EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: THE POST/HUMAN CONDITION AND THE NEED FOR PHILOSOPHY
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On October 4, 1957, what had long been a fantasy of science fiction passed into reality. On that day, the Soviet satellite Sputnik was launched. This was the first human-made object to be propelled into orbit around the earth. So struck was political philosopher Hannah Arendt by this event that she began her landmark 1958 work, *The Human Condition*, with a meditation upon its significance. In the ‘Prologue’ to that text, Arendt remarks upon a curious reaction to this epoch-defining event expressed in the media at the time:

… it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men, who now, when they looked up from the earth toward the skies, could behold there a thing of their own making. The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first “step toward escape from men’s imprisonment to the earth.”

According to Arendt’s analysis, the race into space chimed with a peculiar, and distinctly modern, desire to cast off the condition of the earth and to inhabit an environment of our own making. Christians had spoken of the earth as a vale of tears. Philosophers since Plato’s *Phaedo* had viewed the body as a prison for the soul. But until now “nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men’s bodies or shown such eagerness to go literally from here to the moon.”

An analogous situation, it seems to us, faces humanity today. As a previous generation dreamt of living in spaceships and colonizing far-flung planets, the present generation dreams of living in superhuman bodies or even of transcending the body altogether. Where our predecessors marvelled at the technological achievement of Sputnik, we marvel at the mapping of the human genome. Where they fantasized about the figure of the space explorer, we fantasize about the figure of the cyborg. Scientific magazines and popular culture increasingly fill with evocations of the “posthuman” or “transhuman”. In whatever form, as the essays by Nikolas Kompridis and Jon Seltin here detail, these terms anticipate the possibility of some technologically facilitated translation from our familiar bodily condition into something qualitatively different—and ostensibly, of course, appreciably better. Whatever this new post-human condition will be, it will involve at least the enhancement of mental and
physical capabilities, but also possibly the extension of life itself towards immortality.

Just as the space race chimed with a peculiar and distinctly modern desire to cast off the condition of the earth and to inhabit an environment of our own making, so it seems that today the prospect of a post-human condition chimes with a desire to cast off the condition of the body, and to inhabit a body of our own making. What’s more, the same rhetoric of emancipation that Arendt already noted with Sputnik conspicuously permeates much of the transhumanist literature, going all the way back to Julian Huxley, one of the movement’s inspirations and forefathers. The presumption in this literature is that the body is a prison, a constraint on our very existence, and that we can be free of its fetters through bio-technology. Hans Moravec, for instance, contemplates what would be needed to adapt to a life “rescued from the limitations of a mortal body,” as Seltin documents in his essay. The same presumption of biological enslavement and technological emancipation is cleverly sloganized in the title of Ronald Bailey’s book, *Liberation Biology.* Simon Young, most unabashedly of all, articulates the sentiment in an imperative mood: “People of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your biological chains… As humanism freed us from the chains of superstition, let Transhumanism free us from our biological chains.”

Arendt’s response to the fantasies of ‘transcendence’ prevalent in her day is worth reflecting upon in relation to the current constellation of transhumanist aspirations:

This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians.

Nearly every news cycle today serves to confirm that we are collectively—or at least those of us in the wealthy nations and corporations—becoming able to create our own artificial environment or artificial bodies for ourselves, according to our own design. But with each new development, each new rolling back of the bounds of what had previously seemed impossible, a raft of questions imposes itself, each time in fact with a little more urgency and, in some quarters, with more anxiety: Should we act in this direction? What would it mean to do this? Would transcendence of all the previous conditions of our telluric mortality amount to freedom? If so, freedom for what? Can such freedom serve as a sufficient motive for political action or technoscientific aspiration? Would it not leave us, at best, like the proverbial astronaut, floating weightlessly in the middle of a void, less meaningfully free than utterly dependant on our artificial, almost womb-like life-supports? Do not the advances in genetics and the health sciences amount to our ‘playing God’, a technological *hubris* for which, like Prometheus, we can expect to have our moral and spiritual substance eaten away at each new dawn?

These questions, which in different ways are taken up here by Kompridis, Seltin, and Chad Parkhill, are made only more vexing and pressing by what seems to be the contemporary flipside to the emergence of the post-human. Here we have in mind not the longing for, and increasing possibility of, escaping our naturally given biological form of life, but rather the growing awareness—in the face of one of the world’s great (and first human-induced) mass extinctions of species, anthropogenic climate change, and imminent peak water and oil—of human beings’ inescapable dependence on our natural environment. It is as if, in an odd Hegelian coincidence of opposites, in the very moment when scientists seem on the cusp of realizing the possibility of artificial immortality, our finitude and biological vulnerability as a species is imposing itself in a way it seldom has before, certainly not in the modern age. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the long-maligned category of ‘postmodern’ as we seek to come to terms with this new awareness of our specie-al dependence on the natural world. The Cartesian dream of being ‘master and possessor of nature’, which underlay both liberalism and
socialism, is now broadly contested and seems to be evaporating in the rapidly heating global climate. From the realm of theory (in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, or Actor Network Theory, to take two examples addressed in Rosalyn Diprose's paper) to grassroots environmental movements, we are being forced and enjoined to readdress our dependence on the non-human and social environment.

In the wake of these contradictory ‘signs of the times’—on the one hand, the transhumanist impulse, on the other the all-too-(post-)human(ist) ecological realities—it is small wonder that much continental theory or philosophy has increasingly undertaken its own problematisation of many of the suppositions of previous thought concerning the human condition. One line of continental thought beginning with Jacques Derrida, but more recently represented by Bernard Stiegler and differently by Giorgio Agamben, has called into question the founding suppositions of much religious and humanist thought concerning human beings’ relations to, and transcendence of, their animality, and the technics or tools we ‘use’. In his paper, David Wills undertakes a poetic meditation on Derrida’s passing 1997 remark that “I can die, or simply leave the room,” turning it into a stage for a reflection on the way that language as iterability deconstructs the life-death opposition, so that, aporetically: “Without it, there could be nothing like what we call life; because of it, what we call life has from the beginning left something we would normally call dead behind it.” Rosalyn Diprose’s paper critically responds to an alternative theoretical lineage which culminates in the “Actor Network Theory” (ANT) of figures like Bruno Latour, which seeks to redefine agency in a way that relocates it in non-human life and environments, as well as human beings. While she welcomes some of the impulses behind this post-humanist theoretical trajectory, Diprose attempts to correct the politically suspect ontological egalitarianism of ANT through a rereading of Foucault’s critique of biopolitics. She points to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality as the basis for an expanded ethico-political position which, she maintains, can accommodate the ontological insights of ANT, without throwing out the ethical baby with the bathwater.

The present conjuncture then seems in fact to bear out in striking ways the validity of another ‘post-’ term which has recently passed out of widespread circulation, except as a term of fear in the populist media: namely, Lyotard’s notion that we have passed into a ‘postmodern condition’. On the one hand, the new transhumanism clearly strikes out beyond the dreams of earlier humanists. Yet Seltin notes how the very technologies involved, and the aspiration towards ‘freedom’ however defined, clearly carry forward the type of modernist dreams first voiced in Descartes’ vision of human beings as ‘masters and possessors of nature’, and in Bacon’s famous metaphor of putting nature on the rack to pry loose her secrets. On the other hand, it is notable in contemporary debates around climate change that scientific discourse itself, long the unambiguous champion of all things ‘progressive’, has now become complex. Whereas the reactionary Right alone insists that anthropogenetic climate change is a conspiracy to halt economic development, many scientists today sound oddly like the conservatives or reactionaries of old: warning against the dangers of technological overdevelopment, and calling for massive cutbacks and reshaping of world industries. It is timely, then, that in this edition of *Parrhesia* William Martin’s takes up Lyotard’s claim from the 1970s that we have passed into a ‘postmodern’ condition, interestingly noting Lyotard’s proximity (and in fact debt) to the younger Habermas’ work on epistemology and the public sphere. The proliferation of more and more specialized—and more and more privatized—scientific discourses, Martin suggests, need not have the fragmentary effect for public discourse which Lyotard diagnosed as the postmodern condition. The new ICT network (most notably the worldwide web), Martin argues, represents the elementary basis of what he terms the post-human environment or lifeworld: at once the means of socialization, and as such the potential media for new forms of the public sphere.

A final idiosyncratic feature of the new (post-)human condition we collectively face today is the apparent collapse of viable forms of Left-wing political agency in the developed nations. The causes of this development are surely multiple: the Right’s neoliberal hegemony since the mid-1970s (seemingly only shaken, not stirred, by the 2007-09 ‘GFC’); the New Left’s self-fragmentation into a rainbow coalition of single-issue, identity based political initiatives, often unified only by a shared appeal to difference per se; and the collapse of the Soviet Union (and with it the public legitimacy of socialism) in 1989. Whatever its causes, Mario Wenning’s paper in this edition of *Parrhesia*, indebted to German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, addresses what he perceives as a
‘motivational deficit’ in the (New) Left: namely, its hesitation to avow thymos or rage at injustice as a key motive for political action. In contrast to earlier generations of feminists, socialists, and ecologists, the Left as Wenning perceives it today has ceded the powerful political affect of rage too easily and too much to the Right. His paper challenges us to take a more nuanced, even a more dialectical approach: one that appreciates that, just because the Right has made an art of political outrage in the culture wars and elsewhere, the Left’s “emancipatory prophets [should] draw on indignation as well as hope” as they contest the possibility of a better world.

We have no doubt been fated ‘to live in interesting times’, as the fabled Chinese curse has it. The immense and unprecedented dynamism of the modern age, which long ago melted all that is solid into air, has only accelerated in the last decades. What was air has become airless space; what was the human body has become increasingly ‘wetware’, to be compared somewhat unfavourably to the plastic and silicon based alternatives that the rich at least can consider inserting in its place. In the words of the lead character, Sarah Connor, in Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991), one of the great dystopian films of the period, a veritable Frankenstein for the fast-emerging age of robotechnics: “there is no fate but what we make for ourselves”.

Yet, needless to say, if we are at a loss as to how to manage our new capabilities and address their consequences, this is not a failure of science or scientists. Rather it is, in part, a symptom of the growing gap the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers already discerned: between, on one side, the specialised knowledges and technological know-how of the industrial-scientific complex and, on the other side, the public spheres with their cultures and institutions of narration, meaning-making, argumentation and norm-governed solidarity. Martin Heidegger famously once made the provocative remark that “Science does not think” (to which Lacan added, “because it knows”—and that is its drive and internal justification). Yet science remains—for the moment!—a human activity, and one which as such falls under the category of those things about which we can reflect, deliberate, and which we can potentially redirect in the light of the same.

If there has been a failure at work in the contemporary trajectories of technoscience, then, it is a failure of thought or philosophy, not least to simply keep up. While science and technology have raced ahead according to their own incessant logic of development, public discourse, whose job it is to render human action intelligible, has been left behind. The real challenge we face today, then, is the need to think: not just to think about our biological nature and its possible futures, but also to think about our interactions with the earth, with our cultural world, and with the sciences that are transforming all of these at unprecedented speed and in unprecedented ways—in short, the need to think what we are doing. And that means also to render in meaningful, publicly intelligible speech who we take ourselves to be and what we take life and freedom to consists in. This is perhaps the highest vocation of the public discourse for any society. And it is to this vocation that we hope the essays collected here, drawn originally from papers delivered at the December 2008 conference of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy in Auckland, New Zealand, make their own small contribution.
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