

Posthuman International Relations

Written by Matt McDonald and Audra Mitchell

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MATT MCDONALD AND AUDRA MITCHELL, OCT 5 2017

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Preparing an introductory essay for an edited collection is never a straightforward enterprise. Managing the tasks of defining the scope of that collection, providing an outline of the contributions themselves and pointing to themes and intersections connecting the papers, as well as the questions they raise, is never a simple task. But in this instance, those challenges are much greater as a result of profound uncertainty and even contestation over the key term animating this collection and the expansive licence given to the authors of the thoughtful papers that follow. And, although the initial discussions on this theme emerged in a workshop in which a handful of the authors participated, they have grown and transformed across a series of discussions at several conferences in several countries and continents. In each iteration, new voices have joined to elaborate, contest and innovate on the initial themes.

Yet the scope of issues covered in these contributions, the significant licence given to contributors, and the relatively organic nature of the collection constitutes a key strength. So too does the variety amongst – and sometimes the productive tension between – interpretations, conceptualizations and arguments advanced in these interventions constitute an important contribution to existing debates. A discussion of the posthuman and its relationship to the study of international relations cannot be narrowly defined, nor can one voice (ours or a specified contributor's) be allocated the task of providing the definition of the posthuman or the other set of concepts addressed here: security, ecology, anthropocentrism or the Anthropocene. All are sites of debate themselves, and raise questions about what the interrogation of 'the human' and 'humanity's' relationship to other beings mean for the study and practice of international relations in the contemporary context. As such, they are rightly points of intellectual animation and contestation. And as Audra Mitchell notes in the first essay to follow, it is entirely appropriate that conversations about the posthuman and IR, here or in other contexts, should aim primarily to recognise and raise such questions rather than claim to provide definitive answers to them.

The 'posthuman turn' in the study of international relations, a phrasing certain to raise eyebrows and possibly ire amongst some IR scholars, essentially asks us to reflect critically on the role of humanity in the contemporary global context. More specifically, this provocation asks us to defamiliarise mainstream narratives of 'humanity' so that it is possible to better understand how it is constructed, performed and protected. Given rapid and far-reaching technological development, unprecedented environmental change, and more broadly the profoundly transnational nature of key challenges confronting the earth, this approach asks whether we can continue to work with implicit but powerful modern conceptions of a humanity separated from nature. This question arises even before recognition of the profound threat now posed to other living beings or future generations – of humans and nonhumans alike – or the challenges posed by recognising and engaging non-living beings in the realm of ethics and security. Clearly, these moves raise a big set of questions. But for us and for many of the contributors here, those questions loom large (and indeed become urgent and necessary) in the context of the Anthropocene: the argument that the earth has entered a new geological era in which humans themselves have become the dominant influence on the conditions of planetary existence. As Delf Rothe's contribution notes, the Anthropocene does not in itself dictate an appropriate or even likely

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politics of response. However, given the impact of the ecological, social and political changes associated with this proposed era, it *should* force us to reflect on some of the key assumptions and guiding principles of IR, in theory and in practice.

The contributions that follow address many of these crucial questions. Few, if any, are entirely *new* questions. Grappling with the nature-human divide in social and ecological thought has a long history (see Eckersley 1992), and questions have long been asked about how IR has been constructed to confine its analyses to (imagined communities of) humans, assumed to be separate from a posited 'natural world' (Anderson 1983; Suarin 1996). The nature of the contributions made here, however, is distinctive in drawing together a new generation of scholars who are bringing these questions to bear on the most pressing ecological, political, security and ethical challenges facing the planet. In so doing, they draw on discourses that traverse the social sciences and humanities. For instance, several contributors are inspired by the 'new materialisms' (see Bennett 2010; Connolly 2011; Coole and Frost 2011), which urge attunement to the lively property of materials. Others focus on articulations of the animals, plants and other nonhuman life forms that are co-implicated in the project of earthly survival, and that challenge traditional concepts of security, violence and threat (see Cudworth and Hobden 2011; Mitchell 2014). Meanwhile, some of the authors represented in this volume draw on object-oriented ontologies (Harman 2005; Bogost 2012) to explore how objects of all kinds construct and constrain existence beyond the boundaries of 'human' agency. Many of the contributions to this volume think alongside pioneering work in science and technology studies (Latour 2013; Stengers 2005; 2011) and, in particular, feminist approaches to this field (Haraway 2008; Barad 2007). The range of approaches, methodologies and philosophical frameworks discussed here demonstrate the diversity of ways in which 'posthumanisms' are articulated to challenge the core concepts and assumptions of IR.

Despite this diversity, at least two key themes suggest themselves across the contributions to follow. First, and especially for those contributors engaging directly with the question of environmental change, the relationship between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism looms large. Most strikingly, and perhaps surprisingly, in engaging this relationship in IR and even in locating themselves in a set of conversations about the posthuman, none of the contributors want to wholly reject one in favour of another. While all the contributors universally reject dominant forms of anthropocentrism, they vary both in their sense of the possibility or desirability of wholly moving beyond an anthropocentric frame. Instead, many of the interventions included in this volume seek re-articulations of the relations between humans and other beings that can mitigate the uncritical domination of the latter by the former. Similarly, while all of the authors in this volume express support in some form for moving towards increasing recognition of the embeddedness of humanity in nature, there is a notable sense of scepticism about the prospect of pure modes of ecocentrism. Reasons for this scepticism range from the analytical to the political (see Rafi Youatt's contribution), with Olaf Corry pointing to the intuitive appeal but limited political purchase of a position in which human society is viewed as 'dispensable to the Earth'. While Carolin Kaltofen (this volume) suggests that this ambivalence about ecocentrism may indeed challenge the extent to which contributions can genuinely be labelled 'posthuman', most endorse an expansion of human registers, care and consideration in reorienting attention *towards* an ecological perspective.

Second, and following the above, another key theme is that of relationality. All contributors, in different ways, challenge the tendency in IR to isolate entities and variables to make sweeping claims about 'the international' that ignore or obscure other kinds of relations. This is particularly evident in Cameron Harrington's discussion, drawing on feminist thought, of the desirability of an ethics of care that focuses on the relationship between the particular and the universal. It is evident, too, in Elke Schwarz's call to recognise and interrogate the nature of the relationship between humanity and technology, which profoundly challenges accounts of security weaponry that view these simply as objects employed by users. For contributors to this volume, profound and often deeply complex interrelationships-between people and objects; people and people; people and other living beings- necessitate new ways of thinking and engaging IR. This extends too, for Stefanie Fishel and Matt McDonald in particular, to the need for a radical reorientation of political practice, norms and institutions to respond adequately to the political cul-de-sacs dominant accounts of IR have taken us down so far (see also Burke et al. 2014; 2016).

The contributions that follow are grouped in two parts. Part 1 is themed around a theoretical discussion of the 'human', the 'posthuman' and 'posthumanism', while Part 2 contains contributions analysing ecology, non-human

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species and the Anthropocene. Neither parts, nor contributions within them, are wholly distinct from each other. While these broad thematic sign-posts are intended to help orient the reader, the deliberately significant scope of this volume and the licence given to contributors ensures that as many intersections occur between parts as within them.

In the first contribution to follow, the first in Part 1 of the volume, Audra Mitchell reflects on scholarship and debates around posthuman security in international relations networks to date. Noting controversy about the scope, role and desirability of both the 'posthuman' and 'security', her intervention points to both key axes of an evolving debate and avenues for future research. She ultimately makes a case for a 'reflexive anthropo-centredness', and suggests that future research in this space could benefit from drawing more on postcolonial theory, Indigenous knowledges and increased engagement with the planetary dimension of posthuman security. In the subsequent contribution, Carolin Kaltofen explores key conceptualisations and uses of the 'posthuman' in IR thought. Her paper situates interventions on the 'posthuman' in terms of different (and at times contradictory) philosophical and theoretical traditions, noting ultimately that much scholarship purporting to engage with the posthuman is better understood as an attempt to rearticulate humanism, albeit often in progressive ways. Her contribution compels us to drill deeper and reflect on the traditions and assumptions upon which claims are made, regarding posthumanism and IR scholarship more broadly.

The third contribution in this section, by Elke Schwarz, returns to the more specific theme of 'posthuman security', though in the process raises large questions about conceptions of humanity in IR. Using the example of new technologies of war and security, she points to the ways in which such technology needs to be viewed as more than a mere tool for the pursuit of security controlled by humans, instead raising important questions about how we conceive of ethics in war and even how conceptions of humanity might be affected or altered by the pursuit and use of technology. Rafi Youatt's contribution takes a step further back, reflecting on the anthropocentrism often depicted as serving a fundamental rationale for the posthuman turn and a key impediment to progressive human-nature relations. His analysis here suggests the need to question the simple human-nature binary, in the process pointing to the realities of multiple forms of humanity and humanness and multiple forms and dynamics of nature. It also asks broader questions about distinctions made between living and non-living objects and beings.

The final contribution in Part 1, by Stefanie Fishel, develops a three act structure for exploring the posthuman in IR. Developing the performative theme, her paper makes the case that we should focus less on the condition of the post-human than on the process of post-humanising, which must entail a shift away from traditional forms of anthropocentrism which separate humans from nature. She concludes with a call to arms for the reconstruction of humanity and the discipline (and practice) of IR to address contemporary global challenges, building in the process on her recent work elsewhere (Burke et al. 2016).

The first paper of Part 2, by Matt McDonald, deals most directly with the concept of security. In this paper he makes the case that the increasing tendency to securitise climate change raises important questions about *how* the security-climate relationship is understood. Pointing to the limits and pathologies of discourses that emphasise the preservation of national, international and even human security, he makes a case for endorsing and pursuing a discourse of climate security oriented towards long-term ecosystem resilience, in the process encouraging practices focused on mitigation and the rights and needs of future generations and other living beings. This security focus is also prominent in Cameron Harrington's contribution, which similarly explores the type of sensibility that should inform a more progressive approach to unprecedented environmental change in the context of the Anthropocene. Here he makes a case, drawing on feminist thought, for an ethics of care in informing how we view security in posthuman terms. This ethics, he suggests, is attentive to relations between the particular and the universal and recognises our entanglement in the experiences and vulnerability of those beyond our immediate horizon.

Delf Rothe's contribution simultaneously continues the security theme while returning to the question raised by Carolin Kaltofen of the assumptions underpinning existing scholarship in IR on the posthuman. In particular, he focuses on the meaning given to the Anthropocene. Here, he argues that scholarship on the Anthropocene frequently assumes that recognition of this new geological era will serve as a trigger for a reconfigured and progressive relationship between nature and humanity. In the process, he suggests that such scholarship insufficiently acknowledges the multiple meanings that might be given to the Anthropocene itself, and crucially the set of varied practices these may in turn encourage. In this sense, he argues for a richer sociological account of the Anthropocene

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and meanings attributed to it, in order to develop a richer and more realistic account of the ethics and politics of security in the context of the Anthropocene.

Finally, Olaf Corry's intervention examines the role of 'nature' in international relations thought. Reflecting directly on how IR has engaged 'nature' or 'the environment' over time, Corry suggests that IR had ultimately forgotten about rediscovering nature since World War II. Turning his attention to the question of how IR *should* engage the human-nature/ social-natural distinction, he ultimately makes the case for preserving an analytical distinction between the two while recognising the possibility for dialectical 'progress' associated with changing conceptions of both the natural world and the human condition.

The contributions to this volume are challenging and thought-provoking, often asking fundamental questions about the way those interested in IR can and should think about politics, ethics, security, unprecedented environmental change and technological development, humanity and the human-nature divide. These questions could scarcely be larger, and this volume certainly does not provide definitive answers to all of them. Indeed, in some ways, it raises as many questions as it resolves – but they are questions worth asking if IR is to enable and influence meaningful forms of political practice in the face of planetary challenges. And while this volume identifies numerous pathologies in IR scholarship and global political practice, it also points towards alternative politics, ethical registers and analytical frameworks better suited to face up to these challenges.

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Matt McDonald is a Reader in International Relations in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. His research is in the area of critical theoretical approaches to security, and their application to environmental change and Australian foreign and security policy. He is the author of *Security, the Environment and Emancipation* (Routledge 2012) and co-author (with Anthony Burke and Katrina Lee-Koo) of *Ethics and Global Security* (Routledge 2014).

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