

BOOK REVIEW

Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Paperback: \$24.95

Hannah Glasson

Virginia Tech, US
hannah9@vt.edu

Hannah Glasson's review of Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* outlines the theoretical tensions in Wolfe's formulation of posthumanism. Glasson acknowledges the potential for Wolfe's systems theory approach to create more theoretically rigorous approaches to posthumanist ecological ethics. However, the reductive connection between animal studies and disability studies has the potential to marginalize voices of disabled humans in the aim to decenter the human. The human remains central to Wolfe's notion of posthumanism with the effect of lessening the rhetorical force of the argument. Wolfe provokes a theoretical conversation that could make way for rethinking the anthropocentric location of critical discourse by creating space for recognition of the nonhuman. This conversation can potentially open possibilities broader than simply using posthumanism as a theoretical tool to reimagine existing human undertakings, disciplines, and knowledges.

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Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* is an ambitious book that traverses the territory of ethics, aesthetics, democratic theory, and philosophy of technology within the overarching theme of a study of the term posthumanism. Wolfe writes that "posthumanism," coined within recent decades, is a contested moniker that is often used to refer to deeply divergent meanings.^{1,2,3,4,5} Wolfe argues against the use of the term posthumanism to signify congruence with forms of transhumanist discourse which are concerned with creating improved and enhanced versions of futuristic humanity.^{6,7} Instead, he argues for moving beyond anthropocentric worldviews to begin to articulate a more substantially posthumanist form of ethics and practice. The point for Wolfe is not to augment human experience, but to find ways to use a critical examination of the human to nonhuman boundary as a locus of a new critical ethics that resituates human responsibility outside of normative and liberal conceptions of subjectivity. Wolfe applies his theory primarily to case studies from the disciplines of animal ethics, disability studies, art and architecture studies, and philosophy of technology, but leaves undertheorized the potential implications of posthumanism for ecological discourses and practices of environmental sustainability.

However, the clear articulation of systems theory throughout the book, which serves as a supplement to the more academically popular theory of deconstruction, provides a useful blueprint that could serve as a starting point for the

creation of theoretically rigorous approaches to posthumanist ecological ethics as well as other scholarly projects.^{8,9} A strength of the book is the unique way in which Wolfe brings together Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, the recognition of irreducible difference, with Niklas Luhmann's second-order systems theory, which is an acknowledgment of how self-referencing autopoietic systems (either "psychic" or "social") interface with the complexity of an environment in order to create meaning.¹⁰ Wolfe argues that Luhmann's contribution to the study of difference as complexity is a viewpoint which has been missing in American academic discourse, and that engaging with systems theory provides resources for rethinking the centering of the human as well as assumed autonomous subjectivity in political theory and ethics. Wolfe successfully articulates the ways in which systems theory can be applicable for rethinking a variety of discourses, from critical studies of art to animal studies, although the progression of themes throughout the book can leave an impression of randomness. This is partially a function of the book's ambition and scope, which could have been mitigated by clearer thematic organization. The first section of the book, entitled "Theories, Disciplines, Ethics," begins with a relatively clear progression from a summary of systems theory and deconstruction to an examination of cognitive science and bioethics. Wolfe argues that traditional academic fields have inscribed anthropocentric notions of the human and have left out a full consideration

of the import of both nonhuman forms of consciousness and also the essential a-humanness and prostheticity of human lives. Somewhat incongruously, however, the last two chapters of this section revert back to a centering of human institutions and human knowledge production, albeit through a discussion of their limiting anthropocentrism. While Wolfe provides a fresh perspective for analyzing the priorities of academic disciplines, the human-centered subject matter of these later chapters lessens the rhetorical force of the provocations toward non-anthropocentrism in the previous chapters. Despite the clarity with which Wolfe describes posthumanist ethics, it appears that human social institutions are central to his concern. Nonetheless, Wolfe has provoked a theoretical conversation that could make way for rethinking the anthropocentric location of critical discourse by creating space for recognition of the nonhuman. This conversation can potentially open possibilities broader than simply using posthumanism as a theoretical tool to reimagine existing human undertakings, disciplines, and knowledges.

One of the more problematic aspects of Wolfe's book is his perhaps overly simplistic conflation of animal studies and disability studies, which he most fully articulates in the chapter "Learning from Temple Grandin." The connection between this chapter and the earlier chapters on animal cognition and ethics hinges on his description of a special connection that he argues disabled people may have to non-human life. Wolfe also writes that the limits of the focus on "rationality, autonomy, and agency" in liberal rights discourse are demonstrated by both cognitively atypical humans and sentient nonhumans.¹¹ However, Wolfe does not seem entirely aware of the problematic implications of the way that he uses disabled human subjects to exemplify the problems which classical notions of subjectivity pose to the study of ethics. By decentering the experiences of disabled people, Wolfe generates a potentially problematic dualism between disabled and normative human experience. Wolfe's analysis is stronger when he draws upon the voices of people who say that their own differences in cognition have enabled a privileged understanding of nonhuman awareness. He includes the examples of a color-blind man who claims that he can better understand the subtle movements of horses, while the chapter's titular character, Temple Grandin, claims that the "intensely visual rather than verbal quality of her mental life" as an autistic person has allowed her to design spaces for animals with greater sensitivity.¹² However, Wolfe's analysis of disability studies discourse risks a departure from the ways in which disabled people have represented their own experiences to the imposition of a view from the outside. When Wolfe criticizes disability studies discourse for not referencing "trans-species affinity," his style of analysis could unintentionally reify a division between disabled people and the normative human.¹³ For instance, Wolfe argues that disability studies should more closely examine the importance of service animals for disabled people. Such an examination, he suggests, would go beyond "seeing the nonhuman

animal as merely a prop or tool for allowing the disabled to be mainstreamed into liberal society" and encourage a vision of "a shared trans-species being-in-the-world constituted by complex relations of trust, respect, dependence, and communication."¹⁴ The problem with this move, however, is that the voices of disabled people might become marginalized in Wolfe's quest to decenter the human.

While presenting a novel theoretical perspective, *What is Posthumanism?* contains moments in which Wolfe seems to insist on a single correct interpretation of various theories that align with his version of posthumanism. Wolfe insists that the posthumanist approach he has laid out demands a decisive departure from limiting discourses of human subjectivity that naturalize a positioning of the human as radically separate from its environment and from the nonhuman. He proceeds by pointing to moments in other books that he argues contain the seeds of posthumanist thought, which he claims that his theory can bring to the forefront. Wolfe notes that philosopher of ethics Cora Diamond's "insistence that vulnerability and compassion are very much to the point of justice;" yet says that she fails by not interrogating the representationalism of language.¹⁵ Wolfe's style of engaging with such arguments at times implies that those writers who have not embraced posthumanism in the way that he has defined it have produced incomplete analysis. He writes that the theoretical purpose of including Grandin in his book lies with "mobilizing her observations about her experience toward my own critical ends."¹⁶ However, he does not clearly acknowledge the fact that mobilizing disability discourse towards his own posthumanist project could conflict with the aims and values of Grandin's project. This move could create the impression that disability discourse is being reduced to its use for another project, rather than taken as an instantiation of concrete, marginalized experiences that are intelligible within their own situated locations. While it does not seem to be Wolfe's intention to claim that universal styles of analysis are possible, at times his methodological practice implies that all theories or perspectives can be successfully analyzed by the posthumanist rubric.

The second half of Wolfe's book, "Media, Culture, Practices," is a tour of creative projects in the media of art, film, architecture, literature, and technology that ends with Wolfe's thoughts on the possible posthumanist future. The major shortcoming which emerges in this section of the book is that its connection to the posthumanist ethical perspective articulated by Wolfe earlier in the book is not always clear. In the book's introductory section, Wolfe states that posthumanism should not be about seeking out the exotic, the techno-futurist, or the pastiche simply for entertainment value. However, it is not entirely obvious that Wolfe has avoided this temptation in his discussions of such subjects as artificial clouds, transgenic rabbits, and intercultural music compilations. The ethical analysis in the second part of the book, with the exception of the sixth chapter, deviates from the issue of animal ethics or specifically nonhuman concerns. Instead, it focuses on theoretical and cultural issues related to human societies

and democratic flourishing. While this part of Wolfe's analysis points to interesting possibilities for future scholarship in political theory in particular, it isn't always clear that Wolfe overcomes the centrality of human concerns in this section of the book. Nonetheless, Wolfe's description of the way in which meaning production is recursively mediated by complex systems can be useful for other scholars working towards developing posthumanist approaches to various academic fields or creative cultural practices. Certainly, it would require a fundamental shift in the theoretical self-conception of various academic disciplines for it to become possible to recognize the inherent value of nonhuman life independent of human desires or needs.

Wolfe's focus on human institutions also precludes the possibility of a clearer articulation of the implications of a posthumanist ethical viewpoint for theorizing ecology. It is ironic, in light of the book's posthumanist theme, that Wolfe's most sustained discussion of ecology takes place in the context of the very human-centric location of architecture and design studies. This is evident when Wolfe claims that if individuals deploy "not just a pragmatic and functional shift but a philosophical one as well," then "the relationship between nature and culture can now be *deontologized* and posed anew, not as questions of *what* but as questions of *how*, not as questions of substances but as questions of *strategy*—which has, of course, profound implications for the design process."¹⁷ While a reinterrogated nature/culture binary as a generative resource for human architectural and landscape projects has productive possibilities, it is curious, in light of the earlier section of the book, that Wolfe never fully reflects upon the centrality of the human in processes of design. Theorists of ecological ethics might wish to apply Wolfe's posthumanist theory, for instance, to imagining ways in which humans should withdraw their influence from wild spaces in order to allow nonhuman life the ability to articulate and create worlds. However, Wolfe's analysis of the design of nature parks, which draws upon posthumanist perspectives, does indicate that openness to destabilization can be built into intentional design plans. This openness, according to Wolfe, is enabled by a shift from the anthropocentric focus on space to a posthumanist focus on time, where "embracing the paradigms of emergence and self-organization creates a new and in fact fundamental problem" which is temporalization.¹⁸ For this reason, "the architectural medium is... submitted to a kind of dematerialization or decomposition by the problem of time."¹⁹ Henceforth, architecture, planning, and design might become posthumanist if they resist their own "ideology," as Wolfe notes, and overcome distinctions between "nature" and "culture" to arrive at the posthumanist "system/environmental distinction."²⁰

Although potentially productive, the implications of this formulation for ecological discourse remain underdeveloped. If environments are defined simply as spaces which are excluded by a contained system, it becomes more difficult to emphasize the importance of protecting wild spaces on

their own terms, especially if, as many scholars have claimed, the category of nature is no longer available as a stable signifier in the context of environmental literature. In addition, Wolfe's analysis of the intrinsic worth of nonhuman forms of life is inscribed mostly within the setting of human medical, industrial, and food production systems. As such, Wolfe fails to fully grapple with the possibility that posthumanist theory might interrupt human prerogative in ways that go beyond thinking about ethics in human institutions, and that would challenge humans to pull back the space of their encroachment and expansion into the natural world.

Although Wolfe never fully overcomes the human-centeredness of his posthuman human, his project nevertheless reimagines human subjects in novel philosophical ways. While Wolfe's analysis of Ralph Waldo Emerson's theory of the self is mostly centered upon the ways in which the unstable and continuously produced subject can participate in the human-centric endeavor of democratic governance, Wolfe successfully describes the connection between the systems theory of Luhmann and Emerson's view of "the radical contingency and, at the same time, the radical authority of self-referential observation."²¹ Wolfe writes that Emerson's worldview makes possible a type of "ongoing process of democracy conceived as otherness always yet to be achieved."²² The implication is that a greater recognition of difference, the lack of unity or coherence in the category of the human, can improve relations between humans in their societies and governance processes. Somewhat curiously, however, Wolfe chooses to end the book not with a proposed strategy for building improved human societies or more ethical relations between humans and nonhuman beings, but instead with an invocation of a new form of temporality. As Wolfe mentions in his introduction, what the second-order systems theory of Luhmann offers is the capacity to see both "psychic systems" and "social systems" as constituted by a "recursivity" that is "temporally dynamic."²³ Thus, the instability and in fact the difference that is always present in the forward movement of life can be engaged as a strategic resource for building a different future, and as Wolfe writes "one can have 'nostalgia for a different future' only if the present is not itself."²⁴ Although Wolfe can be criticized for ending on a note that implies a concern for a primarily human future after such a sustained analysis of posthumanist theory, it remains the case that only humans can practice ethics and politics. Within such practices, there may yet be room for a decentering of the most constitutive forms of anthropocentrism that have, among other things, led to consistent suffering for nonhuman life as well as impending environmental catastrophes whose management is likely to require human retreat.

Notes

- ¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- ² Neil Badmington, ed., *Posthumanism* (London, UK: MacMillan Press, 2000).

- ³ Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001).
- ⁴ Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002).
- ⁵ Rasch, William, and Cary Wolfe, eds. *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- ⁶ Joel Garreau, *Radical Evolution: the Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies—and What It Means to Be Human* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005).
- ⁷ Max More and Natasha Vita-More, eds., *The Transhumanist Reader* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).
- ⁸ Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, trans. Rhodes Barrett, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 30.
- ⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Mary-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 214–215.
- ¹⁰ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), 27.
- ¹¹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 197.
- ¹² Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 198, 199.
- ¹³ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 215.
- ¹⁴ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 217.
- ¹⁵ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 147, 151.
- ¹⁶ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 199.
- ¹⁷ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 308.
- ¹⁸ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 207.
- ¹⁹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 309.
- ²⁰ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 315.
- ²¹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 374.
- ²² Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 414.
- ²³ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 27, 25.
- ²⁴ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 440.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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