Review of Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 296 pages, Reviewed by Alexander Thomas

Abstract
Francesca Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism* is an erudite and important contribution to the growing field of Posthumanist literature. For Ferrando philosophical posthumanism comprises post-humanism, post-anthropocentricism and post-dualism. A significant facet of the book's worth derives from its expert uncovering of the genealogy of posthumanism and its identification of the similarities to and differences from related movements. There remains a tension within the book between its stated aims of mediation and praxis, as well as its professed perspectivism and its grasping for transcendental truth within the quantum realm. The notions of post-anthropocentricism and post-dualism would benefit from further development and specificity. Nevertheless, this is an exciting, inspiring and at times dizzying book that successfully identifies the urgency of posthumanist thought in a world increasingly beleaguered by legacies of Western humanist practices.

Francesca Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism* opens with the bold claim that 'Posthumanism is the philosophy of our time'. She acknowledges though that it is not a clearly defined creed and one of her primary aims is to identify its genealogies, and to distinguish it from other theories with which the term is confused, related to or stems from. Ferrando writes with clarity and precision, and the digestible nature of the book is aided by its structure of short chapters within which she asks a series of simple questions such as 'what does posthumanism mean?'; 'where does posthumanism come from?'; through to 'what is life?' and 'what is the multiverse?'. She maintains that posthumanism's urgency stems from 'an integral redefinition of the human, following the onto-epsitemological, as well as scientific and bio-technological developments, of the twentieth and twenty first centuries' (2019, p.1).

Ferrando sees philosophical posthumanism as being comprised of three main ideas: post-humanism, post-anthropocentricism and post-dualism. Her primary contention with regards to post-humanism is that human experience should be understood in pluralistic rather than in generalized and universalized terms. Decentering the human in relation to the non-human is the main concern of post-anthropocentricism. Post-dualism is focused on undermining strict, rigid and absolute dualisms, particularly when they lead to hierarchical conceptions such as human/animal, mind/body. For Ferrando, such thinking causes a process of othering inherent in much Western thought which results in domination. Ferrando acknowledges that posthumanism 'has been primarily defined as a *post-humanism* and a *post-anthropocentricism*' (2019, p.55), but has added *post-dualism* as a defining aspect of the philosophy.

Ferrando expertly uncovers the genealogy of posthumanism, identifying its trajectory through postmodernism with the important additional influence of studies of difference such as feminist, postcolonial, race and queer theories. These have served to deconstruct the 'center' of Western discourse, which posthumanism builds upon by dismissing 'the centrality of the center in its singular form, both in its hegemonic and resistant modes…its centers…are mutable, nomadic, ephemeral. Its perspectives have to be pluralistic, multilayered, and as comprehensive as possible' (Ferrando, 2019, pp. 56-7). This post-centralizing approach encourages an acknowledgement of alterity -

posthumanism seeks not to be a singular discourse but rather one that is radically open. The position counters the notion of the human implicit to humanism, in which man is considered the measure of all things, and thus by its nature exclusionary. Noted Posthumanist thinker Rosi Braidotti draws attention to the limitations of this conceptualization of the human in the preface to *Philosophical Posthumanism*, claiming the humanist ideal of "Man" creates 'an exceptionalist civilizational standard that claims privileged access to self-reflective reason for the human species as a whole and for European culture more specifically' (cited in Ferrando, 2019, p.xii). As she explains this civilizational model leads to the colonialist mindset of European expansion. Ferrando cites chattel slavery, the conquistadors' treatment of Native Americans, and the victims of the Rwandan and Nazi genocides as the dehumanized Others of this exceptionalist humanist legacy. It is Braidotti's brand of posthumanism that Ferrando's thought most closely resembles and so it is fitting she should provide the preface to this volume.

Philosophical Posthumanism is divided into three parts. The first establishes what posthumanism is (and what it is not). The 'philosophical' aspect of the discourse is not to signal contradistinction from critical and cultural posthumamisms from which it emerges. Rather it is to emphasise the breadth of posthumanist inquiry through its merging of the humanities, environmentalism and science in an attempt to reconsider all prior Western humanist philosophical discourse with an awareness of the limitations of its 'humanistic, anthropocentric and dualistic assumptions' (Ferrando, 2019, p.55). The section also draws on Heidegger's analysis of technology and Neitzschean-Foucauldian antihumanist legacies with particular attention paid to the Ubermensch. Part 2 asks 'Of which "human" is the posthuman a "post"?', and is primarily concerned with the process of 'humanizing', building on Donna Haraway's claim that 'Gender is a verb, not a noun' (cited in Ferrando, 2019, p.68). Thus for Ferrando 'the human is not an essence but a process…[one] becomes human through experience, socialization, reception, and retention (or refusal) of human normative assets' (2019, p.71). Agamben's concept of the 'anthropological machine' is introduced and evaluated; the history of the notion of human is fascinatingly explored through Roman and Greek history with their exclusionary emphasis on speech and reason. Linnaeus's taxonomical categorization of homo sapiens is also probed and critiqued for its racist and sexist limitations. The final section begins by analyzing the impacts of anthropocentricism on our planet with climate catastrophe and the sixth mass extinction of species helping to give rise to the idea of the geological era of the Anthropocene. Ferrando proceeds to undermine a number of dualisms including the notions of life / death and animate / inanimate. The section culminates with an explanation of the relationship between posthumanism and quantum physics (with reference to Karen Barad), even developing a conception of a posthumanist multiverse as a thought experiment.

The book functions as an excellent introduction for students trying to situate and understand posthumanist discourse in the wider philosophical field. Antihumanism, New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology are all explained with the central differences to posthumanism laid out. The movement Ferrando spends most time considering is the one with which posthumanism, in many ways, shares least ideological ground, namely transhumanism. Technogenesis, the co-evolution of human and technological development, is clearly of interest to posthumanists, forming as it does a role in the redefinition of the human. However, posthumanists

decry techno-enchantment – the triumphalist claims of technological Utopianism underpinning much transhumanist thought which, for Ferrando are 'based on anthropocentric and technocentric premises' (2019, p.38). She offers a potent critique of transhumanist discourse in claiming it 'would generate, sustain and justify social inequalities, political discriminations, and legal violence' (2019, p.34). Elsewhere she points out 'the prospect of (some) humans redesigning the global ecosystem, according to their perception of relative and culture-specific notions, such as "happiness" and "paradise", is rooted in a hyperbolic form of humanistic exceptionalism, and absolutism' (2019, p34). Yet Ferrando is not entirely dismissive of the ideology, even stating, 'Transhumanism offers a deep and visionary reflection on technology, which should be cherished' (2019, p.38).

This is symptomatic of Ferrando's posthumanist approach as she refers to it as a 'philosophy of mediation'. However, such mediation feels too passive given some of the powerful examples of the failings of Western humanist thought she so effectively elucidates. Given the catastrophic environmental conditions in the Anthropocene, genocidal histories galvanized by cultural supremecism and the potentially dangerous delusions of Utopian techno-triumphalism, this tone of mediation feels untenable for it seems to undermine the gravity of the issues highlighted by posthumanist perspectives. For these reasons too, a 'Concluding Celebration', which signals the end of the book, is perhaps not an apt note on which to sign off. Throughout Ferrando advocates a multi-perspective approach that denies hierarchy to truth claims including Posthumanist thought itself. Thus no modes of thinking are fully dismissed but 'are recognized as functional acts of the philosophical drama, and, more in general, as contributors to the historical formation of the notion of the human' (Ferrando, 2019, p.52). This underplays the vital ethical insights of philosophical posthumanism, denying it the importance and urgency that Ferrando elsewhere so effectively identifies.

Readers may also feel a tension between this professed mediation and her emphasis on posthumanism as a praxis. The focus on praxis is further compromised as it is not quite clear how a human should function in modernity as genuinely post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic. Post-anthropocentricism begs the question from what perspective can we view things if not an anthropocentric one. Ferrando acknowledges, but never fully resolves this problem: she notes that posthumanism is 'aware of its epistemic limitations (as theorized by and for humans)' (2019, p.2). Whether post-anthropocentricism is primarily an ethical ideal – that we should consider things from the viewpoints and interests of other species – or a deeper claim that we can somehow gain ontological and epistemological understandings from a non-anthropocentric perspective is explored but is imprecise. Ferrando claims posthumanism accesses 'an epistemological standpoint through the feminist policies of situating the self, and acknowledging the self as plural and relational' (2019, p.23). Elsewhere she states, 'Accessing nonhuman perspectives means taking into consideration the existence of other species…It means hearing their messages, which may not be verbal or intellective but they are still very clear' (2019, p.152). This feels primarily an ethical claim, but the clarity of the required action that should follow remains elusive.

Likewise post-dualism calls into question the extent to which difference must be acknowledged in order to make sense of the world and to make ethical claims.

Ferrando states 'critical post-dualism…leaves no room for the strict separation between life and death' (2019, p.55) and the 'strict border placed…between organic/inorganic, biological/artificial, and physical/virtual has been challenged' (2019, p.113). Strict binary dualisms may be problematic, but this does not negate the need to recognise difference between these concepts in order to make certain important ethical judgements. Furthermore, emphasising that difference should not imply hierarchy and dismissing the centrality of any specific discourse in its singular form may lead to a sense that philosophical posthumanism lacks the bedrock from which it makes its ethical claims. When Ferrando states, 'Posthumanism challenges biocentrism, sentiocentrism, vitalism, and the concept of life itself, blurring the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, in a quantum approach to the physics of existence' (2019, p.5) there is a danger that by denying the importance of sentience, life and animism Ferrando is leaving open the door to disastrous ethical consequences in the sphere of technogenesis. In the context of hypothetical scenarios of an AI takeover, Ferrando claims: 'adopting post-humanist, post-anthropocentric and post-dualist social practices will also prevent advanced AI from dualizing, and eventually discriminating against humans' (2019, p.113) This idea that the risk of AI takeover can be mitigated by denying the difference between AI and sentient cognition borders on the simplistic.

A tension that remains unresolved and goes to the heart of the issue of mediation and praxis in philosophical posthumanism is the question of truth. This is not because Ferrando fails to engage with the question. The reader is treated to fascinating discussion on the topic, but may be forgiven for feeling uncertain about the answer. Ultimately Ferrando claims that from the 'posthumanist perspectivist standpoint…facts can be seen as the integrated landscape of all the material perspectives related to a specific factual node' (2019, p.150). This builds on Nietzsche's perspectivism which 'more than erasing the possibility of knowledge, it erases the possibility of universalizing one standpoint as the absolutely objective one' (Ferrando, 2019, p.150). Yet Ferrando's engagement with quantum physics might point to a more profound respect for 'truth' than this perspectivism suggests. The probing of the quantum realm functions as an attempt to unify the ethical with the onto-epistemological. Her multiverse thought experiment is an attempt to make the fundamental ethical claim of posthumanism – the absolute relationality of being demands a compassionate acknowledgement of the 'other' – a quasi-transcendent assertion that goes beyond the mediating, perspectivist account she has advanced elsewhere. It could be argued that her engagement with the multiverse functions as a rhetorical device that utilizes the dizzying vastness of being to generate a sense of the sublime. This same rhetorical method has been employed by humanist and transhumanist thinkers to emphasise the transcendent qualities of human reason (Coenan, 2019), leading to a teleological conception of infinite progress with the unfolding of nature ultimately guided by intelligent design.

Paradoxically, Ferrando's ability to formulate and explain with clarity actually draws attention to the abstruse aspects of her posthumanist theory. When the ideas feel abstract or hard to grasp it is because the concepts are imprecise rather than because Ferrando has failed to explicate them. Her partisan embracing of posthumanism seems to preclude her from being critical of the challenges within posthumanist theory. It would be unfair to claim she ignores or avoids these seeming contradictions and complexities – but they remain unresolved. No doubt Ferrando is a vital thinker in

the posthumanist landscape who will play an active role in these clarifications in the future. I would suggest post-dualism's imprecision in dealing with difference is one area that needs consideration. The concept of complexity theory, which is employed in some posthumanist thinking (eg. Cudworth and Hobden, 2011) may be a far more effective tool than post-dualism for dealing with difference. The theory emphasizes that ultimately everything is interrelated, but does not deny the possibility of placing nominal borders to delineate categories or 'systems' whilst simultaneously recognizing such systems are porous and nested (thus also undermining binary dichotomies). Likewise Braidotti & Hlavajova's (2018) inclusion of the terms 'Inhuman' and 'Necro-politics' in the Posthuman Glossary point to the vital role such notions could play in providing a focus to the praxis of philosophical posthumanism and the urgency of its task.

References
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