'Posthuman Security': Reflections from an Open-ended Conversation

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A couple of years ago, I invited a group of scholars (including several of the authors in this volume) to get together and share their views on something called 'posthuman security'. While we all had different disciplinary backgrounds, expertise, questions and commitments, we shared the intuition that international security is not solely a matter of securing human lives and bodies. Instead, we contended that diverse beings other than humans are implicated in the conditions of (in)security. With this in mind, we wanted to think collectively about what the notion of 'security' means in worlds intersected and co-constituted by various kinds of beings: humans, other organisms, machines, elemental forces, diverse materials – plus hybrids, intersections and pluralities of all of the above (and more). In turn, we wanted to think about what the 'posthuman' means when we bring it into the realm of security. For instance, does embracing a more-than-human or post-human ontology mean giving up on notions of security as stability, sustainability or resilience? On the other hand, does embracing such concepts force one back into a humanism that reinforces rigid and exclusive understandings of what 'humanity' is, and what is worthy of being secured? Over the last two years, we have met to hash out these issues with a widening group of interlocutors in workshops and panels in the UK, Australia, Italy and the US. So what kinds of insight have these discussions inspired?

One remarkable aspect of the discussions was the breadth and range of positions that are identified as 'posthuman' or 'posthumanist'. In her recent E-IR piece, Elke Schwarz (this volume) notes this diversity, but suggests that posthumanism can be approached largely in terms of transhumanism, hybridity and the cyborg. This is indeed an important current in posthumanist thinking, and one that, as Schwarz suggests, has important implications for traditional security concerns such as the conduct of warfare and the distribution of agency in violence. On the other hand, many contemporary posthumanists are inspired by engagements with the liveliness and quirkiness of matter and its implications for ontology, agency and causation. They draw on sources such as new materialism of (Coole and Frost 2011; Bennett, 2010; Connolly, 2011) and the politics of affect (Massumi 2015; Protevi 2013). Carolin Kaltofen's work draws on these sources to examine the emergence of hybrid posthumans in the worlds of the virtual and sonic warscapes. Still other participants in our discussion are concerned with how thinking in ecological terms transforms perspectives on what it means to be 'human' – and what it means to be 'secure'. For instance, the work of Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden (2014, 2015) examines the implications of animal bodies and subjectivities in warfare. In a similar light, Stefanie Fishel's work on the subjectivity of dolphins and Matt Mcdonald (this volume) new framework for 'ecological security' each call for profound transformations of the perceived subjects of security and their influence in international law and norms (see also Mitchell 2014b). Rafi Youatt's (2014) work on international regimes of biodiversity show how this category has become progressively securitised, altering ideas of what 'life' is and what should be protected. Meanwhile, other authors are concerned with the agentic role of the 'things' we tend to construe as rigid and lifeless, in particular, their ability to provoke human thought and action, structure violence and create disruption (see Grove 2014). Even this wide variety of approaches only scratches the surface of the

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perspectives that are expressed under the rubric of posthumanism or 'posthuman security'. These terms do not refer to 'theory' or 'framework', but rather to a swarm of resonating, sometimes intersecting and often conflicting lines of thought.

In this context, one of the most prevalent aspects of our discussions on 'posthuman security' is the tension between identifying convergences in these contributions and maintaining the openness of the discourse. To my mind, one of the most promising and radical aspects of these discussions has been their stubborn resistance to resolution. However, the inertia of scholarly debate tends to push such discussions towards the articulation of definitions and particular 'projects' or frameworks. Our struggles with this tension have produced a number of rich debates.

One of the most salient of these debates surrounds whether or not 'the human' has a place in 'posthuman' security. At a 2015 roundtable discussion on the subject at the European International Studies Association Convention in Sicily, there was significant contention over whether or not the visions of 'posthuman security' presented by various contributors were radical enough. Some of our interlocutors expressed the view that anything short of the total elimination of anthropocentric thinking from IR simply reproduced existing paradigms, in particular, the ontology of liberal capitalism. Others contended that it is impossible – and undesirable – to excise 'humanity' entirely from a discussion of security or politics more generally. I have a great deal of sympathy for the latter perspective. Elsewhere, I have advocated the transformation of security thinking around the principle of 'weak anthropocentrism' – a position which acknowledges the embeddedness of humans in complex worlds co-constituted by diverse beings (Mitchell 2014a). Perhaps a better term, in fact, is 'reflexive anthropo-centredness': the ability to be mindful of the various ways that one might be figured, conditioned or disciplined as 'human', and how they affect one's sense of relationality, ethics, politics and co-existence.

From these perspectives, 'security' cannot be understood as a good or status that accrues to bounded, separated, 'purely human' beings. Instead, concepts of (in)security, violence and harm must be understood in relation to distinct, irreplaceable worlds and the relations that bind them. These approaches also highlight how existing logics of security function as a set of ethical boundaries that isolate a narrowly-defined category of 'humanity' from the diverse worlds that co-constitute it (Mitchell 2016b). Ironically, this strategy renders 'humanity' less secure in two major ways. First, it widens the gulf between the 'human' being and the relations that sustain it, as well as knowledge of how to maintain them. Second, by illustrating the constructed nature of 'humanity' as an ethical category, it opens this category up to further contractions and destabilizations. From traditional security perspectives that focus on maintaining 'humanity-as-it-is', this is deeply problematic. However, some modes of posthumanism suggest that it is precisely the destabilization of 'humanity' that can make it possible to transcend rigid categories such as gender, race and sexuality (Braidotti 2013; Colebrook 2014; Mitchell 2016).

Viewed from this angle, it is not possible to entirely escape the constructs, norms and shared experiences that help to define one's life as a human. However, the idea of what it means to *be (post)human* can be transformed by a deep engagement with alternative ontologies, cosmologies and multiple, co-constituting worlds. This suggests that between the two extremes suggested by our interlocutors – a radical, eliminative posthumanism and a relapse into unreflective humanism – there exists a wide space of relations. It is these (international) relations that our discussions probe. In this sense, our discussions are post-human*ist.* That is, they situate themselves in a range of critical positions in relation to human*ism*, particularly the dominant variety that underpins international frameworks such as international norms of humanitarianism (Mitchell 2014b). But they are not *anti*-human: they embrace the deep plurality of ways in which one can be, or become, (post)human. They also encourage the practice of reflecting critically on the category of 'humanity' better to grasp the nature of violence, harm and crisis.

Another flashpoint in our discussions concerns the concept of 'security'. In particular, various contributors have asked whether it makes any sense to continue pursuing security in radically relational worlds disrupted by global crises such as climate change and mass extinction. Moreover, the emergence of hybrids, cyborgs and transhumans suggests that the entire category of humanity is vulnerable to dissolution – along with the frameworks of law, ethics and global norms it underpins. It is clear from our discussions that security as stasis is not feasible: it does not match with the exigencies of a dynamic, entangled and volatile earth. Indeed, one of the major arguments included in the recent 'Planet Politics Manifesto' (Burke et al. 2016) is that existing frameworks and assumptions of international

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politics do not 'match the earth', and must be rebuilt if they are to do so.

At the same time, extending existing logics of security 'beyond the human' to penetrate additional dimensions of earthly co-existence threatens to compound regimes of biopolitical control. The recent work of Mark Evans and Julian Reid (2013) illustrates how fear over climate change and mass extinction has fuelled neo-liberal modes of sovereignty rooted in the production and 'resilience' of bare, often commodified, life. A good example of this can be found in contemporary conservation strategies that convert 'biodiversity' into registers of financial value and monetary instruments (Sullivan 2013) – including 'biodiversity derivatives' (Mandel et al. 2010) – as a response to the threat of extinction. Such practices respond to the annihilation of worlds and life-forms by attempting scientifically to manage the processes of (bare) life and death. In so doing, they condemn all forms and expressions of life to existence in 'survival mode', compelled to conform to a specific understanding of 'life' and its persistence through time.

As this example suggests, there are strong critical reasons to resist existing drives to envelop more and more aspects of the more-than-human within existing security discourses. Our discussions have stressed the need for attention to the double-edged sword of making security 'more-than-human'. However, they have also identified important visions for opening up the meaning of security. For instance, Tony Burke's (2015) recent work on 'security cosmopolitanism' offers an ambitious new vision of insecurity as 'processes that threaten or cause serious harm to human beings, communities, and ecosystems; harm to their structures of living, dignity, and survival'. His work calls for the transformation of understandings of security to become responsive to the nature and dynamics of vibrant, diverse systems – human, organic, material, technological – across time and space. It suggests that the kind of 'security' that might emerge from a serious engagement with posthumanist thought may not resemble anything like traditional and existing paradigms. In this sense, perhaps this line of thought would better be called 'post-human post-security'.

So it is safe to say that most of the contributors to this discussion are not fully comfortable with or committed to either 'posthumanism' or 'security'. Why, then, do we all find ourselves repeatedly drawn to engage with them, juxtapose them and explore their resonances? I think this is largely because their intersection opens up a series of problems, questions and critiques that break from established paradigms and hold the promise of alternative futures. So where are discussions of posthuman security going next?

While I can only speak from my own perspective, I see a number of avenues in which these discourses can continue to break ground. First, discussions of posthumanism and security can engage more robustly with postcolonial theory (an issue around which Cudworth and Hobden's work has broken ground). In particular, there is considerable promise in exploring how highly normative categories of 'humanity' are implicated in the construction of exclusive categories such as species and race. To give just one example, Achille Mbmembe's *On the Postcolony* (2002) brilliantly articulates how the category of animality has underpinned colonial violence against humans and other animals. More recently, he has called on humans to address the Anthropocene by 'see[ing] ourselves clearly, not as an act of secession from the rest of the humanity, but in relation to ourselves and to other selves with whom we share the universe' (Mbmembe 2014, 15). There is huge scope to identify the shared logic of arbitrary division and hierarchy that underpin regimes of violence against any and all beings that fail to fit within mainstream norms of 'humanity'.

However, 'posthumanist' thought also needs to engage more directly with its unacknowledged *debt* to Indigenous philosophy and ways of thinking. As my collaborator Zoe Todd (2014) has pointed out, new materialist and post-humanist modes of thought ignore and often efface the roots of many of their key tenets – profound relationality, multi-species community and an ecological ethic – in Indigenous philosophy and thought. 'Indigenous thought' is not a single, homogenous category. Instead, it is an admittedly inadequate way of signalling towards the hugely plural, singular bodies of thought, cosmologies, philosophies and lived knowledge kept and created by Indigenous peoples across the earth and over millennia. While none of these ways of knowing can be reduced to any other, some ideas – for instance, the co-constitution of beings – resonate across them. Juanita Sundberg (2014, 38) has recently critiqued 'posthumanist' thought on the basis that it 'enacts the world as universe, meaning the ontological assumption of a singular reality or nature, about which different cultures offer distinct interpretations'. Instead, if

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posthumanisms can recognise other worlds and cosmologies, this may open up new conversations across and amongst bodies of knowledge. In particular, by engaging seriously with plural forms of Indigenous thought, discussions of posthumanism and security can move towards a more self-critical understanding of the cosmologies they espouse and the forms of violence they might unwittingly condone. In addition, they might gain an appreciation of plural meanings of violence, harm and insecurity. I am exploring this pathway in my current work, which involves re-thinking the ethical dimensions of global extinction by engaging with plural Indigenous cosmologies and the communities who keep them. This involves thinking with contemporary Indigenous writers, artists and activists to theorise extinction, but also to understand its sources in large-scale forms of worlding associated with 'the global'.

Another direction which discussions of posthuman security can take is to engage more directly with the planet, and the specific conditions of (in)security on earth. This entails thinking about the elemental, geological and cosmological conditions of life on this planet. For instance, the work of geographer Nigel Clark (2011) urges humans to embrace the finite, deeply contingent existence furnished by an earth that is less dependent on them than they are on it. He claims that human existence is contingent upon conditions created by previous (largely extinct) life forms and by inhuman forces, both contemporary and temporally distant. From this perspective, existence is a gift given to humans – and to *all* existent earthlings. Instead of struggling to secure it at all costs, and resenting the finitude that comes along with it, he argues that humans should embrace an ethic of gratitude towards the Earth. This may include welcoming new worlds and beings – for instance, transhumans, hybrids or post-human organisms – that threaten the boundaries of humanity and endanger existing forms of human life. From this perspective, engaging with the post-human may actually involve thinking a world without humans, or a world in which existing modes of human life are no longer possible. That, in turn, requires relinquishing the idea of security as perpetual existence to be ensured at all costs (see Mitchell 2017). For many theorists of security, this might appear to be a frightening and counter-productive stance. However, along with the renunciation of security-as-we-know it would come the freedom to celebrate and cherish the 'gift' of existence on a volatile planet. How these insights and ethical vocations might re-shape understandings of security and global ethics cries out for further discussion.

These are a few of the new directions that the discussion of 'posthuman security' can take in its impulse to explore the intersections of humans and the diverse, transforming worlds we help to constitute. The strength of this discourse is that it places both of its key terms – 'posthumanism' and 'security' – in constant question, and stubbornly refuses closure into any particular vision of either. Indeed, although I have outlined some of the currents of this discussion so far, and some future paths it might follow, the conversation remains open to new and different ideas, critiques, interventions and futures. My account of these discourses should not be misconstrued as an 'expert' attempt to define them. Instead, these are the reflections of a participant-observer in an ongoing conversation that, I hope, will continue to create controversy, provoke arguments, frustrate academic expectations, spark collaborations and engender plural visions. Consider this your invitation to join us.

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