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The Dangerous Myth of Human Exceptionalism

Humans already live in a posthuman world. The normalization of mental and physical modification, the rapid rise of digital communication, the humanization of corporations, and the wholesale commodification of technology-procured, human-oriented data all provide evidence of a posthuman status quo, and this reality is just the newest iteration of a deep-rooted truth. Though these nuances of modern reality are somewhat unique, the unexceptional nature of humanity is not a new phenomenon. Viewing human history through the lenses of Bernard Stiegler's epiphylogenesis, Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power," and the anthropological and ontological analysis of animals in *Philosophy and Animal Life* reveals a longstanding multilayered and multi-directional relationship between humans and nonhumans. Humans have long adhered to traditional views of humanness while socioemotionally engaging with nonhumans as distinct others, and the arguably widespread complacency in response to this dynamic allows much of humanity to resist recognizing the inherent dangers of anthropocentrism. Human exceptionalism has, in many ways, always been a myth—a fact that is notably apparent today—and collective acknowledgement of that reality would allow humans to move beyond the exclusive understandings of humanness that contribute, both directly and indirectly, to harmful trends like climate change and animal cruelty.

Technology, a nonhuman entity, permeates human evolution. French philosopher Bernard Steigler asserts, as explained by Andrés Vaccari and Belinda Barnet, that Western philosophy is

founded, in part, on the myth that technology is a “secondary and derivative” facet of existence (9). The belief that technology is notably detached from human experience—“cast out from the interior of thought”—is false, according to Stiegler, because technology and human existence share a process of “inheritance and transmission” that “supports progressive accumulation with each successful generation” (10). In other words, human evolution is intimately linked to a separate technological evolutionary process. As Vaccari and Barnett explain, language offers another example of this type of human-nonhuman connection: language “is not genetically programmed; it is an acquired skill, and yet it has its own history, its own memory that exceeds the lifespan of the individual” (13). These connections mean that “technics and the human are constitutive of each other” (13), an idea that categorically challenges Western philosophy’s anthropocentric othering of technology. Moreover, epiphylogenesis, the structure that enables the “transmission and recording of experience,” is “external and non-biological,” existing “beyond genetic memory” (11). This structure precedes humanity. By reframing technology as a separate entity with agency and a unique evolutionary history, Stiegler reverses traditional perceptions of human-technic evolutionary relationships: instead of seeing technology as a facet or byproduct of human evolution, Stiegler argues that “human memory is a stage in the history of a vast machinic becoming” (10). Technology is the “prosthetic already-there” that has been with humankind since the beginning.

Jane Bennett’s arguments about the vibrancy of matter augment Stiegler’s assertions about technology and further challenge human exceptionalism—now and throughout history. Jane Bennett’s analysis of “thing-power” reinforces Stiegler’s possible dismantling of anthropocentrism by offering another source of nonhuman agency that has always existed alongside humanity: objects. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett is unwavering in her critique of

anthropocentric views of humanness: her defense of “agency” (instead of softer words) as a classification includes the claim that “material agency is likely to be a stronger counter to human exceptionalism . . .” (34). Bennett posits that ambiguous understandings of human agency, which “remains something of a mystery,” preclude any attempt to challenge the agency of nonhumans: “If we do not know just how it is that human agency operates, how can we be so sure that the processes through which nonhumans make their mark are qualitatively different?” (34). Though Bennett cautions against “failing to affirm human uniqueness” (11), she echoes Stiegler’s reframing of human qualities as qualities (or versions of qualities) that are not exclusive to humans: “human power is itself a kind of thing-power” (Bennett 10). The idea that “agentic capacity” is available to nonhumans as well as humans strikes at the heart of humanism.

Human exceptionalism has negatively impacted human existence, so challenges to human superiority and exclusiveness—like the ones provided by Stiegler and Bennett—should be welcomed and thoughtfully considered. This, however, may be a formidable task. Though it is, perhaps, most easily viewed as a commentary on human augmentation, William Gibson’s “Johnny Mnemonic” can be read as a cautionary tale about human exceptionalism—in particular the strong lure that the faux-logics of human exceptionalism have on many humans. Though the Lo Teks, a group of anti-technology rebels, offer Johnny, a tech-heavy data runner, salvation from a likely gruesome death at the hands of the Yakuza, Johnny’s use of technology remains largely unchanged. At best, Johnny experiences a lateral shift in his technology use (blackmailing instead of trafficking); at worst, Johnny’s technology use *increases* in the company of the Lo Teks at the end of the story. After all, in the story’s last lines, Johnny admits that he is “getting to be the most technical boy in town.” Johnny’s use of technology nearly led to his annihilation, yet he ends the story without achieving a fundamentally different approach to

technics. Even his assumption that he could “dig all the silicon out” of his brain and earn his “own memories and nobody else’s” can be read as a stubborn commitment to traditional perceptions of humanness: Johnny believes that his augmentations are distinctly separate from his existence as opposed to being parts of a larger group of the “prosthetic already-there” discussed in the essay by Andrés Vaccari and Belinda Barnet. “Johnny Mnemonic” offers few particulars regarding the modern hazards of humanism, but it does illustrate the profound hold that traditional views of humanness have on humanity.

Collective acknowledgement of flaws of human exceptionalism may be difficult to achieve, but it must be attempted for the sake of the natural, nonhuman world. In *Philosophy and Animal Life*, Cora Diamond explains that, despite humans’ tendency to anthropomorphize nonhuman animals, humans still experience “astonishment and incomprehension that there should be beings so like us, so unlike us, so astonishingly capable of being companions of ours and so unfathomably distant” (61). This inability to process the seemingly paradoxical nature of humanity’s connection to nonhuman animals—which is notably similar to the “neither inside nor outside” quality of technology as explained by Derrida and Stiegler (10)—leads to mistreatment of nonhuman animals and the environments in which they live. As Cary Wolfe notes in the introduction to *Philosophy and Animal Life*, “our moral responsibilities toward nonhuman animals” are intricately linked to “the very foundations of what we call ‘the human’” (3); thus, if humans are unable to critically consider their own humanness and subsequently shed the weights of human exceptionalism, nonhuman animals and their climates will continue to suffer. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett is careful to guide readers away from simple, ultimately humanistic responses to this problem. Bennett cautions against “the desire to reinforce the boundary between culture and nature” and the intellectualizing of environmental disaster by shifting “the conceptual

vocabulary more in line with this condition” because, ultimately, both of these approaches emphasize “the agency of humans” (115). Instead of these approaches, Bennett offers a direct solution to environmental issues that acknowledges both Stiegler’s anti-humanism commentary and Wolfe’s assertion that posthuman views of nonhuman animals amplify the need for human-to-animal empathy: “Give up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman. Seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages in which you, too, participate” (116). The posthuman call to action is clear: acknowledge human exceptionalism in order to save nonhuman entities—animals, the environment, et cetera—from anthropocentric humanism.

As seen in “Johnny Mnemonic,” escaping the tendrils of human exceptionalism is difficult, but such collective unshackling is needed if humanity has any hope of saving animals and their climates from environmental damage caused, directly or indirectly, by traditional understandings of humanness. If humans are able to connect socioemotionally with animals, technology, and objects, then surely those nonhuman entities deserve some of the respect and consideration typically reserved for fellow humans, and this shift begins with a realization that humans are not the only entities on the planet who think, feel, and enact a will upon others—and they *never have been* the only ones to do so. Human exceptionalism was born a lie, and it has wreaked havoc on humans’ ability to cooperate with nonhuman entities. Killing that lie is the only way to reset the dynamic between humans and nonhumans. Humans must bury their exceptionalism before the earth becomes too toxic to do so.

Works Cited

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