EDUCATION IN THE TIMES OF POSTHUMANISM

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Abstract

My main starting point is a basic definition of posthumanism as a critical theory in the humanities and social sciences that – in short – delves into the question of the relations between the actors in the so-called cybernetic triangle: human/animal/machine (or technology). Critical posthumanism should consequently be understood as a postanthropocentric deconstruction of cultural and technological determinism. I would like to start exploring how these relations are relevant to education. As this is a humanist perspective, I will not be presenting any data analysis; the methods used here are mainly (1) qualitative analysis to confront the official or recognized "common sense" view of social reality, social and political relations, history, and conceptual categories from the perspective of alternative views; and (2) comparative analysis of fundamental concepts. In the current situation, i.e., the "absolute" need to introduce technology in schools as soon as possible (which is partiality induced by the COVID-19 pandemic), we can ask ourselves about the role/relationship of schooling and technology, and the perception of the former and the latter. One view of contemporary education is that digital technology makes education "better" (or: more efficient, more available, etc.) – which should be thought of alongside both technophobia and a purely utilitarian understanding of technology to be better able to navigate between the oppositions of discomfort and euphoria. Through a posthumanist lens, I expect to be able to lay some foundations for critically interrogating not only the introduction (or perhaps non-introduction) of technology in schools and the role of education in general but also the initial conceptual basis for confronting a market logic that is increasingly understood as something on a par with ethical and epistemological systems.

Keywords: Posthumanism, human, technology, education, epistemology.

1. Introduction

In this short contribution, I would first like to address the issue of conceptual (and practical as well) interconnectedness of the definition(s) of education and the definition(s) of the human. In my opinion, both need to be thought together, and that is especially salient today when modern (i.e., digital) technology is rapidly becoming a vital part of education. This text is part of the ongoing research, which is aimed at reflecting on several other aspects in the field of education, edtech, and policy making.

If education means leading the subject (student, pupil) into humanity and being fully human, how does this definition need to be reshaped today? Following will be the reflection on the relationship between the conceptualizations of new technologies within a given theory of education and the kind of subject, envisaged as the outcome of such education (Snaza, 2013). At the same time, which perhaps is not at the forefront here, we need to ask ourselves what the re-imagined end(s) of the human might be and when – if – human stops being human (Callus & Herbrechter, 2012).

In short, we need to rethink (among several other things such as development, ecology etc., and, of course, what it means to be human) education as "a process of in-duction: leading the pupil into being 'human'" (Snaza, 2013). Although "what it means to be human is constructed differently at different historical moments, by biology, philosophy, political theory, and educational institutions" (Snaza et al., 2014).

My main starting point is thus a rudimentary definition of posthumanism as a critical theory in the humanities and social sciences that – in short – delves into the question of the relations between the actors in the so-called cybernetic triangle. This triangle consists of the now well-known human/animal/machine (or technology) components of which the relations are – in the light of contemporary rethinking and various posthuman, even transhuman, possibilities – reconfigured and rethought. We can also think of that as "three crucial boundary breakdowns" (Haraway, 1991) when the temporal and spatial coordinates no longer allow the border wars to be won easily.

It might be worth noting here that there is more than one version of posthumanism as regards the ontology of human, relations to technology, envisaging the future (techno-utopias), and the like. But this is beyond the scope of this contribution.

Another important factor here (often overlooked) is the market logic that is increasingly understood as something on a par with ethical and epistemological systems. The technology used in the classroom is not only (or not predominantly) classroom gadgets/tangible devices, but "rather something much broader, that encompasses the imagined benefits of data, vast data collection infrastructures, complex data-driven technologies and their associated expertise, and the scaled effects of algorithmic and networked systems" (Knox, 2019). Such technology is "fuelling a capitalistic desire for data" (Knox, 2019). This dimension is very often put aside by e.g. the policy makers or not forefronted enough, together with the environmental costs of the digital (the use of rare metals, exploitation of natural resources, pollution, and the like) which amount to the lack of a broader understanding of the socio-technical systems (Knox, 2019).

2. Posthumanist discontents

Posthumanism, as it is usual with such terms, can mean many things to many people and often comes with a doubt of its relevance, the fear that the era of human might be over (are there alternative ways of being human?), or that we have heard all this before. When I use the term, I understand posthumanism as the need or aspiration of non-hegemonic ways of understanding human today.

I stand on a position – in line with feminist posthumanities – that humanist hierarchical conceptualizations clearly show that all humans do not belong to the same category of humanity. This needs to be questioned rigorously, together with human exceptionalism (i.e., the primacy of humans over nonhuman animals) as it affects the epistemic privileges and, of course, the knowledge formed in those processes (Vendramin, 2023). The prefix "post-", as in posthumanism, does not mean a complete break with the main part of the term, but rather is a sign of the ongoing deconstruction of what it "prefixes". It is a kind of "conceptual parasite that inhabits humanism itself and tries to get it to address its own contradictions" (Herbrechter, 2018). This definition neatly does away with the sometimes redundant worries of how to understand the "post-" (as in: is this a break, did we humans become obsolete?) and at the same time stresses a shift in perspective. It does not only posit a posthuman "as a potential evolutionary step (or leap) of the human" (Ferrando, 2013). The perspectival shift needed must encompass various dimensions, such as political, ethical, also epistemological, and last but not least (and I will return to this shortly), educational (see above the outline of what "traditional" definition of the aims of education is like).

Stefan Herbrechter (n.d.) names various questions that need to be addressed and eventually answered, such as: "What does it mean to be human? What is the role of technology in evolution and hominisation? Is a postanthropocentric world picture possible, desirable, or even necessary?" Besides, "We have always been technological" (Snaza et al. 2014), and that is the statement that brings in the co-evolution of human and technology. This means that "at no stage in the process of hominization can you reach a point where you have, on the one side, the human, and, on the other side, the technical" (Herbrechter, 2018). They co-evolved in the past and will co-evolve in the future.

The above questions certainly surpass the issue of education alone; they are to be thought of in a wider frame, but they are important for the future definition of the role of education, which will – quite possibly – be modified, at least to a certain extent.

This is "is not to be confused with a nostalgia for another human, or a new humanism. Instead, it is part of a new theoretical paradigm emerging from all these challenges to humanism, humanity, and the human, and which are causing the erosion of traditional demarcations between humans and nonhumans and are calling for alternative ways of thinking" (Herbrechter, n.d.). (This is not to say that such rethinking was not present until now, there are philosophical traditions that delve into precisely such questions.)

3. Posthumanist education or (post)education?

All this brings us to the question of how to define education in light of changes at several levels in our societies and traditions. Will education be defined as something completely different, will it, say, side-track the role of teachers, schools, curricula, socialization, etc. contrary to the understanding that education means "'pure' human relationships between teachers and their students, or amongst constructivist social groupings" (Knox, 2019)?

As put by N. Snaza et. al. (2014), posthumanism "allies itself with the politico-pedagogical projects of feminism, postcolonialism, anti-racism, and queer activism as it confronts the systematic dehumanization of people under the hegemonic Western form of political right". If education makes us human, if education is a practice of humanization (Snaza, 2013), it is high time we (re)define what human is, considering various de-humanized and even non-human Others that have hereto been relegated to a

lower step on the hierarchical scale of our anthropocentric world. It remains to be seen to what extent and how these changes will take place and how they will "reform" the definition of education and education itself in an ongoing process. (I am not talking here about changes brought in by digitalization and the like.)

N. Friesen (2018) mentions educational posthumanism (do we need the term post-education?) and sees a lot of problems if we embark on a posthumanist ship unconditionally: "For better or worse, education cannot be anything else but predominantly human. […] To the degree that posthumanisms deny human agency and responsibility, they also 'post' the project of education; to the degree that they affirm these human characteristics, they cannot be called posthumanist". He continues: "Through its denial of the centrality of human agency and choice, posthumanism also requires us to reconceptualize the most fundamental assumptions and understandings of education itself."

I want to return here to the question of human (and humanity) and the definition of it as this has a profound effect on how to approach the issue of education. Do we – if we opt for a transformed definition of human (a moral human being) and education (purposive and normative that it is) – lose the education's addressee (Herbrechter, in Friesen, 2018) and with that the edifice that supports humanity? I want to think that posthumanism can make positive transformations in education in several ways. According to Snaza et al. (2014):

> First, it forces us to reckon with how resolutely humanist almost all educational philosophy and research is. Second, it allows us to reframe education to focus on how we are always already related to animals, machines, and things within life in schools […] Third, […] it enables us to begin exploring new, posthumanist directions in research, curriculum design, and pedagogical practice.

To briefly comment and/or stress those three interconnected points or upsides of posthumanism: first, we can start reflecting on the new possibilities of educational research and practice, including the exclusions within humanism regarding human and non-human others. Second, reframing education could only be an enrichment without – hopefully – losing the education itself. And, thirdly, if pedagogical practice needs to deal with the issue of technology on a conceptual and practical level (and it does), there might be new possibilities that would improve education.

4. Conclusion

One of the main contributions of critical posthumanism to the current educational debates – and I am shunning here the term post-education – is posing some very relevant questions that are "far from techno-utopian or -dystopian, but instead involve an entirely new understanding of the relationship between education, technology and the human" (Herbrechter, 2018). This might also mean de-essentializing all of the three, along with the problematization of thinking "in essences and universals" (Mambrol, 2018), to find "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves (Haraway, 1991).

Besides, discussions of pedagogy driving technology, or vice versa, reinforce a false dichotomy. Pedagogy is not just a method; technology is not just a vehicle for implementing that method (Fawns, 2022). The adjustments sooner or later needed in our educational practices include the *meaningful* introduction of technology (understood here in the narrower sense as digital technology) in schools; and *beforehand* identifying the social and educational problems we have and why we have them (Jamison & Haraway, 1992). It might turn out that virtual or digitally transmitted experiences do not always offer "the same kind of experience one has in a lived experience", as technology transforms both people and their experiences (Jamison & Haraway, 1992). It is counter-productive to view technology as a threat, and – at the same time – to view it as a final accomplishment that will help solve all our troubles and problems, be it educational or others.

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