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## Alterity and the Non-human

Trans. Boria Sax

The principal theme in posthumanist discussion may unequivocally be summed up in the phrase “alterità non humane” – non-human otherness. We might even say that the philosophical treatment of this theme requires a broader framework, an expansion of the concept of otherness or alterity. The term “otherness” acquires its meaning in the context of close kinship, whether of an individual or group, and may be defined in two ways: 1) other entities as a basis for comparison – entities which are separate, strange, divergent, or foreign – out of which a subject emerges; 2) other entities as a point of orientation in a dialectic polarity, which may provide support in the construction of identity. This reveals the dual contribution of alterity to identity. Alterity mirrors the distinctiveness of a subject, thus helping that subject to reflect on its own identity. In addition, it is a bearer of references, thus providing others with external guidance and support in the gradual development of identity. Alterity is at one time both internal and external to identity, and consequently integrated and dialectical. This is the cleavage between a posthumanist approach to human identity, which integrates other things or qualities, and a humanistic approach, which purges all that is not human.

But let us step back of a moment. In order to understand the posthuman endeavor to include the non-human within the human dimension, a prerequisite for this analysis, it is first of all necessary to focus on the dialectic of identity and alterity within the human dimension, for example in the construction of individual or cultural identity. Up until the first half of the twentieth century to construct one’s identity meant to diverge, to distance oneself, and purify oneself of foreign elements. Afterwards, particularly since the 1970s, a concept of identity that would include alterity began to emerge. The others, then, were no longer contaminants to be purged but qualities to be absorbed. Reflection on the integrative quality of alterity, in psychology as in anthropology, has led to dramatic shifts in the concept of identity, thus abandoning the imposition of isolationist, solipsistic, or purist standards, in fact every concept of so-called “firm” identity. This adjective refers to any identity that is easily singled out from an environment, which is contiguous with neither alterity nor contamination. It is an identity marked as being special, unique, and pure, which stands out against its background, untouched by

alterity or “contamination.” Such an identity is considered “firm” not for its own sake, but because the process of definition or the interpretive model has made it appear so.

In fact, the divergence-expulsion model weakens identity, since it removes the nourishment that comes through commerce with alterity. The model that emerges in the second half of the twentieth century may be called dialectical-integrative, since it regards alterity as the other pole in a dialectical process of organization by means of incorporating external references, a bit the way a tree organizes its essential identity through absorbing nourishment from the environment in which it grows. The others, in other words, are not considered pollutants but centers of development and fields of expression for identity. In this sense, identity is developed through integration rather than inclusion. Some consider this a model of “weak” identity, but I personally do not agree. The strength of this identity is the power to integrate alterity. Its instruments are those of integration rather than defense, not the ability to construct barriers intended to safeguard a chimera of original purity. Such purity is an illusion and that is fortunate, for it would be inhospitable and sterile. There are those who maintain that the construction of identity through the integration of alterity would be to sanction the end of identity or at least to take the first step in that direction, but, once again, I disagree. And integrative-dialectical process renders the construction of identity more hospitable (embracing alterity, or being embraced by it), and this establishes a threshold, a point of interaction between the home and the world. The threshold is there for the sake of the house, not the other way around.

The model of divergence-expulsion does not simply set forth a very restricted idea of identity but in addition provides an interpretive framework in which manifestations of alterity are devalued in so far as: a) they are perceived as diluting identity; b) they are perceived as irrelevant to the formation of identity and, therefore, neglected; c) they are deprived of their diversity, in much the same way as the Greeks who would not admit of plurality among non-Hellenes. What I wish to emphasize is that there is a strict correlation between the divergence-expulsion model of identity and the humanistic paradigm. In the humanistic approach, the realization of human identity is interpreted as a process of purification and of separation, the peeling off of extraneous layers of in order to reach an identity at the depth. It is washing away possible pollutants that should not have been deposited and corrode the integrity of the body. This is analogous to peeling a fruit, removing the surface in order to reach a core of purity. Identity is active and recognizable in so far as it remains untouched. Humanism is based on the presumption of a complete human autonomy. Inevitably, expressions of alterity cease to be points of reference, still less bearers of references, but less toxins

from which one must be separated for the purpose of avoiding contamination and recovering original purity, toxins which must be cleansed. This is to say, one needs to emphasize difference and discontinuity. According to this schema, humanistic identity is nothing other than a process of emergence. Identity must stand out boldly from its background, distinguish itself from everything else, and cut an insurmountable furrow between itself and alterity. This emergence is an act of emancipation, and one might say that humanistic identity consists in liberating oneself from the bonds of confusion. It is a dramatic gesture of disruption and expulsion, which leaves behind a past filled with fragments and ambiguities; it is a quantum leap of differentiation that may not be measured in quantitative terms. In order to accomplish this, humanism inaugurates a dialectic based on the dichotomy of identity and alterity, thus compressing a plurality of alterities into a single, universal idea of alterity. Furthermore, should distinctive identities emerge from this idea; they are no longer read as a plurality of entities but as aspects of identity, in consequence trivialized as specialties. In this way, humanism creates a horizon of the non-human that is characterized by universality, which is considered to be neither a multiplicity nor a bearer of individual characteristics, as opposed to the category of humanity which is intrinsically pluralistic.

The point is precisely this: the revolution in alterity that have characterized the last 50 years has opened the way for pluralism. In the twentieth century we experienced a gradual disintegration of the idea of universality and a progressive transformation in the areas of reference in two senses: 1) there was an recognition of the authenticity of diversity, which was no longer considered a matter of deviance or disturbance but a fundamental principle; 2) admission of an ontological pluralism which defeats every attempt to assign a measurement in relation to a central point. Here, in my opinion, may be found the true crisis of humanistic thought: alterity has begun to reveal its plurality, thereby becoming unresponsive to every attempt at compression in a single category opposed to humanity. This is not a total collapse of the concept of identity, as some wish to maintain, but rather of a concept of identity that is nourished by divergence, of purity, and of emergence, which bring us back to the dichotomy of human and non-human. We might think this dichotomy is the bastion of defense for human rights, but in reality it is the archetype for every form of discrimination among human beings. The dichotomy of human versus non-human has practical implications that have revealed themselves as very dangerous in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to give some examples: 1) there is one prototype of purity that is more significant than any others; 2) every divergence from the prototype understood as partial and incomplete humanity; 3) that the humanity consists in divergence from alterity and is otherwise

self-referential. The dangerous precipice of solipsism is apparent in these affirmations, as well as the emergence of a principle of marginalization, which may be applied not only to non-human otherness but also to human otherness, in fact to every divergence no matter how it may be labeled. Diversity is viewed, in other words, not as a field of many possibilities, is not valued for its ability to generate a range of alternatives, but is rather judged essentially in a uniform manner with respect to a single characteristic; the divergence from a prototype. Just as “barbarians” were not a constellation of peoples and of cultures but simply those who did not speak the Greek language, so the disabled are not a galaxy of existential modalities but simply those who lack the qualities of the prototype of that defines being able. Humanistic identity in fact claims the exalted role of providing a measure of alterity, measurement in the sense of assigning a level of inferiority to alterity according to its approximation to the prototype. But what does it mean to surrender the pretence of a gravitational center or else a measure of proximity? Previously being “other,” that is diverging from the prototype, meant to be lacking, deviant, deformed. There was an implicit judgment of inferiority since identity was used as the referential model and the measure of judgment. Ethnic alterity, for example, came to be conceived as being poor, primitive, puerile, or even lacking in culture, and not simply the bearer of another culture. Full recognition of diversity changes our understanding of both identity and alterity by opening a place for a pluralistic imagination, and that is the foundation of posthumanism.

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