanism but instead might serve as enlightening critical posthumanism, making more explicit the rootedness in humanist conceptualisations of critical posthumanism and taking the differences in the different forms of being and living in this world seriously, instead of dealing with the world only from a narrow-minded real utopian point of view.

This implies that if critical posthumanists were to take a closer look at some of the philosophical anthropological schools of thinking, which they originally seemed to generally be opposed to, they would discover sources of humanistic thinking which are not at all closed categorisations of the distinction between the human and the non-human and which also do not essentialise the characterisation of the human being. In the work of Helmuth Plessner, they might even dis-

cover a radicalisation of their critical approach, in the sense that it does need to stop at a Deleuzian fluidisation of our human being and becoming, combined with some leftovers of what they originally have described and criticised as a humanistic mode of thinking. By taking the human ability to critically reflect on their centric positionality from the perspective of their eccentric positionality, it would extend the critical perspective of critical posthumanism on the world also to a self-critical perspective of their (centric) critiques and a genuine source of inclusive constructive critique. This may even bring the critical posthuman approach more in line with a humanist critical phenomenological approach, as, for example, advocated by Simonsen (2012) and Simonsen and Koefoed (2020).

5 Epilogue

In this short contribution, I tried to show that it is indeed worthwhile to review German theory and German thinkers, like Helmuth Plessner, in the framework of current debates, like the one on critical posthumanism, in our discipline, instead of relying on rather superficial, incomplete and biased indirect perceptions, not because these “old fellows” were necessarily right but because there is a rich cultural capital which may help us to sharpen our critical knowledge and views and to avoid uninformed surfing of the current fashions of social theorising. In this specific case, it helped to critically assess a few aspects of critical posthumanist thinking and probably would also help to develop it further and radicalise the critical thrust of critical posthumanism to make it even more inclusive, instead of perpetuating new exclusions. The kind of critique of critical posthumanism that I tried to formulate here does not restrict itself to critical posthumanism, and it probably also only scratched the surface of critical posthumanism and does not touch many of its core elements. This kind of critique can also be extended to several other current debates and movements in social thinking, and here critical posthumanism might be seen as just one case among others, e.g. the more-than-human approach or the humanist critical phenomenological approach common in the field of human geography. Emphasising this exemplary example therefore probably also does not do full justice to critical posthumanist thinking. But certainly it shows that German theory can help us to stay critical about and alert to possible misunderstandings or shortcuts in our arguments and to try to think about the next step. Helmuth Plessner certainly helps us to radicalise our critical perspectives on the human being and human everyday life. Especially in the framework of human geography, where the relationship between the human being and the ecological and social environment are of central interest, thoroughly reflecting on what is specifically human in this relationship and how to deal with that in practice is, especially in the search for a more-than-human geography (Whatmore, in Castree and Nash, 2004; Greenough, 2014),

of crucial importance. In this case, it, therefore, might be an intriguing question for the future “critical critical posthumanism” to address how in practice we can agnostically deal with the dual aspectivity or dialectical aspect of our human being and everyday life.³

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³In a forthcoming book chapter on practice theories (Ernste, 2023), I explore these agonistic/dialectical aspects in our everyday practices.

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