posthuman configurations

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Abstract

Humanity is facing an incurable catastrophe in what appears to be a point of no return. Not only is it faced with an ecological crisis and threatened by an impending apocalyptic advent, but it is also on the verge of being superseded by a superior kind. How is humanity to respond to these irrepressible crises? This paper synthesizes some of the prominent responses to this philosophical dilemma. In particular, it will draw on two major positions, (1) critical posthumanism, as espoused by Rosi Braidotti and (2) an interestingly new development in this area of study, David Roden's speculative posthumanism, in an effort to create an ethics that will fix the disparaging state of humanity. The study will particularly motivate the latter response as a solution to the crisis of human decadence.

Keywords

Rosi Braidotti, David Roden, critical posthumanism, speculative posthumanism, apocalypse

The Crisis of Humanism

"Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of 'man' or as a way of announcing its death."[1] Bruno Latour makes this confession in an attempt to expose a detrimental error upon which the entire 20th century philosophy of postmodernity was grounded – that is, the belief that modernity, which is indicated by an aim to purify the world from its opposite dichotomous poles, namely, nature and culture, ever took place. For Latour, humanity has not even reached its phase of adolescence as it continues to incessantly separate itself from nature. Here he brings to light a substantial angle that any contemporary thinker has to consider when conceptualizing the modern. Modernity, in this context, should not be taken as a mere spatio-temporal event that one can simply locate in a fixed, holistic picture of socio-cultural history. Neither is it a segment or a link in a series of chronological epochal successions. On the contrary, it must be conceived as a conceptual phenomenon that can only be realized through a purification of the nature-culture divide. With this, Latour puts into words the crisis of humanity – the crisis that has been haunting the evolutionary progression of human thought, even after the infamous Copernican revolution. And it is this crisis that proponents of *posthumanism* intend to address.

Accordingly, the Eurocentric picture of the history of philosophy can be summed up into an age-old dictum that was articulated by Protagoras when it was his turn to be held captive by one of Socrates' dialogic conversations. In response to Socrates' insinuation for an epistemological conversation, Protagoras declares that "Of all things man is the measure."[2] Unbeknownst to the sophist, this formerly epistemological thesis – with the initial intention of positing man as the ultimate bearer of truth – would later become the mantra of the entirety of western philosophy. That man is the measure of all things made manifest a centripetal force which, as if by law of attraction, relentlessly draws philosophic thinking onto it. We need not take it out of its epistemological context to see that the *man is the measure* principle has become the main driving force of intellectual discourse, almost to the extent of allowing the rendering of the history of western thought as reducible to nothing but a history of the human; an anthropological archive, so to speak. By looking into the historical origins of philosophy, we arrive at an affirmation of this reductive thesis. For instance, what we commonly hold as the birthplace of philosophy, the city of Athens, can also be considered as the birthplace, if not the earliest propagator, of humanism. The city of Athens witnessed the utterance of the words "man

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[1] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13.

[2] Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. C. C. W. Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-58.

is a rational animal" conveyed by one of its greatest thinkers, Aristotle. This was considered to be a catalytic idea as it established the superiority of the *Homo sapiens* over the rest of the species, and it would yet again become the point of departure for the progressive development of philosophic thought. Rationality would become the cornerstone out of which man could accord a superlative status among nonhumans – thus marking the beginning of *anthropocentric thinking*,[3] which can be identified, according to the British philosopher, David Roden, on the basis of the instigation of hierarchical ontologies whereby the instigator's group puts the others to subjugation.

Immanuel Kant would later assimilate this ideological gap which has for many centuries constituted humanism. In one of philosophy's most impactful revolutions and one of history's most disparaging revelations,[4] Kant, through the formulation of the synthetic a priori, overturns the object-thought dichotomy. Kantian Copernicanism reverses the geocentric model of thinking – that which posits that human thought is in conformity towards the object – on the contrary, it is in fact the object that conforms to human thought. This revolution did not provide a way out of the problem of anthropocentrism, it instead aggravated it. The crisis would nonetheless remain unresolved. If humanism has failed in its attempt to create an all-encompassing ethics, one that fulfills and overcomes the promise of modernity, how then shall we make up for this failure? There have been two relatively young movements which serve to respond to this problem: Critical posthumanism, which bears an optimistic attitude towards a critique of humanity and which follows the line of thinking that was made prominent by contemporary philosophers in the likes of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, and speculative posthumanism, an even younger position that was developed by British philosopher, David Roden, and which identifies as a value-neutral analysis of the posthuman phenomenon. The two positions meet, however, at the following point of intersection: both affirm the potentiality of conceiving a posthuman picture as a response to the threatening decadence of humanism.

A Critical Response

In the earlier discussion on modernity, the author argues that Latour's depiction of the modern resonates in a much deeper context than that of its mere attribution to a period in history. The same rule can be applied in uncovering the fundamental hypothesis of posthumanism. Indeed, one can conjecture that the linguistic form of the term implies a certain connotation that is linked with temporality. Its prefix, 'post-', suggests that it came

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[3] David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015).

[4] It is disparaging in that it is responsible for espousing the inescapable 'correlationist circle' to be discussed in the latter part of the paper.

after something, that it has a predecessor, or even quite extremely, that it eradicated its antecedent. This latter connotation might be applicable under the context of *transhumanism*, a scientific movement whose ambitions are directed towards the enhancement of human capabilities by means of technological alteration.[5] The transhuman, which is to say the technologically enhanced human subject, to a great extent, represents our fear of being superseded. We conceive of it as the more mature, more developed, more evolved version of the human. Once again, the prefix implies priority, thus entailing an association with time.

But posthumanism is more than just a temporal phenomenon. It represents an ethical and social function. Furthermore, it serves as a response to the dissatisfaction for humanism. And it is for this purpose that critical posthumanists emerged as a reaction to the crisis of humanity. In her insistence on radicalizing the concept of what it means to be human, French philosopher Rosi Braidotti asks us to consider the fact that we have never been human in the first place. She questions the idea of humanity and its supposedly positive impact on the global scale. Humanity, according to her, has never been what it was supposed to connote and has instead been corrupted with social biases. Is the female, for instance, part of this so-called human race?[6] In actuality, all humanism ever did was further the societal stratification. Acknowledging this, she proposed that our idea of human be deconstructed, and so critical posthumanism became her main position. In her book *The Posthuman*, she speaks of posthumanism as a synthesis of humanism and antihumanism.[7] Posthuman thought, as she explicated, must be critical of what it will be 'post-' to, otherwise its purpose will simply be defeated.[8] Apart from her criticism as an ideological approach to posthumanity, Braidotti considers the rise of transhumanism, which she describes to be the enforcement of an analytic form of the posthuman from science and technological studies. The Human Genome Project, for instance, plays along a pattern that "unifies all the human species on the basis of a thorough grasp of our genetic structure."[9] It basically argues that there will soon be a collision of man and technology. Humanity, then, is left with only two choices: whether to embrace the posthuman or to reject it ideologically. Such a choice does not make the outcome any less different. The posthuman *will* emerge. As Katherine Hayles has projected, the posthuman brings about two distinctive responses from the contemporary human: terror

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[5] David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015).

[6] Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman All Too Human – A Cultural Cartography," *Inhuman Symposium by Fridericianum*, YouTube, last modified August 10, 2015, accessed February 20, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNJPR78DptA.

[7] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 13-54.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 40.

and pleasure.[10] Putting the subject in a semantic play, the 'post' in posthuman suggests that the 'human' will approach a devastating demise. This adheres terror amongst us as we are this 'human' who will soon approach cessation. Hayles, however, does not feed such emotion within her, for as she mentioned, the posthuman does not necessarily mean the end of the human race. Hayles says that it must instead trigger pleasure among the contemporary human for the posthuman means humanity's arrival at "new kinds of cultural configurations."[11] It was also stated in the reference that the vision of someday being able to download the self into a computer does not abandon the autonomy and liberality of the subject but, instead, only expands its prerogatives into the posthuman. Neil Badmington furthered the discussion by studying the way humanity welcomes the idea of the alien.[12] By thorough examination of the history of our shift of treatment towards the alien, from fear to acceptance and towards endearment, he posited that our conception of posthumanism may exhibit the same outcome. In his book, he rethinks our attitude towards an ideal extraterrestrial creature and maintains that this attitude might be in parallel with the idea for a posthuman.

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*[13] gave quite a distinctive vision of the posthuman. She envisions an ideal cyborg – a hybrid of machine and organism and she uses this idea as a metaphor for what she considers "an ironic political myth."[14] The cyborg does not remember the cosmos, has no family, and has no genesis.[15] In other words, the cyborg is pure. She also uses the cyborg myth for a feminist agendum: eliminating gender inequality. Haraway maintains that the female is just as damaged and imperfect as the male. Just as Braidotti insists on a post-woman revolution, Haraway posits that the rise of the cyborg will give justice to the genders. In addition, she promotes this notion of a fractured identity – an identity that does not adhere towards a monistic composition, likely one that is *schizophrenic*, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology. For Haraway, being is never really just one thing. We were and always have been, in the broader sense of the word, hybrids.

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[10] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 283-291.

[11] Ibid., 285.

[12] Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic – Posthumanism and the Other Within* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-33.

[13] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women – The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

[14] Ibid., 149.

[15] Ibid., 153.

A Speculative Response

If critical posthumanism insists on deconstructing the misconceptualization about the human in order to reconstruct a better, more efficient, system of ethics, it becomes quite fitting that we take it a step further and maximize the possibilities of this *ethos*, thus directing us towards domain of the virtual. To better understand this objective, it might be useful to delve on the basic premises aligned with it, particularly, the speculative thesis.

David Roden, in his *Posthuman Life*[16] gave an elaborate response to the posthuman dilemma through a position he called Speculative Posthumanism. He calls it 'speculative' not by coincidence but by its association with the speculative turn – a critical response to the post-Kantian dilemma called the correlationist circle.[17] In Ray Brassier's words: "Post-Kantian philosophers can be said to share one fundamental conviction: that the idea of a world-in-itself, subsisting independently of our relation to it, is an absurdity."[18] Correlationism maintains that reality will cease to exist if there is no rational agent to access it.[19] Not only is correlationism upholding an anthropocentric view but it goes as far as to deny reality should consciousness of any kind be absent, rendering the pre-human conditions – the ancestral history that is prior to the emergence of the homo sapiens – unreal. Accordingly, objective reality can only be accessed by means of "pure consciousness, intersubjective consensus, or a community of rational agents."[20] If this is so, then it seems appropriate that what followed was an avalanche of counter-arguments and escape routes from this supposed impasse. Speculative realism became the leading position that responded to correlationism.[21]

Speculative posthumanism gained its denoting adjective from having a similar standing when it comes to the issue of correlationism. It approaches the dilemma of the posthuman by means of a perspective outside of human-centric thought. In one of his essays, David Roden postulated that the project of speculative posthumanism is

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[16] Ibid., 1-192.

[17] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude – An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 7.

[18] Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 50.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (eds.), *The Speculative Turn – Continental Materialism and Realism*. (Re-press, 2011), 1-18.

'speculative' insofar as "it explores ways of conceiving the posthuman independently of its relationship to human cognitive forms or phenomenology."[22]

Accordingly, the idea of human descent as typically understood is biologically associated. The biological ancestry of the Homo sapiens is mapped in its evolutionary process.[23] Simply put, when one is asked what a human being is, one would most likely refer to it as belonging to the Homo sapiens. As for speculative posthumanism, descent comes in two variants: wide descent and narrow descent.[24] Now, the hypothesis of speculative posthumanism in defining what the posthuman is, is quite narrowly stated in the proposition, "posthumans are . . . no longer human in consequence of some history of technological alteration."[25]

Human descent, in Roden's discussion, is distinguished in speculative posthumanism into two types: narrow humanity and wide humanity.[26] Narrow humanity refers to the group of biological humans, the Homo sapiens. Wide humanity, on the other hand, is considered to be an assemblage that is composed of both the biological human and its extra-biological components. Just as the bank is composed of floors, tellers, and the manager and produces an emergent property upon the interactions among these components, the assemblage of wide humanity is characterized by the interactions among its components. Now, while the current wide human assemblage is already composed of a mixture of biological and extra-biological components, its possible posthuman descendants may either be of natural biological kind or extra-biological as well.[27] In fact, it may even be a hybrid of both, although, as we study further, it may be argued that all of humanity have undergone a hybridization already. For the reason that the wide human assemblage is composed of these variants, a posthuman may emerge from either of these kinds as well.

Posthumanism and Virtual God

By initially exposing the parallelisms that can be found in speculative posthumanism and god, followed by a synthesis of its compatibility with Quentin

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[22] David Roden, "Manifesto of Speculative Posthumanism," HumanityPlus Media, Last Accessed February 27, 2016. <http://hplusmagazine.com/2013/02/06/manifesto-of-speculative-posthumanism/ .

[23] Roden, *Posthuman Life*, 109-110.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 22.

[26] Ibid., 109-110.

[27] David Roden, "Human Enhancement and Wide Human Descent," *Enemy Industry, Philosophy at the edge of the Human*, accessed March 10, 2016. http://enemyindustry.net/blog/?p=965.

Meillassoux's *virtual god*, the study hopefully maximizes its pursuit to develop a more profound ethics that responds to the crisis of humanity.

First, Roden maintains that the arrival of posthumanity is an unknowable occurrence.[28] No one could forecast this event, it will simply reveal itself. This unknowability forbids us humans from being able to ascribe absolute qualities to the posthuman. For instance, one cannot say for sure that posthumanism will be the realization of the perfect Artificial Intelligence – this is just one of the numerous possibilities.[29] This extensive array of posthuman possibilities range from a toothbrush capable of post-anthropocentric functions to the materialization of dystopic futures depicted in many sci-fi films of late. Roden signified this set of possible posthumans through what he calls *Posthuman Possibility Space* (PPS).[30] In Chapter 3 of *Posthuman Life*, he laid out the constraints on PPS which narrowed down the number of potential posthuman forms, but it basically draws on constraints that are technologically impossible.

It may be articulated, now, that the vastness of these possibilities opens the door to the birth of a new theology, which brings us to the second similarity: apophatic theology.[31] Since neither the *when* of the posthuman's arrival nor a list of qualities that the posthuman should inherit can be determined because of its presupposed unknowability, Roden chose to take the apophatic road, which means that instead of ascribing qualities to the posthuman such as superintelligence, disease immunity, superlongevity or immortality, and the like, we must actually theorize from the negative perspective. The posthuman must be studied by virtue of what it is not or what it should lack. This is evident in the way Roden approached the PPS which from a large set, constraints are eliminated to thereby minimize the possibility space. It eliminates impossibilities rather than determines possibilities. The apophatic method, as Roden claims, is a reasonable methodology for a posthuman study since there is no actual observable proof for posthuman investigation and it evades having to resort towards a careless prediction.[32]

The third parallelism can be found in the potential incomprehensibility – at least to human cognition – of the posthuman. While Roden does not explicitly say so, the possibility of posthuman unintelligibility is quite high. This is due to the functional autonomy that renders posthuman cognition different from that of the human.[33] Its moral intentions and cognitive preoccupations could vastly be diverted from that of its human

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[28] Bakker, R. Scott. "Interview with David Roden," *Figure/Ground*, Last modified June 6, 2015, accessed March 19, 2016. http://figureground.org/interview-with-david-roden/.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Roden, *Posthuman Life*, 53.

[31] See Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God – Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995).

[32] Roden, *Posthuman Life*, 113.

[33] Ibid., 124-149.

ancestor. The moral systems of humanity might no longer be upheld by posthumans because their autonomy no longer exhibits human-related functions.

Interestingly enough, Roden's speculative posthumanism proves to be compatible with the Meillassouxian formulation of the *virtual god*. In an essay called "Spectral Dilemma," Quentin Meillassoux laid out a comprehensive investigation on the problem of god's existence.[34] The old dispute between theism and atheism, according to Meillassoux, can be summarized into two positions. The first position is that of the theists: that god exists and that there is only the case that he has always existed and therefore, we must believe. The second position is from traditional atheists, which claims that god does not exist and that he has never at any point existed, and for this reason, we must not believe. This is where the dilemma lies, says Meillassoux. The belief in god's existence, throughout the history of theology, has always been linked with *necessity*,[35] and this link demonstrates how problematic both positions are. The dilemma can be summarized in the proposition, "to say that God exists, or that he does not – whatever is thought through these two statements, both are paths to despair when confronted with spectres."[36]

The dilemma must be resolved by first recognizing that there could be a third position,[37] which is not going to be agnosticism. The necessary connection between these absolute positions must be terminated. The belief in god does not automatically translate into its absolute, necessary existence. Once the bond of necessity is broken, the third and fourth positions may be able to arise: the third position being that we must not believe because he does exist; and the fourth, we must believe because he does not exist. For a long period of time, we have been aggravating the dilemma by choosing between the two classical stances. One is either a theist by necessity or an atheist by necessity. The third position suggests a resentment on the part of the nonbeliever.[38] If god exists and yet he allows for suffering, he is not a god worthy of being believed in. The fourth position is the one that Meillassoux would advocate. We must believe in god because god does not exist or, at least, not yet.[39]

The virtual god, in this respect, is the possible god. His virtuality is presumed because of his momentary absence, but his reality may be attained at some point in the future. It may be recalled from Meillassoux's most critically acclaimed work *After Finitude* that the principle of necessity is rendered dubious because of the fact that the universe is

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[34] Quentin Meillassoux, "Spectral Dilemma," *Collapse IV*, ed. R. Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, May 2008), 261-276. 263.

[35] Ibid., 269.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 267.

[38] Graham Harman, "Meillassoux's Virtual Future," *Continent*. 1.2 (2011), 78-91.

[39] Ibid.

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in a state of hyper-chaos.[40] The so-called laws of nature are not absolute and the only necessity is, as the title of his text implies, contingency. In approaching the god dilemma, this notion must be taken into account as well. There must not be a necessity that links knowledge and belief in god with his actual existence. Eliminating the necessity paves way for its possibility. God *no longer* exists, but he possibly might and, in fact, as the study holds, he will exist – he is to come.[41]

The idea that this god is *possible* implies that he is, for the moment, absent. Looking back, the most influential depiction of positive theology can be found in Christianity. Borrowing from St. Augustine's *Confessions*, god is the "Most high, most excellent, most powerful, most almighty, most merciful and most just; more hidden, yet most present; most beautiful, and most strong; stable yet mysterious; unchangeable, yet changing all things. . . ."[42] God is, in the Christian sense, considered to be omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent, and omnipresent. These were the attributes that positive theology through Christianity has given the signifier 'god.' Meillassoux, on the other hand, as well as Roden, considering the fact that they are coming from aporetic and apophatic positions, never once attributed this enigmatic entity with such absolutes. Meillassoux speaks of god only as a historical symbol for justice,[43] which heavily connotes an optimistic attitude; whereas Roden addresses the posthuman 'neutrally' and without attributions.

Meillassoux posited that the universe is in a state of hyper-chaos which gives us reason to speculate that 'natural laws' as we know them are contingent. This idea is implicit within Roden's philosophy especially when considering the influence of emergentism in his work. As we know, speculative posthumanism is anchored to a radical philosophy of society called the *assemblage theory*.[44] The asset of this sociological idea is its property of emergence. It holds that a society, or almost any particular assemblage for that matter, is not merely a collection of parts. Rather, the interactions among the parts produce something else – emergent properties. Roden borrowed this and contextualized it in the posthuman sphere. Disconnection, accordingly, will be attained the moment a component from the wide human assemblage becomes independent of the assemblage and garners an autonomy of its own function. It is implicit within the study that this disconnection can, in fact, allow for the creation of a new assemblage.

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[40] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude – An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. (New York: Continuum, 2008), 99.

[41] Meillassoux, "Spectral Dilemma," 268.

[42] St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Hal Helms. (Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2010), 5.

[43] Harman, "Meillassoux's Virtual Future," 78-91.

[44] Roden borrows the theory from Manuel DeLanda's social philosophy. See also Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society – Assemblage Theory and Social Complexities* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

Lacking in Roden's thesis, however, is the explanation for the emergence of the human assemblage – a gap which Meillassoux can supplement. Contingency is the only necessity.[45] By this Meillassoux means that the 'laws of nature' are not absolute, they can be broken and they will be broken.[46] He says that there have been three orders of advents throughout history that we know of. It all began with matter. Our evidence for the Big Bang Theory suggests that the world was created from an explosion.[47] The birth of the universe signified the birth of matter. This was followed by the emergence of life. One of the earliest life forms we know of, the ones whose remnants still haunt the vicinity of our planet, are the dinosaurs – which emerged during the Mesozoic Era, approximately 250 million years ago.[48] Then came thought, which allowed anthropocentric thinking to come to life. From matter emerged life, from life emerged thought, and it was the human being that encapsulated it all. The world progressed from one advent to the next, "each of them dependent on the advent/s preceding them."[49] Life is dependent on matter and thought is dependent on life. Meillassoux concluded that what comes after thought must be god, because there no longer is anything greater than human thought. These advents are representative of how laws of nature as we know them are themselves contingent.

This contingency of natural laws seems like a suitable explanation for emergence, as the author sees it. We may view matter as belonging to an assemblage of its own and life as its emergent property; in the same way that thought is the emergent property of life. This revelation implies that what will emerge out of the human – of this being that is composed of matter, possesses life, and capable of thought – must be god.

Speculative posthumanism holds that the posthuman does not necessarily belong to the human lineage. In fact, it argues that, being functionally autonomous and existentially independent, it should no longer be part of humanity. Roden hints that posthumanity might be an event that poses neither the demise of the human nor an enhancement of the human, but instead, a coming of a new, potentially incomprehensible entity. All beings started out from matter, selected few from this assemblage soon evolved into life – human evolution and, in fact, all life forms, are believed to have started out from

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[45] In the 8th of May 2008, Quentin Meillassoux gave a lecture at the Middlesex University, Londres, entitled *Time Without Becoming*, in which he explicitly stated that "contingency, and only contingency, is absolutely necessary."

[46] See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

[47] See also Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Bantam Dell Publishing Group, 1998).

[48] See also John Rafferty, *The Mesozoic Era: Age of Dinosaurs – The Geologic History of Earth* (Britannica Educational Publishing, 2001).

[49] Harman, "Meillassoux's Virtual Future," 85.

a singular cell[50] – and then another group of components further developed and soon acquired thought. Just as life descended from the wide assemblage of matter, and thought descended from the wide assemblage of life, the posthuman might be a far greater entity that shall descend from the wide assemblage of humanity: a step further towards historical progression.

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