

Prometheus Performer or Transformer?

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In an article called *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture* (1977) the literary theorist Ihab Hassan was one of the first to use the word “posthumanism”. As the title suggests, the mythological figure of Prometheus is used to signal the emergence of a posthumanist culture. Interestingly, not only Hassan referred to Prometheus to make his point, but so did many posthumanists after him, and quite a few transhumanists use the myth as well to support their arguments. By focusing on these references in the following I will try to clarify some of the important differences between the two movements. I will start with a description of the myth and will then analyse a selection of key posthumanist and transhumanist texts.¹

The Myth

There are many versions of the myth of Prometheus, of which one of the best known is *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus (5/6th century BC). After the older generation of deities had been conquered in the Clash of the Titans, Zeus threw all of them, including his father Kronos, in the dark hole of Tartaros, the lowest depths of the underworld. Only one of them, Prometheus, was saved because he had helped Zeus to win the war by means of his cunning and advice. Soon, however, Zeus turned out to be a merciless tyrant. When he conceived a plan to wipe out the whole human race, Prometheus took pity on them. He stole fire for them from heaven, gave them wisdom and taught them all kinds of techniques and arts – from mathematics to reading and the art of prophecy. However, when Zeus found out, Prometheus was severely punished. Zeus chained the immortal god to a rock, where a vulture would eat his liver. Every night it would regenerate so that his torture could be repeated the next day, until many centuries later Hercules should free him.

Hesiod’s earlier version of the myth,² tells how Zeus also punished mankind by sending them Pandora, the first woman. She carried the famous box that spread out evil, misery and disaster over the human race. Later, in Plato’s *Protagoras* (4th century BC), Prometheus is described as taking part in the creation of mankind. He and his not-so-clever brother Epimetheus were put in charge by

the gods to assign to all the mortal races their defining attributes. Epimetheus, however, used up all the qualities on the animals, so that no powers were left when he came to man: “the human race was naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed” (Plato 1997, 757). To compensate for his brother’s fault, Prometheus decided to give them fire, knowledge, and other civilizing arts which, again, he stole from the gods. Plato’s story does not mention Pandora or the rock, but merely that later Prometheus was charged with theft. The humans started worshipping the gods, because “they alone among the animals had a share of the divine dispensation” (ibid.). First, however, “[t]hey were being destroyed by wild beasts because they were weaker in every way” (ibid.). Only after Zeus sent them the art of politics, justice and shame, they were able to establish order, found cities, and bonds of friendship.

Posthumanism

The Prometheus myth is used in Hassan’s paper, in which an emergent, posthumanist culture is announced. Explaining how we should understand the term, he writes:

“We need first to understand that the human form [...] may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism” (Hassan 1977, 212).

Hassan observes the dissolution of classical humanist dichotomies – such as subject/object, man/machine, or science/culture – its idea of the human and its strong anthropocentrism. The culture is characterized by “[c]onvergences and divergences, conjunctions and disjunctions.” On the one hand, there’s fragmentation: “Our planet continually splinters, breaks according to ideology, religion, [...] sex, and age” (ibid., 207). On the other hand, it sees traditional distinctions blurring, such as those between “the One and the Many,” “the Universal and the Concrete” (ibid.). Prometheus mirrors this culture because of his (and the myth’s) ambiguity: on the one hand, he is a hubristic trickster, a thief, on the other hand a hero, a savior. Moreover, by means of his cunning, courage and theft he helped to create the human being, and to *transform* him into a smarter, better, more civilized being.

“Prometheus is himself the figure of a flawed consciousness struggling to transcend [...] divisions. With regard to posthumanism itself, the most relevant aspect of the Promethean dialectic concerns Imagination and Science, Myth and Technology, Earth and Sky” (Hassan 1977, 207).

1 Since there are many different understandings of both concepts, I don’t claim to present an exhaustive explanation of either of them.

2 In his *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (8th century BC).

Prometheus crosses boundaries between the human and the divine and makes mankind overcome its limits by means of art and technology. This is relevant since, as Hassan shows, in contemporary culture many divisions are dissolving. There is creative imagination involved in science – in man’s expansion into the Galaxy for instance – while technology is incorporated into the arts – in photography for instance, or electronic music. The concept of the human as such, and the dichotomy subject-object should also be reconsidered, for it is questionable whether we, having developed things such as space travel and organ transplantation, could still be said to be the same species. “Will artificial intelligences supersede the human brain [...]? We do not know. But this we do know: artificial intelligences [...] help to transform the image of man, the concept of the human” (ibid., 214). The boundaries between man and machine, in short, between human and non-human, are blurring as well, and changing continuously.

“Prometheus is our performer. He performs Space and Time; he performs Desire. He suffers. We are ourselves that performance [...]. We are the pain or play of the human, which will not remain human. [...] Everything changes, and nothing, not even Death, can tire” (Hassan 1977, 217).

Because of his ambiguity, his boundary-crossing and his help to enable humanity overcome its own limits and evolve, for Hassan Prometheus exemplifies a posthumanist culture in which humanism’s binaries are dissolving and its idea of the human and its anthropocentrism are challenged.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida uses the image of the Titan in his work *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008).³ As the title suggests already, it deals with what Derrida calls “the question of the animal” (Derrida 2008, 8). Reflecting on the shame he feels at the moment when he is “caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal” (ibid., 3) – his cat, namely – Derrida starts questioning the concept of nudity. It is generally assumed, he says, that what distinguishes animals from humans is that they are naked without being aware of it. Only humans decided to dress themselves because they are ashamed of their nudity, and thereby “nudity” as such reveals itself as inherently human – namely as something opposed to being dressed. One could say the animal *isn’t* naked: it doesn’t have knowledge of its own nudity, feel shame, or dress itself, and therefore it *isn’t* naked. Nudity thus draws a boundary between human and animal – just like shame, and clothing. Like so many words and statements made about animals – their alleged inability to speak, to reason, to address us – “nudity” assigns to the animal the place of “the absolute other”. That is, man defines himself in contrast with the animal. The gaze of the cat, however, makes Derrida realize it is *look-*

3 The text arose from a lengthy address given by Derrida at a conference in Cerisy, (France) in 1997 and was published earlier in the journal *Critical Inquiry* (2002).

ing at him, *seeing* him, perhaps even *addressing* him, which would invalidate our assumptions about the animal’s inabilities. The gaze thus deconstructs its place as the “wholly other”, leading Derrida to wonder who he is, and question his humanity and subjectivity.

The establishment of the animal as “wholly other” already starts in the Genesis, when God told man to name the animals, to “have authority [...] over all the wild beasts [...] that crawl upon the earth!” (ibid., 3).

“[I]n the Genesis tale as much as in the myth of Prometheus (let’s remember the *Protagoras* and the moment when Prometheus steals fire [...], in order to make up for the forgetfulness or tardiness of Epimetheus, who had perfectly equipped all breeds of animal but left “man naked [gymnon],” without shoes, covering, or arms), it is paradoxically on the basis of a fault or failing in man that the latter will be made a subject who is master of nature and of the animal. From within the pit of that lack [...], man installs or claims in a single stroke *his property* [...] and his *superiority* over what is called animal life” (Derrida 2008, 20).

The myth of Prometheus – Plato’s version, that is – is, like the Genesis, a classic story about the origin of humanity. It appoints to the human a central place in the world, a position as proprietor of arts and technology and as “master of nature”, which also implies his superiority over animals. However, Derrida argues, this supposed mastery is based first, on a *fault* – Epimetheus’ failure to save some powers for the mortals; and second, on a *lack* – man’s nakedness and original lack of abilities.⁴ By stressing a different aspect of the Prometheus myth than “usual”, Derrida shows how unfounded this supposed superiority is. Although elaborated rather differently than Hassan, again the myth thus provides a means to present posthumanist ideas, to deconstruct anthropocentrism and humanist dichotomies such as human/animal and subject/object.

In *A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design* (2008), the sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour also criticizes humanism with the help of the image of the mythological god. He investigates the word “design”, which used to have a limited significance as the “form” or “shape” of an object, as one side of the form/function or material/aesthetic dichotomy. However, its meaning has grown to “comprehend more elements of what a thing is” and “is applicable to ever larger assemblages of production. [...] [T]he typically modernist divide between materiality on the one hand and design on the other is slowly being dissolved away” (Latour 2008, 2). While he analyses the concept’s connotations, Prometheus emerges. “Design”, Latour argues, implies a certain humility and modesty since it is not “foundational”.

4 In the Genesis the “fault” and “lack” are (respectively) the original sin and man’s initial nudity.

“It seems to me that to say you plan to design something, does not carry the same risk of hubris as saying one is going to build something. [...] A second and perhaps more important implication of design is an attentiveness to *details* that is completely lacking in the heroic, Promethean, hubristic dream of action. [...] [T]hings are no longer ‘made’ or ‘fabricated’, but rather carefully ‘designed’ [...]; it is as though we had to imagine Prometheus stealing fire from heaven in a cautious way!” (Latour 2008, 3-4).

Apart from humility and attention to details, “design” also has a semiotic, a remedial, and a moral dimension. It adds something to be interpreted to (what was originally) the “object”: “matter is absorbed into meaning.” Further, to design means to “redesign”. There is always already a basis on which is worked: “[t]o design is never to create *ex nihilo*”. Finally, since something can be designed “well” or “badly” the concept shows that normativity is inherent to design: “it is as if materiality and morality were finally coalescing” (ibid., 5).

Thus for Latour, Prometheus symbolizes hubris, mastery, rebellion, and creation (from scratch). Although he doesn’t consider the myth to be ambiguous, it does provide a means to both signal (like Hassan) and call for (like Derrida) conceptual and practical change. “Humanists are concerned only about humans; the rest, for them, is mere materiality or cold objectivity” (Latour 2008, 10). It is this humanist – or “modernist” – view that Prometheus represents. Calling for a “precautionary Prometheus”, Latour asks to overcome humanist anthropocentrism and binaries such as form/function, fact/value, objective/subjective and human/nonhuman. Mere deconstruction, however, won’t do, since these divides never really existed in the first place: objects and subjects have always been integrated, just like the “natural” and the “artificial”. “What I am pressing for is a means for drawing *things* together – gods, non humans and mortals included” (ibid., 13). “Things”, in Latour’s vocabulary, thus include objects as much as subjects, and artifacts as much as humans. This is what we need to recognize “if we are to adequately represent the conflicting natures of all the things that are to be designed” (ibid.).

Although not all three would literally call themselves “posthumanists,” in view of the way they criticise humanism the thinkers treated so far do hold posthumanist ideas – visible in the references to Prometheus.

Transhumanism

Transhumanism is a movement of people who argue that we should try to “enhance” the human being in every possible way, especially with new technologies such as genetic engineering, cloning, or nanotechnology. A variety of arguments is used: enhancement is inevitable, a logical new step in humanity’s evolution,

and/or a moral duty. It will cure disease, reduce inequality, make us mentally stronger, more intelligent, and happier. According to some in the end it will even generate a *posthuman* species. Which, as leading transhumanist Nick Bostrom explains, we should understand as a “possible type of human mode of being – if I am right, an exceedingly worthwhile type” (2009, 135).

Several transhumanists – or pro-enhancement thinkers⁵ – appeal to the Promethean image in order to articulate their point of view. In his book *Redesigning Humans* (2003), biophysicist Gregory Stock confidently announces that we are “on the cusp of profound biological change” (Stock 2003, 1). Given emerging technologies such as cloning and genetic modification it is only a matter of time before we will be able “to seize control of our evolutionary future” (ibid., 2). Whether we like it or not, he argues, the trend has been set and further developments are inevitable. Some of us *are* already enhancing themselves by means of, for instance, “performance enhancement” – drugs – in sports or aesthetic surgery. Of course we should be careful with the new technologies, but, Stock claims, no serious scientist will start playing around with human genes until such interventions can be safely carried out. So “why all the fuss, then?” (ibid., 12). To try to stop the developments is unrealistic and simply impossible. Rather, we should think about how to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits, be brave and face the unknown dangers that accompany all radical new developments.

“Some imagine we will see the perils, come to our senses, and turn away from such possibilities. But when we imagine Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, we are not incredulous or shocked by his act. It is too characteristically human. To forego the powerful technologies [...] would be as out of character for humanity as it would be to use them without concern for the dangers they pose” (Stock 2003, 2).

In other words: Prometheus sought adventure, faced danger, and crossed boundaries, which led to civilisation and technological progress. This, Stock seems to say, is exactly what we should do as well. Or better: what we *will* do, for it is *too characteristically human*. A *true* human is like Prometheus: he takes control, acquires knowledge and develops technologies in order to improve. Enhancement is only natural, and therefore inevitable.

It seems like Stock rather supports than opposes humanism. First, his argument is very anthropocentric. All reasoning is done exclusively from a human perspective, championing his control and mastery without any attention for animals for example, or “things” in Latour’s sense. Moreover, behind his claims lies a particular idea of what human nature is in the first place: a Promethean being that naturally faces danger, transcends his borders, and looks for infinite

5 Not all people who endorse these views call themselves “transhumanists”.

improvement. Second, he shows a firm belief in science and technological development which reveals a very humanist emphasis on – and faith in – reason, knowledge, and progress. Third, an assertion stating that we will “seize control of our evolutionary future”, shows how many humanist dichotomies are still at work. The (human) subject manipulates the object; science takes control over nature; and the mind engineers the body – which is nothing but an instrument. We should exclusively focus on rationality and cast aside emotions such as anxiety.

Pretty much all of transhumanism’s standard assumptions and statements are gathered in the *Designer Evolution – A Transhumanist Manifesto* (2006) by transhumanist Simon Young. He defines it as “the belief in overcoming human limitations through reason, science and technology” (Young 2006, 15). To conquer the greatest “tragedies” of life – man’s biological limitations and death – is not a mere wish, but our destiny. Humans, Young explains, are by nature imbued with the innate “Will to Evolve”: “the instinctive drive [...] to expand [his] abilities in pursuit of ever-increasing survivability and well-being” (ibid., 39). Therefore, a so-called “Designer Evolution” is inevitable: “Humanity will take evolution out of the hands of butterfingered nature into its own transhuman hands” (ibid., 38).

The “Will to Evolve” is symbolized by Prometheus, who represents “the innate human drive to increase knowledge and abilities, even at the expense of present pains” (ibid.) – the drive, that is, to progress, improve, *enhance*.⁶ Young recognizes that a future of “self-design” is not without risks. However, to reject the “Prometheus Drive” will lead to decline, for “that which ceases to grow, begins to decay” (ibid., 39). It would mean to remain forever in the power of our limitations and keep on suffering from disease and death. Therefore, Young pleads:

“Let us be the *New Prometheans*. Let us unite in our commitment to boldly go where none have gone before in search of the knowledge by which to transcend the limitations of the human condition. Let us cast aside cowardice and seize the torch of Prometheus with both hands” (Young 2006, 40).

Again, Prometheus thus symbolizes courage, mastery and transcendence of limits in order to gain knowledge, develop techniques and improve the human being. And again, all humans have a Promethean nature, since we all possess the “Will to Evolve”, the drive to progress. More explicit than in Stock’s case is the element of “creation”: humanity will not merely take control of its species but – like Prometheus – *create, design* it, literally taking “evolution [...] into its own

⁶ Young explains later that the *Will* consists of two drives: the *Prometheus* and *Orpheus Drives*, or the *Will to Grow* and the *Will to Love* respectively.

transhuman hands”. Further, Young’s moral urge is stronger than Stock’s. Not only is this “designer evolution” inevitable, but we *have to* fight nature by all means for otherwise misery and decay will be our fate.

But in general Young argues just like Stock in a very humanist, anthropocentric way and employs a specific idea of human nature. With respect to his belief in science he even literally mentions humanism. “To boldly go where none have gone before” is a reference to Star Trek, and Young emphasizes how the series’ philosophy “is the essence of humanism: the belief in the ongoing progress of the species through reason, science, and technology” (ibid., 39). By invoking the Star Trek ambition and explaining it the way he does, he explicitly affirms the humanist character of his faith in science. Obviously, Young’s arguments in general also imply several humanist dichotomies, with science, reason and the human mind on the one hand; and nature, emotions and the body on the other.

Various transhumanists thus employ the myth to encourage enhancement and celebrate the infinite possibilities that contemporary technology can offer humanity – all based on a rather humanist perspective.⁷ Interestingly, the figure of Prometheus is also used to argue the exact opposite from the transhumanists. In this paper I do not have the space to discuss all such views and analyse them in any detail, but I would like to briefly mention two thinkers.

Decades before the so-called “enhancement debate” starts, the philosopher Günther Anders (2010 [1956]) criticises the technology-driven society and its effects on humanity. He argues that contemporary humans feel that artifices have taken over their position of the most perfect, unique and superior being. It fills them with what Anders calls *Promethean shame* (*Promethische Scham*) – “shame for the shamefully high quality” of the things they fabricated themselves.⁸ They consider it their duty to overcome their inferiority, their contingency, their *nature*, and attain the perfection of the artifice. One could say Anders already saw enhancement coming – and perhaps even the posthuman – and lamented the sad wish of man to become one with the machine.

Today, the political philosopher Michael Sandel – “bioconservative” according to his pro-enhancement opponents – passionately argues against genetic en-

⁷ Although they would probably not call themselves transhumanists, similar pro-enhancement statements are made by the philosophers Ronald Dworkin and Donrich Jordaan. Both speaking in the context of genetic engineering, the former tells us that “[p]laying God is indeed playing with fire. But that is what we mortals have done since Prometheus, the patron saint of dangerous discoveries” (2000, 446); and the latter warns us to “[b]eware the day when we betray our promethean heritage” (2009, 590).

⁸ “‘*Promethische Scham*’ [...] die *Scham vor der ‘beschämend’ hohen Qualität der selbstgemachten Dinge*“ (Anders 2010 [1956]), 23).

gineering and other forms of enhancement. The problem is that "they represent a kind of hyperagency – a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires" (Sandel 2007, 26-27). Such a Promethean drive to mastery will destroy our appreciation of what he calls the "giftedness of life", our natural talents and gifts. A certain anthropocentrism and some humanist dichotomies are still also at work in Sandel's thinking, yet obviously in order to sustain an entirely different argument than the transhumanists. In contrast with them, both Anders and Sandel deplore the Promethean urge to cross our boundaries and transform ourselves, for instead of enhancing it is humiliating us and will perhaps even destroy our very nature.

Conclusion

The transhumanists discussed clearly endorse a *humanist* rather than a posthumanist view: their ideas are anthropocentric, they have an unshakeable belief in science and technology and rely on some of the most basic dichotomies which are challenged so ardently by many posthumanists.

Of course, there are some differences between transhumanism and humanism as well. For a start, enhancement by means of technology and drugs is rather distinct from the Renaissance focus on education (although this difference is vehemently denied by many transhumanists). Further, transhumanism's faith in science and evolution must lead them to recognize that technically humanity is merely one of many species, which forces them to adjust the original humanist view of man's unassailable superiority. Finally, the "posthuman" is obviously a creature that moves beyond the human in a way. The creation of a being consisting of both organic and electronic or mechanical parts would, for instance, indeed synthesize man and machine, radically changing the traditional idea of what it means to be human.

The latter is probably one of the most important reasons why posthumanism and transhumanism are often used interchangeably. Both movements pay a lot of attention to emerging technologies and the way these affect (the concept of) the human in particular. The image of a posthuman being who is not 100% organic anymore, arises rather often in both cases and, as said, is an example of the way in which transhumanism, just like posthumanism, challenges the dichotomy man/machine. However, for transhumanists this is only in order to enhance the human, not to equalize man and machine. And as we saw, many other binaries are still prospering in transhumanist theories. Of the two movements, only posthumanism seems to truly aim to move beyond humanism. Clearly we are dealing with two rather different philosophies: a *post-humanist* and *posthuman-*

ist one. So each time Prometheus enters the stage in this context, we should ask ourselves: is he a *Post-humanist* Performer, or a *Posthuman-ist* Transformer?

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Nächster Beitrag¹

¹ Die Fußnotenzählung beginnt wieder mit 1