

***What is Posthumanism?***

**by Cary Wolfe (2009)**

**Reviewed by Greg Pollock<sup>1</sup>**

As I prepared to read Cary Wolfe's latest book, *What is Posthumanism?*, I wondered how much hermeneutic effort would be required to answer the titular question. To my pleasure, Wolfe gives a clear definition of what he means by "posthumanism," and how it contrasts with others' usage, in the first few pages. For Wolfe, posthumanism is the set of questions confronting us, and way of dealing with those questions, when we can no longer rely on "the human" as an autonomous, rational being who provides an Archimedean point for knowing about the world (in contrast to "humanism," which uses such a figure to ground further claims).

Wolfe's posthumanism should be taken as "after humanism" rather than the-ism form of a substantive being called "the posthuman." Both traditional humanism and the techno-ecstasy of "the posthuman" or "transhuman," he argues, lead to "an intensification of humanism" because they retain the fundamental gesture of leaving behind constraint in liberating their real selves (xv). All humanisms share some conception of freedom—autonomy, agency, intention, and rationality are popular ones—that secures exceptional ontological value for humans through nonhuman lack. In addition to distinguishing his position from humanism and transhumanism, Wolfe points out that there are also real and valuable differences even among those who share his basic coordinates, like Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Judith Butler.

Those allied figures are largely absent from *What is Posthumanism?*, in which Jacques Derrida and Niklas Luhmann do the lion's share of the theoretical labor (and as a result, one's opinion of the book will depend largely on one's feelings about those two and Wolfe's reading of them). Wolfe's combination of different intellectual traditions is refreshing: though Derrida is only obliquely challenged (over

---

<sup>1</sup>Greg Pollack can be contacted at: [pollockgf@gmail.com](mailto:pollockgf@gmail.com)

vegetarianism, more about which later), Wolfe's juxtaposition of Derridean deconstruction (widely disseminated in US literature departments) with similar moves in second-order systems theory (largely neglected by US literature departments) recovers what was radical and invigorating about Derrida in the first place.

Glossing Dietrich Schwanitz, Wolfe notes how deconstruction and systems theory mirror each other around the relation between impossibility and possibility:

the starting point for systems theory is the question of what makes order possible and how highly organized complexity, which is highly improbable, comes into being at all. Deconstruction, on the other hand, begins with taken-for-granted intransigent structures of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence that are already ensconced in textual and institutional form, and then asks how the subversion of those structures by their own elements can be revealed. (13-4)

Deconstruction and second-order systems theory start from opposite questions—how can we show incoherence? how can we understand coherence?—but proceed, Wolfe suggests, through essentially the same maneuvers.

For Luhmann, a system engages with its environment precisely because it is closed to it; “openness from closure” is something of a mantra for *What is Posthumanism?* (15). All references by a system to other beings in the environment are really references to designations originating from the system's own structure. Wolfe cites the example of the legal system: “legal” and “illegal” is the fundamental distinction of the juridical world, but both designations originate from the “legal” half (15). This, of course, is the problematic Kant laid out for modern philosophy, from which Hegelian dialectics was supposed to supply escape. The Hegelian response is not specifically taken up in *What is Posthumanism?*, though one of its more popular forms, Žižek's Lacanian Marxism, is discussed with regard to *Dancer in the Dark* in chapter 7, where Wolfe argues that Žižek conserves a metaphysics of voice to provide coherence for the subject. In short, the dialectical way out of Kant's “settlement with skepticism,” to use Cavell's frequently cited formulation, is either too local and unable to address the

second-order complexity of the system/environment relation, or makes ontological generalizations by re-importing substance by another name (70).

Where Kant concedes that self-reference is inescapable but finds solace in the power of reason to recognize its formal limits—most notably in the sublime experience, which Wolfe revisits in chapters 8 and 9—Luhmann refuses any sleight of hand to surmount Kant’s original insight that systems are self referential. But—and here’s why Luhmann is so important to Wolfe’s posthumanism—by insisting on this closure, Luhmann is also able to accept the paradox that, because this border is not permeable, self-reference is simultaneously hetero-reference. To continue with the juridical example, the legal system builds up internal complexity (the different kinds of courts, for example) by reference to its fundamental self-instituted distinction (legal/illegal), and at the same time that internal complexity constitutes an ongoing response to the complexity of its environment. And whereas the dialectical solution to Kant’s impasse revolved around “the subject”—The German Ideology makes that critique as well as any text, and, as Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx*, marks the spectrality of the Marxian “subject”—Luhmann’s account of the simultaneity of self- and hetero-reference works for any system because it is not founded, like the Kantian or Hegelian solutions, on the humanist assumption that there is a thing called “the subject” that centers or escapes from or redeems an otherwise constrained world.

Without the humanist baggage, Luhmann’s second-order systems theory departs from its more programmatic first-order incarnations (associated with the likes of Norbert Weiner and Gregory Bateson) in a movement paralleling that from structuralism to poststructuralism. In each case, the application of powerful explanatory mechanisms to the emergence of the discourse itself (as in Derrida’s “White Mythology”) reveals and undercuts (“deconstructs”) the hidden, exceptional position conserved in the theorist-as-subject. Wolfe’s close comparison of their procedures and conclusions shows that the humanist hypothesis has been rigorously devalued by both its scientific and philosophical/aesthetic (institutionally, “the humanities”) achievements.

Wolfe’s theorization of posthumanism is not a wildly new creation—and I don’t think he claims it to be—so much as a synthesis of two of the most important and comprehensive schools of contemporary thought. His glosses of Derrida’s and

Luhmann's demanding texts are as clear as humanly possible, and he is consistently crisp in his criticisms of vestigial humanist habits in purportedly posthumanist projects. In chapter 4 Wolfe maps the permutations of humanism and posthumanism as a useful reference for positioning himself (and Haraway, Butler, Latour, etc.) vis-a-vis, on the one hand, anti-foundationalists like Žižek and Richard Rorty who nevertheless reconstruct a world where humans are special and on top, and on the other hand, animal rights philosophers like Tom Regan and Peter Singer who argue that nonhumans are ethically equal to humans but do so through traditional humanist categories.

Over against humanist posthumanism and posthumanist humanism, Wolfe argues we need to “find a mode of thought adequate” to the demands of posthumanist posthumanism (xviii). Thus the site of intervention for *What is Posthumanism?* is decisively that of philosophy and thought:

when we talk about posthumanism, we are not just talking about a thematics of the decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates...rather, I will insist that we are also talking about how thinking confronts that thematics, what thought has to become in the face of those challenges. (xvi)

The commitment to the problematic of “thought” is consistent with Wolfe's application of the principle of “openness from closure” in the domain of academic disciplinarity. The posthumanities, he argues, should not be an interdisciplinary muddle that renders the academic palette gray, but a set of heterogeneous disciplines enriching each other by knowing their own material the best— as he demonstrates convincingly in chapter 2, applying Derrida's work to Daniel Dennett's slippery use of “language.”

At the same time, the emphasis on “thought” displaces attention to actual nonhuman beings in *What is Posthumanism?*. This is not to say that Wolfe's conception of “thought” is a side door for a uniquely human capability—it isn't. It just has the effect of making actual nonhumans less relevant to the conversation. This is the complication Haraway has raised regarding Derrida's essay “The Animal that

Therefore I am (More to Follow).” Even when Derrida speaks of seeing “a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn’t the figure of a cat,” he still turns the encounter with the cat into a site to reflect on the “textual canon of Western philosophy and literature” rather than “become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking.” (Derrida 374; Haraway 19-20). Wolfe’s discussion of representationalism in activist art and architecture in chapters 6 and 8, respectively, is just as apt as Derrida’s rejection of “imperializing” ways of seeing animals, but likewise remains more curious about human artifacts than actually existing nonhumans.

Linked to this, the discussion of ethics remains at the level of Derrida’s studied refusal to commit to rules that could provide a shoehorn for the calculability of the other. There is “an essential tension in Derrida’s work on ethics between his insistence that we pay vigilant attention to the particular instance of decision...without letting formulae or maxims do the work for us, and a general law or economy of iterability that would render such decisions nonuniversalizable” (96). In concluding his excellent survey of different modalities of humanism in the ethical consideration of nonhumans in chapter 3, Wolfe writes that:

Derrida is of little use in enabling us to formulate new guidelines about particular surgical or experimental procedures...But he is of immense use in forcing us to live with the fact that no matter how such policies are drawn, the distinction between human and animal should be of no use in drawing them. (98)

Ethics is split between a “pragmatically determined” instance of the singular decision and the yet-to-come structure of “the ethical” that deconstructs the generalization of any actual law. Vegetarian or vegan commitments, which would appear like a justified response to the particular procedures of factory farming, are ethically suspect because they reintroduce rules not determined by the singularity of the occasion. The deconstructive vegan would therefore be pushed into some form of ethical occasionalism to say that never eating meat (because its production as “meat” is only conceivable within the horizon of “the distinction between human and animal”) is, on each discontinuous occasion, a pragmatic determination based on the particular slaughter of the being whose flesh is on offer, rather than because the meat-making

industry is brutally humanist and then some. Such ethical occasionalism wouldn't be a terrible attitude to have about flesh-eating, but it seems more complicated and less honest than it could be.

Rather, the second-order systems theory running throughout *What is Posthumanism?* provides a vocabulary for articulating sumptuary and deconstructive commitments together. The Derridean commitment to non-commitment isn't uncertainty—it is really the foundational ethical gesture toward “the ethical” itself. But the object of ethics, as acknowledged in its “pragmatic” moment, is not just “the ethical” but the actual beings outside of that system. Thus the self-reference of the ethical, its accrual of internal complexity, is absolutely cut off from actual other systems and therefore subject to them at the same time. The ethical attitude toward “the ethical” must “re-enter” (one of Wolfe's favorite terms) ontic determinations, and should do so on the basis of the deconstruction of the human/animal distinction. This would yield an iterative commitment more like the oath sworn on the not-present specter in *Specters of Marx* than the rule criticized by Derrida in “Eating Well.”

As is often the case in *What is Posthumanism?*, there is not space here to pursue this line of thought fully. Wolfe does not dispatch the question of posthumanism but clarify it as the meta-framework for future research agendas in the erstwhile humanities. *What is Posthumanism?* is not beyond critique, but relevant objections will still inhabit the philosophical world that Wolfe has mapped in this book.

## References

- Derrida, J., (2004) *Specters of Marx*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 2004.
- . (2002) "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." Trans. David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28: 369-418.
- . (1984) "White Mythology." In *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J., and Jean-Luc N. (1991) “Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject: an Interview with Jacques Derrida.” In *Who Comes After the Subject?*. Eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy. London: Routledge,

Haraway, D (2008). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

Marx, Karl. (1998) *The German Ideology*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Wolfe, Cary. (2010) *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.