

# Non-Philosophy and Speculative Posthumanism: A Conversation with David Roden

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As David Roden writes, “a biomorphic posthumanism is no longer about the human relation to the future... It is the insurgency of an Outside... We have no transcendental access to this ‘doll space’ prior to making it.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, as Katerina Kolozova describes Laruelle’s position, “how something appears cannot be philosophically predetermined. Reality dictates how we will think and develop entirely new concepts and programmes about what is going on.”<sup>2</sup> In this conversation, David Roden and Bogna Konior discuss the possible intersections between non-philosophy and speculative posthumanism, tackling a variety of topics, including transcendental computers, human agency in relation to modern technology, the body, biomorphism, and pain, dark phenomenology, and how both non-philosophy and Roden’s work diverge from other contemporary approaches to posthumanism.

**Bogna Konior:** I want to start with a question that is not central to your work but that drew my attention. I find it very interesting that you begin your book *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (hereafter PHL) with a discussion of pain. Through non-philosophy, Katerina Kolozova has written extensively about pain as the real, the lived, brutal experience *par excellence*, which, in her view, unbinds our humanity from philosophical and conceptual thinking. In my article on the recent self-immolation of Polish chemist Piotr Szczyński, I use her work to argue for a non-representational politics rooted in this relentless and equalising workings of pain. Thinking through my pain syndrome, pain is as much as the thing-in-itself as I’ve experienced; it is also a communication breakdown, a fact that Eugene Thacker notices in *Infinite*

<sup>1</sup> David Roden, “Posthumanism: Critical, Speculative, Biomorphic,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*, ed. Mads Thomsen and Jacob Wamberg (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 81-94.

<sup>2</sup> François Laruelle, “Non-Standard Marxism: A Quantum Theory Approach,” *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* vol. 12, no. 1 - 2, (2015), 19.

*Resignation*: “Low-grade, chronic pain for weeks, months, I’m trying to listen to my body but I don’t know what language it is speaking.”<sup>3</sup> While for Kolozova the traumatic experience of pain shatters signification and is the precondition for interspecies politics, you write rather that it is a fundamentally isolating experience: “Whatever consolation we offer, it seems, the other’s pain is theirs alone.”<sup>4</sup> So, for you, pain reminds us of our inability to experience the mental states of others, a problem that can be alleviated *technologically*. I find the question of pain important now, with all kinds of pain conditions, acute and chronic, environmental and physical, emotional and social on the rise across the globe in an unprecedented manner. What is the place of pain in your take on posthumanism, especially at this moment in history?

**David Roden:** This question cuts across a lot of my current concerns, some that we will need to take up in later question, I imagine. Like Bertrand Russell, Kolozova and yourself, I am struck by what you imply is pain’s apparent lack of relation. Whatever its functional role in the economy of our bodies, the experience of intense suffering or extreme pain seems detached from any representation or purpose. For example, even if it informs us of tissue damage, this information is often vitiated by our inability to use it - because the pain is disabling, chronic, untreatable, or terminal.

Of course, in the introduction to PHL I introduce this phenomenology to problematize it, suggesting that pain may not be necessarily private but only contingently so, given the absence of technologies for connecting the pain evaluation and discrimination areas in one’s brain to the inputs flowing into analogous areas in others’ brains. But the excessive character of pain

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation: On Pessimism* (London: Repeater Books, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (London: Routledge, 2014), 1.

- its 'blackness and luminosity' as Kolozova puts it - is something other than privacy.<sup>5</sup> It is privation. Our capacity to express the experience is precluded by that experience. Its phenomenology, as I say elsewhere, is "dark" or as Thomas Metzinger says, 'is online only.' It does not allow us a complete or adequate re-presentation.

Pain may be fundamentally privative, divorcing us from the world, because it has no world. There's a phenomenological 'cut' of pain, something that, in removing the subject, divorces it, perhaps temporarily, from notional positions within it - whether as male, female, human, non-human, living, machine, etc.

I can go some of the way with Kolozova and yourself. Perhaps the inhumanity of pain resides in this power of detachment. This may partly explain the pleasure of pain received or given consensually in sadomasochistic practices, performance art or extreme sports. Although Stelarc correctly rejects accusations of masochism, his body art is also a notional cut of this kind - removing the body from its functional relation to a world, implying its absolute generality, its capacity for detachment. An art of pain, cleaving and remaking the body image or imago, allowing us new possibilities for pleasure or action: pain as offworld violence, or to cite your reading of Kolozova, "a void that suspends all meaning, all worldly affairs."<sup>6</sup>

I admit I'm hesitant regarding the emancipatory nature of this cut, or rather towards the kind of thought it prompts or enables. I agree that there's some kind of opening here. Maybe being deprived of subjective coherence or world through the cut of pain can help us think out-

side the limitations of our worlds. But this only reiterates the problem of the posthuman as a subtractive mode: it deprives thought of the subject, leaving the void as its remainder; but in so doing removes any source of or address for normative claims. Maybe the multiple and contested readings of Piotr Szczęsny's [politically-motivated] self-immolation [in your article] illustrate this dangerous ambivalence.<sup>7</sup> This may partly explain the violent rejection and victimization of immigrants that contemporary fascism exploits. As if their loss and victimhood must be placed outside 'our' borders. It's too obscene or excessive, one should suffer only in moderation.

I see the relation to this subtraction as so 'be-headed,' so open as to be without any determinate political or ethical content. It does not imply, for example, a relation of inter-species justice more than one of extirpatory violence. I agree that the cut of pain opens a space for remaking bodies and subjects, for different forms of affiliation, but one so wide that it preempts any particular decision or form of ethics. For this reason, also, I'm critical of those 'critical posthumanists' who see deconstructing anthropocentrism as an ethical act portending a more graceful or egalitarian relationship with nonhuman animals or with life as such. Rather, I regard anti-anthropocentrism as implicit in the predicament of a late technological modernity already acephalic, inhuman, 'out of control' without being 'in control' in any way we can make sense of (see PHL, Chapter 7). Anthropocentrism is wizened and dying on its feet. It doesn't work anymore. But the forms of distributed agency or non-agency (rather) that are replacing individual and collective agency - e.g. of deliberative democracies, collectives, etc. - seem utterly indifferent to otherness or the distinctive life of the other. I accept that pain may sometimes be a gift; a phenomenological cut that - in disordering our body or world - opens us to thinking dif-

<sup>5</sup> Katerina Kolozova, "A Post Scriptum: Post Mortem (To my Father)," in *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Bogna Konior, "Media intellectualism or Lived Catastrophe? Mediating and Suspending the A/Political Act," *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 15, no. 1 -2 (2018), 178.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

ferent embodiments. Maybe Kolozova is right that this is a necessary condition for some kind of interspecies politics, but it isn't sufficient, and it is massively ambivalent.

**BK:** In PHL, you overview various strands of post- and transhumanism. I have been drawn to the idea now called transhumanism from a young age because of its commitment to either extreme bodily modification (to the level of disrupting species identity) or abandoning the body altogether. I am often scolded for this commitment - arguing *against* the body is a general no-no in all kinds of disciplines, with feminism leading the way. In Kolozova's work, it seems that riding ourselves of this commitment to our bodies would foreclose our ability to have a more-than-human politics. Similarly, for a teacher of mine [Jules Sturm] who initially trained me in posthumanism, queer embodiment and posthumanism were synonymous. Paul di Filippo's novel *A Mouthful of Tongues: Her Totipotent Tropiciana* is a good example here and one I think you'd like because it comes close to your insistence on *biomorphism* as a key component of speculative posthumanism - the body is not to be abandoned but morphed in ways as yet unforeseen.<sup>8</sup> Di Filippo describes a fusion between a woman and a "benthic," a metamorphic, totipotent animal named after organisms that live in the lowest bodies of water. In the novel's end-of-days, climactic, cannibalistic orgy, the consumption of quivering flesh is not the locus of objectification but of personalization. While he is paying tribute to the radical Tropicália art movement in Brazil in the 1960s, where the dominant principle was *antropofagia*, a cultural cannibalism, he calls his own genre "ribofunk," a rendering of cyberpunk that takes biology and excretions like slime, fluid, blood, and sperm as the field of the technological revolution to come.<sup>9</sup> But it seems

to me that for many who think about the challenges that exist and that will come, bodies seem a burden - our bodies do quite badly in outer space, for example, which is why they have been written out of various futurist narratives. Could you talk a bit more about why retaining the body is necessary in speculative posthumanism - is it a question of philosophical rigor for you (we cannot think ourselves without bodies) or also a strategic choice to place yourself in a discourse that discounts embodiment as a productive way of thinking about posthumanism?

**DR:** Thanks for posing this question so well, Bogna - I've just ordered Di Filippo's book! I admit that I am struggling with this question at the moment.

Posthumanism seems to me a response to various overlapping predicaments in which bodies find themselves. I've already referred to the way the virulent power of technological modernity seems to exceed agency, anything like a bounded, political body. At the same time, we remain embodied creatures at a historical juncture where we can imagine very radical changes to individual bodies, their minds, their interrelationships and boundaries. For example, the introduction of increasingly intimate technologies inside the skin-bag, neural interfaces between bodies and prosthetic devices, synthetic protein switches to monitor and regulate cellular machinery, the production of transgenic animals to service the excess demand for transplantable organs, the use of genome editing techniques like CRISPR to target or induce new mutations in both human or nonhuman bodies... And, of course, some transhumanists dream of transcending the limitations of the body entirely - whether through mind-uploading, the creation of non-human artificial intelligence or by escaping biological senescence. A future technopolitics of space colonization - should this occur - will radically explore the limits of bodies, the degree to which they can be adapted for non-terrestrial

<sup>8</sup> Paul di Filippo, *A Mouthful of Tongues: Her Totipotent Tropiciana* (Cabin John, Maryland: Wildside Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Paul di Filippo, "Ribofunk Manifesto" (1996), <https://www.wired.com/1996/05/ribofunk-manifesto/>

environments and the extent to which this might constitute a mechanism of posthuman ‘disconnection,’ a secession from terrestrial bodies and forms of political affiliation.

On the other hand, we are facing a catastrophic breakdown in the capacity of various environmental and technological systems to sustain human and nonhuman bodies. Lastly, the political contestation over bodies, gender and race, over territory, place and identity are becoming more vehement and open. Maybe, as I suggested in the case of migration, this bespeaks a kind of terror reflex in the face of these other changes, an attempt to shore up meaning by cementing identity - a kind of retreat into the “peace and safety of a new dark age” - I couldn’t resist citing Lovecraft’s opening to *The Call of Cthulhu* here, which opens a completely ‘other’ can of worms, or tentacles...<sup>10</sup>

Even those who see biological bodies as instantiations of abstract cognitive functions contest the place of the body. In fact, it is hard to conceptualize agency without the assumption of a relatively stable body, fundamentally self-maintaining and bounded, however plastic and adaptable. The posthuman predicament is one that - however acephalic and disembodied - challenges our conception of what bodies are in ways almost too numerous to list here.

I’m not sure if posthumanism would be recognizable without this double affect of massive fragility and almost unlimited potential. If the body is, in some way, the essential horizon of posthumanism, this generates a kind of aporia. We need this contested, changeable flesh to articulate the posthuman condition or posthuman predicament - our capture by these multiscale technological, social and environmental processes. But given the possibility space that it opens

<sup>10</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” in *H. P. Lovecraft: The Fiction. Complete and Unabridged* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2008), 355 – 380.

up, there is no phenomenology of the body or conception of agency adequate for conceptualizing *what* is being challenged or threatened. The space of possibilities is too vast, whereas the philosophical tools available for constraining that space seem too epistemically fragile, or so I’ve argued in PHL and elsewhere.

It’s as if posthuman philosophy is fated to subtract the body that made it intelligible as a historical predicament. I can put it another way: This is one of many points where posthumanism outreaches philosophy, indicating its points of contact with non-philosophy. The body that is challenged has its ‘incept date,’ its pleasures, pains, gender(s), ethnicity, racial marking. But none of these seem transcendental or invariant. They are not philosophical material for limiting the scope of posthuman possibility. As soon as we insist on one dimension of this body as invariant - I don’t know, its capacity for duration or joy, for rational action - we limit the scope of the posthuman challenge. We need a way of addressing our bodies as the subjects of this experiment that isn’t tied to invariants.

The idea of the biomorph - I think - is that of a kind of placeholder or ‘stand in’ for the body invariants that the posthuman condition precludes. The biomorph isn’t personal and it isn’t the body itself. Perhaps - to reference Nancy - it touches the body at its limit, modifying and machining it, offering it up to experimentation and fantasy. Di Filippo’s fiction of xenoerotic fusion with a trans-species entity or cannibalism is thus biomorphic in this sense, as are Bellmer’s highly sexualized dolls, Ballard’s Crashes, Cronenberg’s visceral bodies and machines.<sup>11</sup> It’s not a conceptual representation of possibilities so much as an organon for intervening in or transgressing bodies, affecting them in precisely the way that pain or violence affects us, cutting us off-world, perhaps not unpleasurably. In this case,

<sup>11</sup> David Roden, “Xenoerotics,” (2020), <https://enemyindustry.wordpress.com/2017/08/18/xenoerotics/>

I suspect, this is to conjure ‘pleasures’ or dissociations from unexpected quarters, potentiating action and connection, however discreetly. What possibilities does the thought - the pleasurable thought - of being food for a lover or alien God, a gift for another (human or non) open up? Could that generate a politics? Once again, I’m not proposing this as a lifestyle (laughs).

**BK:** Despite the importance of embodiment for your project, one of the most obvious intersections between speculative posthumanism and non-philosophy is that both discount human *experience* as a ground for thought. Non-philosophy, in my view, is akin to an anti-phenomenology (although Laruelle might scold me here for using the word ‘anti,’ which does not allow the same movement of mutation as ‘non’ does). Non-philosophy’s use of ‘man’ interchangeably with ‘the real’ could give the opposite impression yet Man-in-person is not a subject nor a mode of consciousness, experience or being. In fact, if the real is experienceable it is only through its practice or through its effects. This seems connected to the types of experiences that you call *dark*: “having them does not confer much or any understanding of them” and that “our capacity for self-reflection exposes us to the simulation of a subject whose utterly non-subjective nature is entirely inaccessible to it.”<sup>12</sup> For you, this is important - acknowledging these dark phenomena means that we abdicate the desire to decide how our experiences can apply to “non-human, non-terrestrial or posthuman life” or decide on what makes someone a person.<sup>13</sup> This vocabulary of “broken thought” and “disconnection” not only relates to non-philosophical practice but is very powerful in the times when, despites its goal to do the exact opposite, posthumanist thinking is dominated by affects, connections, networks, relations, affirmations and the lexicon of neoliberal subjectivity. The commitment to

<sup>12</sup> David Roden, “Disconnection at the Limit: Posthumanism, Deconstruction and Non-Philosophy,” *Symposia Melitensia* 14 (2018), 24.

<sup>13</sup> Roden, “Posthumanism: Critical. Speculative Biomorphic”

dark experiences is contrary, you say, to new materialist posthumanism that reduces nonhumans to life, relations, affect or, in the case of Rosi Braidotti, ‘endurance, passion, pain.’<sup>14</sup> Could you elaborate on this difference, especially in relation to what kind of politics and ethics they necessitate? It seems to me that new materialist posthumanism wants to look for common ground with nonhumans and sees in that a precondition of ethics, which is why the relations, connections and networks are so important. But could there be an empathy without understanding, an ethics without perception, and with no common ground? Some would argue that this is something that non-philosophy forces us to consider.

**DR:** To begin with, I think we need to be clear about what the dark phenomenology thesis implies for phenomenology. It isn’t intended as an eliminativist thesis about first person experience. It is *consistent* with eliminativist or deflationist theses about phenomenal consciousness such as those developed by Dan Dennett (multiple drafts theory) and Keith Frankish (illusionism) but does not entail them. The idea, rather, is that having experience does not provide a secure warrant for claims about the nature of that experience because its structure need not be disclosed by the mere having it.

For example, if some phenomenological accounts of the continuity of temporal experience are on the right tracks it is hard to see how we could have first person evidence for those accounts (experience would be just too dense and rich for finite beings to grasp). By the same token there can be no epistemic warrant for claiming that experience consists of a special class of introspectable phenomenal properties which cannot be accounted for naturalistically in terms of the functional role of conscious states. The problem - as Keith Frankish and Metzinger have argued - is to explain why humans have such intuitions of specialness. That also involves a kind of phenomenology but it’s entirely naturalistic

<sup>14</sup> See Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2019).

and continuous with (say) cognitive theories of the architecture of mind. Dark phenomenology makes room for naturalism without entailing naturalism. It implies that our first-person knowledge of consciousness experience is narrower than we think, but it doesn't entail any particular thesis about its susceptibility to scientific (third person) methods. That something for the scientists to work out, or fail to work out.

So, yes, I agree with Laruelle about the opacity of experience and practice. It's not merely that we act without having unmediated access to action, but that the very space of that mediation (interpretation) isn't given either, and quite possibly alien. For example, should we subscribe to the neo-Hegelian view that mind and agency are constituted by the space of reasons within historically evolving social games? I don't think there's a convincing argument for this claim to be had - certainly within phenomenology or interpretation-based account of meaning.

I think this implies a more austere, dark but also (I hope) epistemologically rigorous kind of posthumanism. I don't deny that there are affects, ecologies, relations, especially transversal ones, where organisms or species bleed into one another, acquire new functioning and power. However, for reasons that ought to be clear by now, we need to be cautious about reading an ethical itinerary into this metaphysics. The most 'teleology' we can derive from this ontology is that function and purpose (insofar as they are to be found) are diachronic and indeterminate. There's nothing that life wants. There's nothing inherently joyful or graceful about becoming. Nor is there anything egalitarian about the transversal. To use Braidotti's terminology, "zoe" (this generalized, differential life opposed to the cultivated, individuated life or "bios") doesn't want to save us affirm anything at all.<sup>15</sup>

This doesn't mean there isn't a scope for affirmation here, only that this isn't any longer

<sup>15</sup> See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (New York: Polity Press, 2013).

bounded. I want to quote Claire Colebrook (who I've admired hugely since seeing her incendiary talks at a couple of Society for European Philosophy – Forum for European Philosophy events) writing in an almost Darwinian vein in her essay *How Queer Can You Go: Theory, Normality and Normativity*:

This question of fitness is, I would argue, a politic-metaphysical question of the utmost urgency for our time. What modes of life, what forces or selections can be affirmed? This is not the question of a decision – of how we might make or recreate ourselves – but the problem of encounters that are queer (not determined according to recognition and reproduction).<sup>16</sup>

Theory/philosophy can't preempt ethics because ethics is made rather than recognized (hence the compound 'politic-metaphysical'). Theory can't affirm anything - especially posthumanist theory since the epistemological unbinding principles at its core (dark phenomenology/ performativity) are fundamentally subtractive. Admittedly, we might want to say that posthumanist theory is a subject - an operation of subtraction - but, if so, it's a perverse and deracinating one that - like Vaughan, the ideologist and sexual totem of Ballard's *Crash* - is engaged in a suicide run whose effect is to detach politics/bodies/technology from the space of philosophical adjudication.

**BK:** I would add that there are other dangers in this philosophical pre-emption of posthuman ethics. Fetishizing animals and plants, othered as tokenistic 'ethical models' and aspired to as our salvation from 'humanism' might serve us well in rituals of poetic self-purification and performances of self-erasure. But because we need

<sup>16</sup> Claire Colebrook, "How Queer Can You Go? Theory, Normality and Normativity" in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 30.

to keep them fixed through a specific ethical definition so that we can erase our humanism ‘through them,’ we actively reduce them to historically specific, limited goals of social ‘progress’ in our times, say, socialism or feminism in Europe in 2019. This also erases the possibility of nonhumans being something else, or indifferent, or just resistant to any ontological colonialism of the ‘noble nonhuman’ we perform for the purpose of our contemporary politics. So, instead, you propose ‘unbinding,’ an idea that I see as close to the intention of non-philosophy. You take it from Drucilla Cornell’s “philosophy of the limit,” which you describe as such: “strip away the artificial constraints that make the world in our image, layer by layer, concept by concept. What remains, as in deconstruction, is something other than a world, and perhaps something more or less than philosophy, but an encounter with a remainder or non-meaning that philosophy cannot recognize or conceptualize.”<sup>17</sup> And elsewhere you speak of the “self-imposed conceptual poverty of Unbound Posthumanism,”<sup>18</sup> recalling non-philosophy’s intention to think without concepts, what John Ó Maoilearca unpacks so well.<sup>19</sup> You argue we should perform unbinding with regards to our humanity. You then want to make this more *indeterminate*, towards a post-humanity that we cannot yet imagine or recognize: “If we unbind the posthuman we cannot deliberate on becoming posthuman without pre-empting our deliberation.”<sup>20</sup> Has encountering non-philosophy after completing the book changed how you think about what speculative posthumanism and unbinding could be? You write that “speculative posthumanism is committed to a minimal, non-transcendental and nonanthropocentric humanism and will help up put bones on its realist

commitments,”<sup>21</sup> which sounds completely like non-philosophy to me!

**DR:** I sometimes feel like I’m converging with Laruelle from a different starting point. While I appreciate that his use of ‘Real’ is axiomatic - to be grasped through its performative consequences - I’m not sure we need to make that opening game to solicit such a space of indetermination. As you imply with your remark on Cornell, I guess my approach owes more to deconstruction, in that regard; scratching at the blind spots or aporia in systems, slackening their constraints, etc.

I’ve read a bit of Laruelle, talked to him briefly (in my fractured French) at an event in the Liverpool Tate, and obviously read those he has influenced, Katerina [Kolozova], yourself, John [Ó Maoilearca], Rocco Gangle, Emma E. Wilson and, of course, Ray Brassier. I think the effect of these various encounters has been to confirm my sense that posthumanism requires a shift *via* epistemology and ontology towards a kind of operation or practice - whether or not this should be viewed as ‘affirmative’ in the sense that Braidotti and others urge. I don’t feel that I need to use Laruelian terminology (the Real, vision-in-one, determination in the last instance, etc.) to do this. But I don’t think I can claim any special originality or independence here. You and the others on this list are remarkably independent in the way you develop Laruelle’s thought. There’s nothing here like the cloying scholasticism that one sometimes found in some of the reception of Derrida and Foucault within anglophone continental philosophy.

If there’s a sense of struggle and perhaps concern here, it’s that this indetermination is, as I’ve suggested, hard to like. It’s a kind of ‘for-itself’ that is also for nothing. I don’t know, or have any reason to believe, for example, that it will help us save the planet.

<sup>17</sup> Roden, “Disconnection at the Limit,” 26.

<sup>18</sup> Roden, “Posthumanism: Speculative, Critical, Biomorphic.”

<sup>19</sup> John Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts Are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Roden, “Disconnection at the Limit,” 27.

<sup>21</sup> Roden, *Posthuman Life*, 36.

**BK:** Speaking of our theme, ‘the end times,’ you write about a different, posthuman reality emerging through technological alteration, “human-made future that doesn’t include us.”<sup>22</sup> Advancement requires withdrawal, disconnection; or, in non-philosophical terms, both synthesis and mutation require negation. It must start from the negative. In the academy, transhumanism, which you also criticize, is generally condemned because of its association with the military-industrial complex and capitalism, both of which are often disavowed in the academic humanities in Europe. Transhumanism has an obviously futurist ambition. Critical posthumanism (and its extension in the new materialism), on the other hand, developed in self-proclaimed parallel to feminist and postcolonial thought - the narrative here tends to be that ‘we are already posthuman therefore attempts at posthumanism are power relations in decoy.’ They are more interested in mapping existing relations of power through deconstructing what the category of the human means. Attempts to cut across this division - as some members of Laboria Cuboniks, for example, try to do - often hit a nerve. Apart from a short essay *Homo ex Machina*, Laruelle tackles this subject in *The Transcendental Computer*, where he entertains the possibility of “a unified theory of thought and computing... a machine that would have a transcendental relation to philosophy in its entirety and therefore would be able to compute-think the blendings of thought and computing” akin to a “transcendental arithmetic like Platonism.”<sup>23</sup> In this arrangement, the real (or human-in-person) is both “a legible figure in a space of transcendence [and] precisely what defies every transcendence and every inert

structure composed of terms and relations.” He states that “AI prejudices intelligence, what intelligence can do by setting for it limits or goals (determined and finite in the measurable sense) in order to compare it to the machine,” which recalls your own commitment to underdetermined thinking about posthumans and what their intelligence might be like. But philosophers are not the ones who decide. Nevertheless, over the decades and in unpredictable ways, many of philosophy’s ideas have made it to the cultural mainstream, to the extent that popular op-ed culture seems like a parody of academic cultural studies, with the same discursive wars waged on a larger scale. Could you comment on these underdetermined ideas of intelligence? Is it possible to speculate on what that would mean for “us” (humans)?

**DR:** The dominant images of intelligence in the AI community have been in flux for some time: e.g. intelligence as the ability to derive theorems within formal systems, intelligence as the codification of expert knowledge, intelligence as skillful embodied coping (in situated robotics). The current interest in the powers of deep learning neural networks raises particular problems for received philosophical conceptions of intelligence. For example, DeepMind’s Alpha Go Zero (AG.0) the successor to the deep neural network Alpha Go (which defeated a three-time European Go champion) learned to play in an entirely unsupervised way, by playing successive iteration of itself.

A related issue which has bedeviled neural network research for some time, is that a trained up neural network may accomplish a particular pattern recognition task but its creators may only have access to the learning algorithm or classical data structures that produce this fluency. It doesn’t follow that they understand how the trained up neural network achieves this: that knowledge is encoded in the weights of a multidimensional neuronal state space, which

<sup>22</sup> Roden, “Disconnection at the Limit,” 19.

<sup>23</sup> François Laruelle, “*Homo ex Machina*,” trans. Taylor Adkins (2018), <https://fractalontology.wordpress.com/2018/02/08/new-translation-of-francois-laruelles-homo-ex-machina-1980/>; “The Transcendental Computer: A Non-Philosophical Utopia,” trans. Taylor Adkins and Chris Eby (2013), <https://speculativeheresy.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/translation-of-f-laruelles-the-transcendental-computer-a-non-philosophical-utopia/>

humans can't intuitively comprehend in the way one can, for example, comprehend a piece of code that implements some algorithm. There are dimensionality reduction approaches in statistics which can tackle this problem by finding the significant subspace and trajectories relevant to a particular task, but (and here I'm talking way outside my expertise!) this may become increasingly problematic with the very large neural networks (hundreds of layers) exploited in deep learning. In her keynote at Tuning Speculation 7, Beatrice Fazi argued that this leads to a kind of opacity in machine thought - in that the algorithmic models produced by deep neural networks are opaque but also treat the domain that they work in as yet another black box, generating prediction engines rather than theories that delineate the structure or composition of reality. It should be stated that this approach is, with qualifications, reflected in current cognitive science in the vogue for predictive coding models of learning and cognitive function.

So, it is possible, regardless of the philosophical prescriptions of transhumanism, that progress in AI and CogSci will generate images of thought by virtue of the brute success of certain paradigms over others. One way this might go is tipping us towards Scott Bakker's "Semantic Apocalypse" - a final shredding of humanistic assumptions about a special preserve where meaning, intentionality or normativity held sway. If things go this way, nothing we're doing in the academic humanities or posthumanities is going to stem the backwash or help us cope with it. The end of meaning is the end of the human, the end of ethics, any kind of political prospectus we can grasp. Alternatively - and this is reflected in the work of neorationalists like Reza Negarestani and Ray Brassier - there are plenty of folk who argue that we need to reinstate a commitment to intelligence as the reflexive employment of concepts in social-inferential practices.

To be intelligent - in this sense - is not just to be nifty at generating optimal outcomes but of having the language-bound capacities for the production of transcendental apperception. I have the greatest admiration for Brassier, Negarestani et al. and Reza's latest book elaborates this prospectus in vivid and massively fascinating detail.<sup>24</sup> However, I've argued that this approach inherits the philosophical blind spots of the Pittsburgh Pragmatism (Sellars, Brandom, etc.) that informs it. The worry goes something like this: the Pittsburgh-style approach needs a model of agency as the capacity to undertake and ascribe normative (deontic) commitments. But since such approaches deny that we can simply read off normative practices from non-intentionally described behavior or regularities, normativism reduces to something like interpretationism. When asked what makes a particular stretch of behavior meaningful or norm-governed the interpretationist says something like: 'it could be so interpreted by an interpreter under idealized conditions...' (for example, where the interpreter is a field anthropologist who wants to devise a semantic theory of an entirely unknown language).

The problem here is *just who is this Interpreter?* It's not the apperceptive subject - or *better not be* because then the account is viciously circular and collapses. But then - with a nod to the worries about dark phenomenology mentioned above - we don't seem to have an independent account of what this second-order transcendental hermeneut is. Is it even human? At the risk of being a little unfair, Donald Davidson in his work on Radical Interpretation pretty much assumes a pith-helmeted fellow with a notebook, recording his interactions with natives throwing spears at rabbits. But viewed through the lens of posthumanism there are no obvious constraints that can independently limit the capacity of the interpreter. Alluding to the theory-fiction [that I

<sup>24</sup> Reza Negarestani, *Intelligence and Spirit* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2018).

read recently at [Tuning Speculation 7], *The Sound Artist*, we might imagine ‘it’ as the cowed auditor in Becket’s *Not I*, Nyarlathotep herself, or Laruelle’s transcendental computer.

That is, once we strip away the filters afforded by phenomenology or anthropology, the worry is that the Pittsburghers and their neorationalist acolytes can’t regiment the space of interpretation. It follows that seeing the future of intelligence as the social production of transcendental apperception just won’t cut it: the ‘space of reasons’ it entertains is massively underdetermined. It cannot - for example - preclude Bakker’s *Semantic Apocalypse* as a resting state along its itinerary.

**BK:** Last question. You write about humans as “feral technological entities”<sup>25</sup> and I am just riffing on a word here but would it be interesting to reflect on the place of speculative posthumanism in the Sixth Extinction of species, or what has been called the anthropocene? And more so, is this a question of ethics or of something else, maybe of possibilities of techno-biological adaptation? You make a commitment to an underdetermined ethics; in fact, you condemn mainstream transhumanism, represented by the likes of Nick Bostrom, for its moralizing attitude - the transhuman is better, faster, stronger. The same criticism goes, however, for Braidotti and her condemnation of capitalism, for example, as “unnatural,” a diversion from some kind of good, non-capitalist essence of life. Both affirm the existence of the natural, they just value it differently. Looking for a third way - no ‘natural’ way of things and no moral hype of technological advancement, what is then the speculative posthumanist stance regarding environmental change (if any)?

**DR:** You summarize my criticisms of transhumanism and critical posthumanism beautifully but I fear that my response won’t live up to the same standards. Personally, of course, I worry

about the prospect of radical climate change because it threatens to strip away the nature on which I minimally depend, from which I draw enjoyment, aesthetic pleasure while foraging for cherries, apples, petting cats, and so on. The position I developed in PHL implies that maximizing functional autonomy (the capacity to enlist values and generate functions in an environment) is the way to go in a planetary technological culture generating an increasingly noisy, uncertain future. This is because wider functional autonomy is an existential necessity. In an uncertain world you want to maximize your options even if this generates a positive feedback loop requiring the cultivation of even wider functional autonomy ...

But this isn’t a moral prescription and it presupposes something like a stable, embodied agent (or population of such) as the subject of these interactions. That position was self-evidently perverse, but an unbounded posthumanism simply embraces its essential perversity. To quote from a forthcoming piece of mine: “A rigorous posthumanism is ... perverse in principle. It makes no philosophical decisions, including or especially ethical ones; although, as in Braidotti’s posthumanist ontology, it indicates a field where ethical relations between variously living and non-living entities may emerge.” I’m not sure I can do much better. To look for posthumanism for ethical guidance or political critique is just wrong-headed. It can, however, cue us to the junctures, the spaces or interstices where new bodies or ethical relationships emerge. For example, and with a nod to my anti-natalist friends, it can allow us to consider a gentle path to the extinction of humans or sentients on a dead planet finally devoid of suffering as an ethical path or trajectory. It doesn’t prescribe this however, because that is not the game of posthumanism.

<sup>25</sup> Roden, “Disconnection and the Limit,” 20.