

Non-Anthropocentric Posthumanism and the Stakes of Relationality

Niki Young  

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Abstract:

This paper examines the ontological underpinnings of non-anthropocentric posthumanism through an analysis of the work of Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti. I argue that their commitment to relational holism tacitly undermines their stated commitment to individuals by subordinating them to their relations. Drawing on Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology and Jacques Derrida's commitment to a "Leibnizianism without God," I propose a model of "non-relationist relationality" that preserves the radical alterity and individuality of entities while enabling contingent interactions.

Keywords: Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Posthumanism, Relationality, Jacques Derrida, Graham Harman

The prominent philosopher of technology Mark Coeckelbergh has rightly argued that the "philosophical concepts we use bar us from an adequate understanding of the politics of artifacts," and this is because "much of our modern thinking assumes a strict distinction between humans and artifacts" (Coeckelbergh 175). What holds for the human/artefact distinction here may however also be said to apply to the binary division between the human and its alleged other(s) more generally. Though diverse in their respective approaches, Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti share a common commitment to challenging this long held conceptual boundary in order to then redefine both the nature of the non-human considered independently of the human, as well as the relationship between humans and non-humans. Bennett's vital materialism and Braidotti's critical posthumanism jointly offer a network of navigational tools that allow us to reimagine our place in the material world by "[recasting] political agency in the direction of relational ontology" (Braidotti *Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism* 40). How to grieve or hope in ways that are productive rather than debilitating or delusionary.

My aim in what follows is to raise a series of queries concerning the ontological foundations for a truly non-anthropocentric posthumanism. More specifically, I aim to provide an answer to the following questions: can a relational approach of the type propagated by Bennett and Braidotti mitigate against anthropocentrism? and, relatedly, can we think the post-human by positing a world in which entities exist in excess of their relations? In this paper, I answer these queries by oscillating



between the works Bennett and Braidotti in order to substantiate my claim that a non-anthropocentric and post-humanist philosophy might fruitfully proceed in the direction of a generalised Derridean “Leibnizianism without God” or Harmanian “withdrawal” which simultaneously and without contradiction maintains a non-relationist relationality. I shall then proceed in the following manner: I begin by distinguishing between a general and restricted sense of posthumanism, in order to then show how Bennett and Braidotti respectively fit the dictates of the former schema. In following, I go on to consider the stakes of their approach for a truly non-anthropocentric posthumanism by juxtaposing their ontological commitments to those of thinkers such as Nandita Biswas Mellamphy, Jacques Derrida, Graham Harman, and David Roden.

Narrow and General Posthumanism

I should start by noting that there is a certain ambiguity concerning the notion of posthumanism, for, as Francesca Ferrando has rightly pointed out, the term is often used as a loose category denoting a number of assorted positions which can at times even be incommensurable. One can cite philosophical posthumanism, critical posthumanism, speculative posthumanism, transhumanism, and new materialism as exemplars of this diversity (Ferrando 26). In order to constrain the scope of this paper, I hold that it would be possible apply the label “posthumanism” in either a general or a narrow sense. For ease of reference, I shall here refer to these as GP and NP respectively.

In its narrow sense, NP may be said to refer to the critique and/or transgression of the foundational principles and values of “humanism,” with its emphasis on human autonomy, rationality, progress, and dignity. Understood in this manner, its aims might involve reevaluating anthropocentrism and/or the various ethico-political frameworks that have traditionally centred around exclusively human concerns. This form of posthumanism already affords a great deal of heterogeneity; for instance, Rosi Braidotti lists theoretical, insurgent, speculative, cultural, literary, trans-humanist, meta-humanist, and a-humanist forms of posthumanism (Braidotti *Posthuman Knowledge* 81). It would also be possible to note that such positions can sometimes even have antithetical foundations and/or goals. For instance, transhumanism is here categorised as a subset of posthumanism, even if the former is often committed to certain values – progress via technical alteration, the elevation of rationality, the prioritisation of life over its other, etc. – which other posthumanist thinkers might find problematic and even unpalatable.

In its more general sense, however, GP is best understood as a broader array of heterogeneous positions. It would then be possible to give a working definition of GP in terms five shared conditions or features. The first feature of GP is its rejection of anthropocentrism. As a reminder, anthropocentrism is the view that all concerns and ethico-political decisions should centre around the human as their priority. GP rejects such an approach by advocating for an ontological shift that recognises our reliance on, and embeddedness in, a more-than-human ecology. It therefore calls for a rethinking of the role of the human within broader networks of relations, and fosters a deeper sense of reciprocity in our interactions with the world. Second, and relatedly, GP questions the humanist understanding of the human, with its emphasis on, and elevation of traits such as rationality, progress, and autonomy. GP critiques this framework by exposing its historical and structural biases (cf. Braidotti *The Posthuman*; Agamben), and the manner in which it has marginalised others (women, racial minorities, non-humans, etc.) who do not conform to its stringent standards. Third, GP works

towards a multi- and interdisciplinary approach which recognises the important discoveries of the sciences, but without necessarily shoring up this interest with a reduction of thought to a simple “handmaid of the sciences.” In other words, while posthumanism may most certainly be compatible with the anti-transcendentalist tendencies of naturalism, and while science and technology are seen as providing crucial insights into the material conditions of life, they ought not to dictate the entirety of philosophical thought. In this way, GP seeks a renewed dialogical relationship between philosophy and the sciences. Fourth, GP is post-dualistic, in that it questions binaries such as those separating the human from the non-human, nature from culture, subjects from objects, or the natural from the technical. Such a move can be seen in Donna Haraway’s talk of “naturecultures,” Bruno Latour’s abandonment of the nature/culture dichotomy in favour of a plurality of actants, or even in Graham Harman’s broadening of the category of the “object.” Finally, GP reframes ethico-political issues in light of the above, without assuming that ontology should be the handmaid of politics. Traditional ethical and political frameworks often subordinate ontology to immediate human-centered concerns. GP reframes these issues by grounding ethics and politics in a broader ontological perspective that prioritises relationality and interdependence, thereby ensuring that ethical and political actions are informed by a more nuanced understanding of being.

One possible objection to my present characterisation of GP is that it ends up broadening the definition of posthumanism to the point where the absolute majority of contemporary thinkers would fall under this label, thereby ultimately rendering the term meaningless. I admittedly accept this risk, as I hold that it is to some extent true that many contemporary thinkers do in fact (or at least should) work within the shadow of what may be called the “posthuman requirement,” namely the need to think through and with the rapid changes undergone in the spheres of technology, science, politics, and philosophy throughout the late twentieth century, and continuing through to the present day. Nevertheless, I also hold that for a philosophy to fall squarely within the remit of GP, it needs to bring together all these characteristics. Thus, as I will show, the thought of Bennett and Braidotti may indeed be called posthuman in this general sense. Conversely, the contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, for example, would not qualify as a GP. In spite of his epistemological search for a non-correlated – i.e. a non-anthropocentric – absolute, his ultimate commitment to the human/world dualism – via his assertion of the “ex nihilo irruption” of thought from matter, and his assumption that mathematics could, at least in principle, accurately model the primary qualities of the “in-itself” – ultimately reject the first, second, and fourth GP conditions (see Meillassoux *Time Without Becoming*; Meillassoux *After Finitude*).

With the above in view, I shall now proceed to oscillate between the work of Bennett and Braidotti in order to then assess the stakes of their relational ontology for a non-anthropocentric general posthumanism. Before proceeding further, it would be interesting to note that only Braidotti accepts the label of (critical) “posthumanism,” since Bennett prefers to situate her work within the broad framework of “new materialism(s).” Nevertheless, I seek to show that both thinkers in fact fall within the category of general posthumanism to the extent that they share all the five features just discussed. In view of this, I shall move on to evaluate their thought in light of the five conditions just outlined.

Bennett: A Relational Ontology of Forces

Jane Bennett's work seeks to move beyond anthropocentrism towards the recognition of the vitality present in singular entities, thereby effectively shifting thought towards a "speculative-onto-story" which aims to attend to what things can do (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 3-4). In stark contrast to the "culture of life" which stresses the opposition between life and matter more generally, and human life and everything else more specifically, Bennett advocates for a "vital materialism" which is committed to the inherent "force of things" or "thing-power" (Bennett *A Vitalist Stopover; Vibrant Matter* chapters 5, 6). Nevertheless, she also rejects the hylomorphic model according to which vitality is impressed onto "dead matter" from the outside, and instead seeks a form of materialism "in which matter is [in and of itself] figured as a vitality at work both inside and outside of selves" (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 62). There is an absolute "out-side" where singular existents express a power which arises from "bodies inorganic as well as organic" (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 6). In this way, Bennett seeks to emphasise a certain vitality of things beyond their association with humans. Crucially, she nonetheless also sees a certain continuity between humans and non-humans, as can be seen from the fact that what we call the "human" is in actual fact also composed, sustained, and conditioned by non-human entities (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 4). All entities are therefore agents in a strong sense for Bennett, yet each alleged individual ultimately owes its "agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it" (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 34).

While Bennett acknowledges that the human/nonhuman binary helped to prevent human suffering, she also rightly claims that this mindset has led to the pervasive view that nature only has derivative moral and political worth, in that non-human entities have been seen to exist to ultimately serve the ends of man. The vital materialist response to this predicament in turn consists of two interrelated moves: first, it minimises the age-old distinction between subjects and objects by effectively underlining the vital materiality shared by humans and non-humans alike (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 12-13). Second, it highlights the role of non-human entities in acting as a condition of possibility for human life and cognition, thereby accenting a certain reciprocity and continuity between humans and non-humans. In her rich example borrowed from evolutionary biology, for instance, Bennett stresses that fats found in different nuts affect both human moods and cognition when consumed, while the presence of omega-3 fatty acids was crucial for the development of our higher order cognitive functions in our evolutionary history (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 41, 42, 48-49).

All this entails that any ethics worth pursuing cannot begin by considering only one's duty or the general consequences of an action. Rather, ethics must begin by recognising this "human participation in a shared, vital materiality" (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 15). Welcoming this vitality inherent in all entities, be they human or non-human, can lead to a more ecologically responsible and ethical approach to the way we interact with the environment. Such a recognition implies the subjugation of human exceptionalism through the appreciation of our shared materiality and agency (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 122). Furthermore, Bennett's "thing-power" also implies that the realm of politics is not exclusively about human relations. Rather, entities also have political power in that they have the capacity to "make things happen" in the right combination. Borrowing examples from Darwin's book on earthworms, she shows that these unassuming organisms are in actual fact crucial contributors to human life and culture in at least two important ways; first, earthworms produce vegetable mould, and in so doing they contribute to the nitrogen cycle and make the Earth hospitable to living organisms like us. Second, earthworms also preserve human artefacts by burying them under soil, thereby contributing to the maintenance of human culture (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 94-100).

Crucially, Bennett stresses that various assemblages of entities are not exactly alike, thereby rejecting a certain understanding of “flat ontology” which reduces entities to a purely horizontal plane of being. She however also rejects hierarchical views of nature in favour of a certain “contextuality” whereby actants gain or lose power by virtue of their place in an assemblage. For instance, trash and foodstuff is able to gain ethico-political power through its ability to “startle and provoke a shift in [human] perception” (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 107).

In spite of her attention to the vibrant force of things just described, Bennett is careful to emphasise that the agents of which she speaks are ultimately “actants.” This assertion in turn entails two consequences which are especially pertinent to my present task: first, her emphasis on action implies that things are not fixed substances, but rather “as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension” (p. 20). At this point, one might wonder whether a thing understood in this manner can be both a force and an entity simultaneously for, as Gambale, Hanan, and Nail rightly point out, Bennett’s sensitivity to things is ultimately a sensitivity to relational *forces* (Gambale, Hanan, and Nail *What is New Materialism*). While she concedes that assemblages do in fact have emergent properties, it would perhaps be more accurate to claim that they *are* these properties, with the latter meaning that they “are” only insofar as they are able to act or “make things happen” (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 24).

Second, the understanding of a thing as actant entails the related claim that the latter are not monads but rather relational congregations or “assemblages,” to the effect that every actant is in fact both a process and nothing but its affects (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 21). As Bennett puts it, her understanding of matter is as a “heterogeneous ... *differential of intensities*” such that one can find “no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself aquiver with virtual force” (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 57, emphasis added). As a result, things are also not primarily objects, since they only appear as such due to their slow speed of becoming *relative to the human* (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 58). One can here immediately note that Bennett is heavily influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of things as “assemblages” and, more importantly for our present task, by Spinoza’s understanding of “affective bodies” (*conatus*). In fact, references to Spinoza are ubiquitous in her work, and he appears in the most crucial moments of each of her texts. For Bennett, this thinker is important in that his philosophy articulates an associative view of things whereby “each body is continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies” (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 21). As is well known, for Spinoza, all bodies are ultimately modes of a common substance, and every mode is in turn “itself a mosaic or assemblage of many simple bodies” (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 22). All this is to say that nature is ultimately a form of creative becoming rather than being composed of discrete substances. This activity in turn only temporarily “congeals into bodies” which in turn seek to persist in their being (*conatus*) (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 118).

Before proceeding to analyse how Bennett’s work resonates with that of Braidotti, it would be useful to briefly take stock of how her main ideas fit within the five conditions of general posthumanism (GP) discussed above. First, vital materialism aims to move beyond anthropocentrism by highlighting the inherent vital force present in all entities (condition 1). Second, she questions certain humanist values of autonomy and rationality by showing that the human cognition and life more generally in fact depend on non-humans (worms, Omega-3 fatty acids, nuts, etc.) acting as their conditions of possibility (condition 2). Third, Bennett borrows from examples taken from disciplines such as evolutionary biology in order to sustain her views (condition 3). Fourth, the generalisation of

a vital materialism questions longstanding binaries such as those separating the human from the non-human, or nature from culture (condition 4). Finally, Bennett lays emphasis on the fact that entities are also the site of ethical imperatives and political power (condition 5).

Braidotti: Critical Posthumanism as “Zoe-centered Egalitarianism”

Of the two thinkers mainly discussed in the present paper, only Rosi Braidotti explicitly identifies her work with a “narrow” form of (critical) posthumanism. Yet I want to show that her resonates with the framework of GP more generally as well as Bennett’s position more specifically, to the effect that the two thinkers can be fruitfully compared in ways that are especially pertinent to the present analysis. As I shall show below, their work may be shown to share the same virtues, but also the same vices. Braidotti defines the posthuman as “a convergence phenomenon unfolding the intersection between posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other” (Braidotti *Posthuman all too Human* 16). As a result, a careful analysis of her general view would need to scrutinise what it might mean to be post-human and post-anthropocentric, as well as the stakes of such a position.

Her posthumanism is directed against a certain humanist understanding of “Man” as a general standard based on a logic of inclusion and exclusion. More specifically, this binary thinking is criticised for transposing “a specific [Humanist] mode of being human” – namely the human as rational and autonomous agent – “into a generalized standard,” thereby relegating anything which does not fit this alleged universal standard – specifically women, minorities, non-human animals, and the neurodiverse – into the category of the “other” (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 26). Braidotti’s posthuman thereby emphasises that the notion of the human is not value neutral (Braidotti *Posthuman all too Human* 16), while also seeking to assess the positive aspects of the critique of classical Humanism by calling for a new theory of subjectivity which rejects both nihilistic defeatism and individualism (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 49ff.).

Rather than embracing the anti-humanist “liquidation” or “death” of the subject allegedly associated with thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault and Heidegger, Braidotti seeks to resituate and redefine posthuman subjectivity in terms of a “process-oriented political ontology” according to which subjects are intrinsically defined via a process of negotiations (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 35). Stated differently, her own alternative to humanist definitions of the subject in terms of a fixed essence or identity as well as anti-humanist critiques of this alleged essence involves resituating the subject “within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings” in which the subject comes to be “constituted in and by a multiplicity ... that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable” (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 49). This thoroughly relational view of subjectivity in turn involves what Braidotti describes as a monistic “vital materialism” which sees matter itself as self-organising and vivacious, thereby eliminating the need for a transcendental entity or force as the source of this vitality. The posthuman subject is therefore itself thoroughly immanent, self-organising, and defined relationally and differentially via interrelationships with human as well as non-human entities, with the latter including non-human living beings as well as technology (Braidotti *Posthuman all too Human* 6).

Braidotti’s position admits a two-pronged complex relationship to technology. On the one hand, she recognises that our current global capitalist economy is techno-scientific in its structure, in that

it effectively trades on life itself via disciplines such as genetic engineering and stem cell research. Nevertheless, and on the other hand, disciplines such as molecular biology also demonstrate that life is self-organising, while monism shows us that all is relational (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 59-60). Such discoveries in turn dismiss the claim that matter is itself inert and passive, thereby also eliminating the need to posit a transcendent source in order to account for the emergence and sustenance of vitality. The latter has important ramifications for her rejection of anthropocentrism, for this recognition of an interrelational monism allows her to develop the notion of an “expanded relational self” (p. 60). In other words, her own brand of vitalism rejects the long held binary distinction between the political idea of man (*bios*) and nature or life itself (*zoe*), favouring instead what she dubs a “zoe-centered egalitarianism.” The latter in turn entails what I hold to be the two most important consequences for Braidotti’s work. First, this emphasis involves dismissing the previously mentioned humanist subject defined in terms of an abstract universal standard superior to the rest of nature by insisting instead on a radical “zoe-egalitarianism” between humans and non-human animals (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 71). Braidotti’s sense of the term “subject” is thus not linked exclusively to the *Anthropos* or its alleged superior qualities, but is rather to be understood as a rich relational assemblage of entities such as animals, microorganisms, plants, cells, and even algorithms (Braidotti *Posthuman all too Human* 20). Second, rather than erasing all differences between beings, it instead emphasises these radical differences. Braidotti rejects so-called “flat ontologies” in favour of an “open-ended, interrelational, multi-sexed and trans-species flows of becoming through interaction with multiple others” (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 89) and a “vitalist ethics of mutual trans-species interdependence” (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 92). That is to say, she argues for a thoroughly differentially constituted material, embodied, and technologically mediated subject which is both constituted and maintained by their interactions with multiple others (Braidotti *The Posthuman all too Human* 30). In this way, and perhaps most crucially for my present task, it is clear that her position entails a relational monism which emphasises on the absolute “priority of the relation” over the related terms (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 100).

While Braidotti’s work draws from an extensive list of notable thinkers, it is especially significant to point out that, like Bennett, her work also draws important inspiration from Spinoza’s metaphysics. References to the thinker abound, but her direct indebtedness is perhaps most crisply and explicitly articulated in the essay “Memoirs of an Aspiring Spinozist”. In this brief text, Braidotti claims that Spinoza’s philosophy pushes two important ideas which ultimately prove to form the cornerstone of her entire work. First, she credits Spinoza with the rejection of dualistic thinking in favour of a monistic vital materialism based on radical immanence, thereby accentuating the “trans-individuality of all entities, human beings included” (Braidotti *Memoirs of an Aspiring Spinozist* 18). Secondly, she also praises Spinoza’s understanding of desire (*conatus*) as the “constitutive capacity to persist and endure in one’s existence in relation with others” (Braidotti *Memoirs of an Aspiring Spinozist* 17). This, in turn, forms the basis of a relational ontology which constitutes and sustains subjectivity via differential relations (Braidotti *Memoirs of an Aspiring Spinozist* 19). Braidotti’s sense of a post-human and post-anthropocentric subject is therefore to be understood in terms of a Spinoza-inflected “geocentric” (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 81) subject premised on the necessary recognition of a vital, immanent, holistically interrelated, and self-organising materiality.

While there is a lot more to say about Braidotti’s rich and expansive body of work, I will now explore how the fundamental aspects of her work just discussed encompass all five conditions of

general posthumanism. First, she claims to thoroughly reject anthropocentric philosophy in favour of a vital materiality and zoe-centered egalitarianism premised on radical immanence and holism (condition 1). Second, Braidotti is decidedly post-human in that her relational approach necessarily goes hand in hand with the disavowal of the humanist understanding of “man” in terms of exclusionary traits such as intrinsic rationality and autonomy (condition 2). Third, examples lifted from molecular biology and biotechnology are employed in the service of the development of a view which sees nature is interrelated, holistic, immanent, and differentially constituted. This fact also further sustains Braidotti’s claim that the posthuman today is necessarily technologically mediated, and that therefore advancements in biotechnology must necessarily inform our “politics of location” and practice (condition 3). Fourth, the long-standing binary distinctions between humans and nature or technology and ecology are unambiguously rejected by her insistence on a “geo-centred” approach which sees the relation between these two terms as one of mutual interdependence and continuity. In this way, it becomes impossible to separate the realm of the human from that of the nonhuman, for the human is to some extent non-human and vice-versa (condition 4). Finally, all these aforementioned elements combined lead to a rethinking of all ethico-political practice in terms of a differentially constituted view of entities (condition 5).

Having established the main tenets of Bennett and Braidotti’s thought, it may be noted that both thinkers share an admirable sensitivity to the force of entities understood in terms of a vital materiality immanent in the world itself. This construal of materiality is praiseworthy in that their general posthumanism successfully refuses – rather than refuting – humanist anthropocentrism by drawing our attention to what can be fruitfully described as the ethico-political call of the non-human. While engaging in an extensive exegesis of Spinoza’s texts would be beyond the scope of the present analysis, I wish to point out that Bennett and Braidotti’s specific deployment of this thinker pushes a form of vital materialism premised on a tripartite framework rooted in the interrelated concepts of relationality, holism, and immanence. First, as I have already shown, vital materialism entails a thoroughly relational and differential system in which beings are defined exclusively and exhaustively in terms of a “differential relationality” rather than some singularity pertaining to the individual. Secondly, this thorough relationality in turn entails a holism in which everything is connected to everything else via interlocking networks of relations, such that any entity’s relative persistence (*conatus*) is only due to its emergence through and embeddedness within a holistic relational network. As a result, it would here only make sense to speak of a relative persistence, since ultimately what persists is a relational vector in a network and not an fully fledged individual as such. Thirdly, the notions of relationality and holism entail immanence, understood here in terms of the rejection of the possibility that anything could survive its detachment or disconnection from its network of relations. More specifically, if everything is differentially constituted by its network of relations, it follows that no purported individual can survive even the most subtle and minute changes in its current network of relations. Following Jordi Vivaldi, we might then question whether this commitment to Spinozist relationsim ends up “[obscuring] the accountability of finitude, agency, and change, watering down the notion of otherness and compromising the overall theory’s consistency” (Vivaldi 312). While Vivaldi restricts this analysis to Braidotti, I hold that the same questions can be raised with respect to Bennett’s work.

Ontological Individuals: Humans out of the Loop?

Given the tripartite system just discussed, I now turn to consider the ontological implications of Bennett and Braidotti's frameworks for individuality and agency, questioning whether relational holism adequately accounts for non-human individuality and alterity. To be sure, both want to leave some room for the emergence and agency of individuals for, as I have shown, Bennett speaks of the vitality of individual things, while Braidotti's critique of humanism relies on an expanded "zoe-egalitarian" theory of differentially constituted subjectivity.

Nevertheless, and against their stated claims, one might wonder whether it would be possible to simultaneously sustain such a theory of individuality while also favouring a thoroughly relational system; if all entities are exhaustively defined by their relations, can any individual retain its singularity without being subsumed into the totality of relational networks? Bennett claims that it is indeed possible. In "Systems and Things," for instance, she claims that "perhaps there is no need to choose between objects or their relations," and instead suggests aiming for a theory which understands entities as "swirls of matter, energy, and incipience that hold themselves together long enough to vie with the strivings of other objects, including the indeterminate momentum of the throbbing whole" (Bennett *Systems and Things* 227). Nevertheless, and as Harman rightly points out, if entities are ultimately "nothing but 'incipient swirls', then it is difficult to see how they can ever have more than derivative status by contrast with relations" (Harman *Object-Oriented Ontology* 243). Furthermore, given Braidotti's emphasis on a dynamic process of becoming and interconnectedness, I hold that Harman's critique would also apply to her work. If one assumes a relational holism of the kind just discussed, then two specific unsavoury consequences would follow. First, assuming a relational approach might have precarious ethico-political implications in that it risks falling back into the same (weaker) anthropocentric framework which such positions set out to critique. Second, an "individual" would ultimately be nothing more than a redundant mode of the "throbbing whole," thereby sacrificing its purported individuality. I shall now go on to consider these problems in more detail.

In order to expand on the first problem, I will adapt terminology originally used by Nandita Biswas Mellamphy in her analysis of the human/technology relation, and broaden it to include human/nonhuman relations more generally. In "Humans 'Out of the Loop'?" Biswas Mellamphy essentially distinguishes three possible approaches to the relation between humans and technology. First, a "humans in the loop" (HIL) approach is a strongly anthropocentric approach according to which humans are to be understood as dominating over nonhuman entities and controlling them. In view of the above, it should be clear that this approach should be rejected for our purposes, as it violates the most basic tenet of GP, namely the rejection of anthropocentrism. She in turn distinguishes the HIL approach from a "humans on the loop" (HOL) position. This view "deprioritises human-centrism" by "underscoring the compatibilities between human animals, nonhuman animals, and machines" (Biswas Mellamphy 19), i.e. the fact that all entities are interconnected. In this way, the HOL approach sees the human as "an open-ended category and the product of ongoing processes of collaborative bio-socio-technical individuation" (Biswas Mellamphy 20). This approach is not *strongly* anthropocentric, in that it does not cede priority to human concerns. Nevertheless, and as Mellamphy rightly states, it still remains *weakly* anthropocentric to the extent that the emphasis of relational alliances between humans and nonhumans still do not do enough to think the possibility of a world independently of humans. More specifically, and even if she does not frame her argument in this precise manner, it may be argued that if everything is thoroughly connected to everything else, then ultimately everything is also thoroughly connected to humans, and to our all-too-human modes of normative and epistemic evaluation. Mellamphy cites Braidotti as an exemplar of such a position when she questions whether

the commitment to a “zoe-centered” approach may be said to do away with human-centrism. Such a critique is especially pertinent given that Braidotti herself admits that her vision “actually enhances [human agency] by offering an expanded relational vision of the self as a nomadic transversal assemblage engendered by the cumulative effect of multiple relational bonds” (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 33). Even if this is not stated by Mellamphy, I hold that the same critique would necessarily apply to Bennett for, by her own admission, her own ontology of becoming is ultimately “biased toward the peculiar rhythms and scale of the *human body*” (Bennett *Systems and Things* 229, emphasis added).

As a result, Mellamphy argues that a truly non-anthropocentric approach might require a “humans out of the loop” (HOOL) approach whereby “human control would be deprioritized and nonhuman rationales would be prioritized” (Biswas Mellamphy 21). She is right to point out that such a position would necessarily be speculative in that it relies on what David Roden calls the “disconnection thesis” (Roden *The Disconnection Thesis*), namely the idea that future technologies may be autonomous to the extent that our current human-centered epistemic-normative frameworks cannot grasp. To be sure, both Mellamphy and Roden frame this “HOOL” approach in light of technology specifically, namely in terms of the emergence of some possible *future* “xeno-intelligences” which we currently cannot evaluate in terms of our epistemic or ethical norms (Roden *Posthuman Life*). Nevertheless, my claim here is that we can widen such a view beyond technology specifically, and towards singular entities in particular. In other words, prioritising nonhuman rationales might require thinking that any entity whatever is capable of a rupture which resists any preestablished epistemic or ethical valuation.

Such an approach would have two main consequences which align with my response to the problem of relational holism and individuality outlined above: first, Roden’s “disconnection thesis” might have to be rethought in relation to Harman’s thesis of withdrawal, namely the idea that disconnection is already at work between singular haecceities, to the extent that any encounter between two entities whatsoever cannot be judged in terms of any pre-established epistemic-normative framework. Second, such a generalised disconnected approach should allow us to reevaluate the stakes of a truly non-anthropocentric posthumanism. This might require a move away from a Spinoza-inflected differential holism of the sort that Bennett and Braidotti endorse, and towards a Leibnizian system of monads premised on the problematisation of relations. My claim here is that such a possibility can be achieved only by marrying what Jacques Derrida, in *A Taste for the Secret*, describes as a “Leibnizianism without God” with elements of Graham Harman’s object-oriented thought. Thus, in what follows, I shall consider the implications of a non-relationist relational approach for posthumanism.

Relationism, Disconnection, and Withdrawal

As I see it, Bennett and Braidotti seem to take the fact of causal relations for granted, in that they essentially assume that entities are necessarily always already entwined. In so doing, I hold that their holism ultimately robs entities of their individuality and, more importantly, their alterity. This problem may be further articulated using Harman’s critique of “relationism.” As is well known, in *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux coined the term “correlationism” to name philosophies which insist on the primacy of the correlation between thinking and being, such that it would be impossible to think of being independently of the human (Meillassoux *After Finitude*). While relationism does not strictly

insist that to be is to be a correlate of thought alone, it nevertheless views entities as “bundles of dynamic relations” (Harman *Objects are the Root of all Philosophy* 242), to the effect that they tacitly “discount the existence of entities outside their effects” (Harman *Circus Philosophicus* 7). Relationism is in turn a modality of what Harman calls “overmining,” namely the tendency to want to reduce entities to nothing more than manifest actions, events, and effects (Harman *On the Undermining of Objects* 24). Harman is right to argue that relationism (as a subset of overmining) makes change impossible, and therefore robs entities of their future to the extent that it leaves them with no “residual reservoir of force” that would allow for “instability in the current state of things” (Harman *Realism without Materialism* 64).

With this in view, a critic might wish to argue that Bennett and Braidotti’s reduction of entities into relations is debatable, since both explicitly acknowledge a certain degree of (what can only be relative) agency in entities. Nevertheless, I hold that their commitment to an immanent relational holism ultimately undermines the very possibility of a radical force or individuality to entities, insofar as everything is defined by everything else according to all too human rhythms and relations. Conversely, a rupture of the sort envisaged by Roden – as well as a HOOL approach more generally – would entail a form of alterity which is radical and discontinuous. It therefore cannot be commensurate with a relationist holism, since it would require entities to harbour a radical reserve beyond the human especially, but also beyond their current actions and effects on one another. As Harman explains, “in the present an object is not merely encountered by one human observer or other object, but many” and the specific “nature of this encounter is slightly different for each of the encountering entities” As a result, one would have to conclude that any entity “is not identical with how it is encountered by any other object, by the sum total of such encounters, or even by the sum of all possible encounters” (Harman *Realism without Materialism* 65). Entities, as Harman puts it, “withdraw” from their relations; they harbour a radical alterity, even if this is not to say that they do not relate at all (Harman *Tool-Being*).

I hold that we can make better sense of this non-relationist relationality premised on excess by drawing on Derrida’s remarks on Leibniz in *A Taste for the Secret*. At one point in his discussion with Maurizio Ferraris, the latter asks Derrida about relations of place; when A and B face each other, their respective positions seem radically incommensurable. Derrida responds by arguing that this profound disparity is in fact “true of everything that is dual.” It is unclear whether Derrida would want to limit this position to intersubjective relations exclusively. Nevertheless, if we broaden his remarks beyond the strict confines of the human, it becomes possible to assert that the very fact of temporality requires ingenuity, namely that repetition “cannot exhaust the novelty of what comes” (Derrida and Ferraris *A Taste for the Secret* 70). This absolute novelty and openness of time in turn entails as its condition of possibility a “hypersolipsism” in which entities are not absorbed into their relations. As a result, entities would therefore resemble Leibnizian “monads,” since it is “infinite difference that makes us always ingenuous, always absolutely new” (Derrida and Ferraris *A Taste for the Secret* 70).

Nevertheless, and as Derrida rightly points out, if this were strictly the case then nothing would ever happen to begin with. As is well known, Leibniz circumvented this problem by granting God absolute jurisdiction over monads via the “principle of pre-established harmony.” Yet it is clear that Derrida finds such an appeal unpalatable, hence the description of his own position as a “Leibnizianism without God” (Derrida and Ferraris *A Taste for the Secret* 71). The rejection of an absolute causal mediator in turn requires that entities would have to communicate obliquely, via a process in which a

local third space acting as both a mediator and medium for relations, but without every exhausting the relata. In this way, and contrary to Bennett and Braidotti, the possibility of novelty, ingenuity, radical alterity, and disconnection would in fact require that entities are absolutely “ingenuous and new” with respect to one another. This is precisely what one gets in Harman’s notion of “vicarious causation” (Harman *On Vicarious Causation*). While present restrictions of space constrain detailed elaboration of this mechanism, it would be possible to briefly describe this process as one in which any two real objects or “monads” indirectly interact by producing a third space which then has retroactive effects on its parts. Crucially, such a mechanism does not only apply to intersubjective interaction in Harman’s thought, but rather hold for any two encounters whatsoever.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout the course of this paper, a general posthumanism requires a non-anthropocentric framework which rejects both humanist values and dualist hierarchies; it is essentially a multidisciplinary approach which seeks to recast ethico-political issues in light of this rethinking of the role of the human. Bennett’s vital materialism and Braidotti’s zoe-centered egalitarianism may both be said to contribute to the decentring of the human by developing a relational ontology which seeks to decentre the ethico-political centrality of the human. Nevertheless, and in light of Biswas Mellamphy’s critique, Bennett and Braidotti may be said to remain “weakly anthropocentric” to the extent that the former judges processual rhythms in relation to the human, while the latter argues for an expanded relational self in which the human comes to be infused into everything and vice-versa. As a result, they risk subsuming the non-human into frameworks that remain tacitly human-centered, thereby letting the human in through the backdoor. Furthermore, and as I have shown above, this (weak) anthropocentrism may be seen as a product of their commitment to an immanent relational holism.

Conversely, I hold that disconnection and a truly “humans out of the loop” (HOOL) approach requires Derrida’s notion of “Leibnizianism without God” and Harman’s notion of withdrawal in order to develop a model of non-relational relationality. In granting irreducibility and radical alterity to entities, this non-relationist approach preserves individuality while simultaneously allowing for contingent connection and disconnection, thereby offering a framework for thinking the posthuman in a way that is genuinely non-anthropocentric. In rejecting “human-centric” epistemic and ethical frameworks, this alternative model of responsibility demands the development of an ethic attuned to the singular force of specific beings beyond their current relations. In this way, it reframes the posthuman as a commitment to the radical multiplicity, specificity, and force of entities beyond strictly human concerns.

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