Moral philosophy for cyborgs

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Abstract This essay explores the intersections between one prominent version of posthumanism and natural law theory. Emphasizing the role of self-preservation as an important principle within seventeenth-century natural law theory brings into relief the moral imperatives of posthumanism. The work of Bruno Latour, primarily his influential *We Have Never Been Modern*, in particular describes an ethical framework organized around collective safety as the legitimating principle of an imagined new democratic dispensation.

Among the most familiar gestures of much posthumanist thought is the deconstructive critique of the liberal humanist subject, a critical project fueled by desires to move beyond or beside the ontology, epistemology and ethical frameworks mobilized around and in support of this entity. If the emphasis of such a gesture is to underscore the considerable amount of labor that goes into maintaining the category of ‘the human,’ the goal seems to be not so much to move beyond humans, but to provide intellectual and practical resources for preserving humans and the world they share with nonhumans. That is, ‘post’-al logic notwithstanding, posthumanism is a kind of humanism – revised and retooled, to be sure, but a humanism nevertheless. Whatever else posthumanism might be, for all of its skeptical energy, posthumanism at least in some of its most influential versions strives to intervene in the processes through which the category of the human is produced and maintained, to reimagine what it means to be human, and to refashion how we inhabit our world. A crucial aspect of
such a project – and the source of the urgency underwriting it – is its effort to underscore the dangers associated with a dispensation organized around this particular vision of humanism, the regimes of accumulation liberal humanist ideologies underpin and advance, and the frequently devastating consequences of a world built to accommodate this possessive and dispossessing form of personhood.¹

What follows attempts provisionally to sketch the moral framework that emerges out of these concerns – the ethico-political imperatives that arise out of the more or less apocalyptic vision of a world out of control. To better describe this aspect of one of posthumanism’s more prominent versions, I propose to situate the concerns with potentially catastrophic futures in relation to natural law theory, a form of theological, ethical and political thinking that extends from antiquity to our contemporary moment, and that occupies a prominent place in medieval and early modern moral thought. As with posthumanism, there are many versions of natural law theory, many competing ways of deriving obligation from the structure of reality; the present remarks don’t aspire to a full accounting of natural law and indeed significantly elide the complexity encompassed by this term.² My present concern is with one feature of natural law thought, namely the assumption that creatures desire to preserve themselves. Though there are obvious limits to taking one writer as representative of posthumanism, I focus on Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) as an influential statement that resonates in hopefully illuminating ways with the natural law emphasis on self-preservation. The assumption that all creatures desire to preserve themselves is central to the natural law theorists of seventeenth-century Western Europe, particularly such writers as Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke and their efforts to rethink the nature of political legitimacy. Hobbes actually figures centrally in *We Have Never Been Modern*, and this seventeenth-century political philosopher helps us locate some of the central moral imperatives informing Latour’s version of posthumanism.

For anyone familiar with Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future* (2002), what I’m proposing might seem completely wrong if not willfully perverse. Fukuyama appeals to natural law to justify vigorous efforts to protect what he perceives to be a basic human nature outside of cultural or environmental determinants – that is, he defends an essential core humanity in ways inconsistent with the foundational assumptions of much posthumanist thought. Fukuyama’s primary concern is through appeal to natural law theory to justify the regulation of biotechnology in order to keep us from destroying the essence of our identity as humans, that is, to keep us precisely from becoming posthuman. Since, generally speaking, natural law theory is predicated on the idea that ontology stipulates deontology, that the structure of reality provides a clearly accessible moral framework for grounding action, Fukuyama’s minimal but nevertheless substantial understanding of human nature strives to ground a robust justification for an array of state-based regulatory

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¹ A classic statement of such a view is provided by Haraway (1980).

interventions into scientific activity threatening to alter fundamentally and irreparably human nature as he defines it. My concern here is not to engage critically with Fukuyama’s argument (beyond my no doubt tendentious framing of it), an effort undertaken ably by others elsewhere. Instead, I detail it briefly by way of bringing into relief Latour’s distinctly different approach. Latour is not a natural law theorist by any stretch of the imagination, and indeed his work sets out from assumptions that differ sharply from those espoused by Fukuyama. Latour would no doubt understand such a project as inherently tautological, to the extent that for him ‘Nature’ (or ‘Society,’ for that matter) cannot be an explanatory or imperative principle for anything precisely since these abstractions are what need to be explained, as they are the products of networked relations among actors rather than a causal force in their own right. But where he has no interest in defining and defending an essential vision of human nature, and though he studiously avoids any kind of universalizing claims about what creatures want, the comparison with Fukuyama’s brand of natural law theory seems justified to the extent that for Latour the moral force underpinning his argument derives from an emphasis on the dangerous nature of contemporary reality. For Fukuyama, the concern is that our descendants or successors will be altered neurophysiologically or genetically in ways that make them no longer recognizably human. Latour and others, by contrast, fear the potential destruction of humans and nonhumans here and now as well as in the future. In response to the sense that humans have created an apocalyptic or potentially catastrophic world, Latour attempts to develop the tools with which to imagine and to bring into being non-apocalyptic futures, to create less threatening realities, or in utopian fashion project alternative governmental dispensations to help guarantee collective survival.

This latter aspect of posthumanist critique finds a close ally in the work of the sociologist Ulrich Beck, particularly his account of ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992; Beck, 1999). Beck argues that modernity may be differentiated from earlier moments by the greater probability of catastrophic events that obtains under its aegis. For Beck, this dire situation in the West has been brought about by an earlier, industrial modernity, a period that generated forces in the process of technological innovation no longer containable by this formation’s institutions. Where Fukuyama is relatively sanguine about our capacity to respond to the kind of technological risks Beck identifies, Beck argues that ‘the unforeseen consequences of functional differentiation can no longer be controlled by further functional differentiation’ (Beck, 1999, 2). ‘Reflexive modernity’ is thus what is precipitated by this dynamic, a moment characterized by modernity’s newly found capacity to destroy itself (Beck, 1994). Critical analysis of industrial modernity – Marx is who Beck has in mind – emphasized the production and distribution of wealth as its organizing rubric and hence as the most relevant principle of intelligibility. By contrast, Beck insists that the most salient factors for comprehending reflexive modernization are the risks it
generates and the new, unexpected groupings such risks create, the generalized exposure to harm brought about by modernization processes out of control as well as the possibility of global forms of civil society organized around contestatory modes of counter-expertise to intervene in those processes. This brief précis of Beck’s influential work brings into relief the moral stance informing a prominent strand of posthumanism’s revised account of what it means to be human and how humans should inhabit the world. Though Latour (who recently has made favorable comments about Beck’s work (Latour, 2004b)) argues that we have never been modern, his polemic resonates with Beck’s understanding of ‘reflexive modernization’ to the extent that, however non-modern we may be, however reductive a then/now account of temporality might be, the present differs from the past precisely to the extent that it is substantively more dangerous and growing more so as technology advances and contemporary life becomes ever more complex. To truncate a finely calibrated and rhetorically nuanced argument, Latour contends that what he calls the ‘Modern Constitution’ – an epistemo-ontological dispensation that starkly separates nature and society (and all of the corollary binaries that go along with this basic opposition) – is maintained by ongoing acts of epistemo-ontological ‘purification,’ a radical partitioning that insists on the sharp distinction between the natural and social worlds. Such purificatory action occurs alongside the proliferation of densely inter-articulated networks of humans and nonhumans, and in fact adds dangerous momentum by concealing the whole process. The result is the creation of ‘monsters,’ complex assemblages of people, institutions, artifacts and other entities that are essentially out of control, and that, as in Beck’s approach, put existence at risk. Latour contends that what he calls the ‘modernist settlement’ renders the world more dangerous; the epistemologies such a settlement sponsors occlude – and thereby render it more difficult adequately to respond to – the complex interplay of people and things that constitutes reality, the dispersed agencies such networks organize and enable, and the unanticipated consequences generated by proliferating networks of ever greater complexity.

The objective for Latour is to develop a metalanguage adequate to this complex reality and to answer the modernist dispensation with a nonmodern ontology, epistemology and political vision organized around the task of limiting the proliferation of ‘monsters.’ Latour proposes that we create a ‘Parliament of Things’ by way both of acknowledging the roles nonhumans play in the networks or assemblages that make up our world, and of gaining some measure of control over the proliferation of these networks. Latour desires ‘to replace the clandestine proliferation of hybrids by their regulated and commonly-agreed-upon production’ (Latour, 1993, 142). Speaking of the Parliament of Things, Latour explains that,

In its confines, the continuity of the collective is reconfigured. … Let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another
represent the Monsanto chemical industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions; let still another speak in the name of the state; what does it matter, so long as they are all talking about the same thing, about a quasi-object they have all created, the object-discourse-nature-society whose new properties astound us all and whose network extends from my refrigerator to the Antarctic by way of chemistry, law, the State, the economy, and satellites. (Latour, 1993, 144)

The new representative democracy provides a way of conceiving reality that attempts to bring it under control. And just as the operative objective of the Parliament of Things is to create the possibility of a safer world for humans and nonhumans alike, the new morality to go along with this new political dispensation is one keyed to the notion of danger and safety. Towards the close of his essay, Latour repeatedly invokes the following judgment on those aspects of the Modern Constitution that would be inconsistent with or positively disruptive of the work of the Parliament of Things: such vestiges ‘will be deemed harmful, dangerous, and quite simply, immoral’ (Latour, 1993, 140). Harmful, dangerous and immoral: The continuity of terms here suggests a metonymic link such that in Latour’s imagined dispensation, moral judgment is a matter of evaluating the safety brought about by any given arrangement of humans and nonhumans.

On one hand, Latour’s Parliament of Things is antithetical to natural law theory’s effort to restrict its applicability to only certain beings – ones capable of exercising reason, with some occasional references to the sociability of animals. Though the appeal to animals as sociable creatures is an interesting exception (one within the orbit of a lively research program in medieval and early modern literary studies), by and large, natural law theorists establish a sharp distinction between creatures capable of intentional action and those incapable of such – though of course the criteria defining intentional action varies from thinker to thinker. At any rate, early modern natural law intersects with a longstanding theological discourse of ‘the creature’ – the sum of all things created by God (see, for example, Book XII of Augustine’s City of God) – and may even acknowledge (as does Grotius) Cicero’s observation that all things desire to preserve themselves (Tuck 1993, 172–173), but advances its ethical and political thinking on a kind of foundational exclusion of all but sentient creatures from the ambit of relevance of its inquiry, except as negative example or as property. Though he singles out Thomas Hobbes throughout We Have Never Been Modern as – along with Robert Boyle – one of the founders of his Modern Constitution, and hence as part of the problem at least in the epistemo-ontological division he sees them as instituting, in his own political vision and moral philosophy Latour engages important aspects of Hobbes’s effort to define the scope and objectives of governance, to reground the legitimacy of
rule. As Hobbes writes, ‘The Obligation of Subjects to the Soveraign, is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth, by which he is able to protect them. For the right men have by Nature to protect themselves, when none else can protect them, can by no Covenant be relinquished’ (Hobbes, 1985, 272). Self-preservation is both the motive for entering into a contract with the sovereign and the norm that both defines and limits the sovereign’s existence. In subsequent work, Latour has substantially developed his vision for a Parliament of Things, continuing to articulate his radicalized democracy, a ‘republic’/public of res defined by a new ‘political ecology,’ in tense relation to Hobbes’s Leviathan, a formation in itself ‘monstrous’ and never completely accomplished anyway (Latour (2004a, 54) [for res publica] and 283, n.43 [for Hobbes]). Even so, Latour’s consequentialist morality – let’s call it a moral philosophy for cyborgs – doesn’t so much negate or undermine Hobbes as reconfigure and re-energize Hobbes’s concern with self-preservation, radicalizing that concern by decentering moral reflection from the perspective of persons alone, and by imagining procedures that would incorporate the perspective of things into ongoing and reflexively dynamic deliberations about collective safety.

The upshot of these comments is not to derive a portable theory from Latour or from posthumanism more generally. Indeed, the temporality informing the aspect of Latour’s work upon which I’ve focused is a decidedly and surprisingly modernist one, a sense that life is growing ever more complex, which implies that earlier times were less complex, less fraught with the possibility of catastrophic events. On one hand, the point is fair enough, especially if one considers phenomena such as nuclear power or the genetic engineering of plants and animals. On the other, one wonders if St Augustine contemplating the sack of Rome or Justus Lipsius trying to make sense of the wars of confession devastating Europe at the end of the sixteenth century would view the world as less dangerous than do we. Perhaps this is obtuse to compare apples and oranges, or perhaps is simply another way of questioning the generalizability of Latour’s work as an explanatory paradigm. Rather than derive a theory from Latour, in the present context I prefer to approach his work as an instance of utopian counterfactual imagining designed to jolt us into a revitalized awareness of our world and how we inhabit it. And it is a utopian project especially to the extent that Thomas More’s Utopia, as I have elsewhere argued, is a thought experiment about the capacity to create a secure world by creating political structures capable of diminishing and distributing exposure to harm (Glimp, 2008). Whatever limits there are to imagining the future polity as a Western-style democracy, Latour’s work serves to pluralize our understanding of collective safety. In our contemporary state of emergency, a moment of drastic expansion of state power in the name of providing ‘homeland security,’ this aspect of Latour’s work provides an especially salutary provocation to consider that security does not mean one thing, but is a dynamic concept far more
complex than available conceptual resources can fully accommodate, and that itself can be a subject of debate or contestatory struggle. In addition to disrupting productively the discourses of sovereignty in the present moment, such an insight in turn provokes a renewed understanding of the complexity of the notion of safety and security in earlier moments, a heightened awareness of the competing and varied definitions of what it means to inhabit a safe world. As a literary scholar, I thus see the concerns of this particular version of posthumanism as inviting us to view anew literary texts as engaged in the process of articulating, contesting, adjudicating, travestying or otherwise playing with various understandings of risk and with possible ways of rendering the world less harmful. This is to see works less as bearers of themes – which they certainly are – and more as artifacts that create occasions for collective life and for modifying the experience of being together in the world.

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References


