

## **Contesting Humanism(s) in a Humanist Cause: Musings on Three Kinds of Antihumanist Challenges**

*Jibu Mathew George*

### **Abstract**

Against the backdrop of myriad antihumanist challenges that are current in the contemporary theoretical climate, this article distinguishes between and discusses three kinds of such challenges to the received discourse of humanism. The first is the counter-discursive contestation of universalistic claims of Western humanism on behalf of those subtly excluded from and subdued by this discourse. The second is a critique of the tropology of the human with the aim of unraveling illusory autonomies and helping human subjects to attain (or regain) their subjectivity. The third involves analyzing the implications of redefining the human in the transhumanist/posthumanist context of scientific-technological developments, many of which are comparatively too recent to have been factored in by the conceptual challenges mounted earlier. The article foregrounds the paradoxical possibility of serving the humanist *cause* even as one contests received conceptions of the human as a *category*.

**Keywords:** humanism, antihumanism, transhumanism, posthumanism, cause, category, linguistic turn, ideology, cyborg.

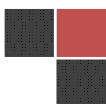
## Introduction

The intentional ambiguity of the main title, rather than being merely a matter of linguistic play, denotes two possibilities in the critical discourse surrounding received notions of humanism: first, the plurality, mutual contestation, and even celebration of *several* humanisms emerging on behalf of the claims excluded by the hegemonic Occidental humanism. This, we know in retrospect, was part of the inevitable process of heterogeneization and democratization of the received humanist discourse, factoring in differences of, say race, ethnicity, class, culture, gender, and sexuality. Second, the phrase in question alludes to the paradoxical possibility of serving the humanist *cause* even as we contest received conceptions of the human as a *category* – a possibility that will incrementally become clearer as we progress. This article discusses three kinds of challenges to the received discourse of humanism: one, counter-discursive contestation of the universalistic claims of Western humanism on behalf of those subtly excluded from and subdued by this discourse; two, critique of the topology of the human with the aim of unraveling illusory autonomies and helping human subjects to attain (or regain) their subjectivity; and three, analyzing the implications of redefining the human in the context of scientific-technological developments, many of which are comparatively too recent to have been factored in by the conceptual challenges mounted earlier and have gained greater currency in academia than challenges of certain other kinds. It is important to grasp the differences, some of them very subtle and delicate, among these challenges, along with the provenances thereof, lest we club their concerns, resulting in what may be called a category error, with the risk of misunderstanding the claims of the intellectual terrain at large.

Historical experience of humanism<sup>1</sup> is a story of generalization in which particular, culturally specific formulations of ‘man’ became camouflaged under, got marketed in the name of, and was mistaken for *l’uomo universale*. This unjust historico-conceptual logic forms the basis of the critique of Renaissance humanism – that it actually confined itself to a celebration of white, male, European cultural achievements, values, and tastes. This critique reveals the human of Renaissance humanism as a short hand for white European male. Foregrounding the particular that cleverly passed for the general, or, put otherwise, the political generalization of the particular, Tony Davies observes that “the essential human being tends in any period to bear a striking resemblance to the dominant group of that time and place” (59). Michèle Barrett illustrates this claim with an example from the pertinent centre of European thought:

Let us imagine the celebrated ‘Cartesian subject.’ He is made in the image of his inventor. He is white, a European; he is highly educated, he thinks and is sensitive, he can probably even think in Latin and Greek; he lived a bit too soon to be a bourgeois, but he has class confidence; he has a general confidence in his existence and power; he is not a woman, not black, not a migrant, not marginal; he is heterosexual and a father.... It is entirely clear to us that this model of the subject is centred, and unified, around a nexus of social and biographical characteristics that represent power. (90)

As a result of such camouflaged entanglements in networks of discursive power, humanism itself came to be seen as a hegemonic Western discourse insensitive to diversity and difference. Since attempts were and are still being made to propagate the ideational expressions of specific times, particular places, and concrete contexts as the universal and



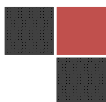
eternal ‘human condition,’ it was only natural that such sinister ideological endeavours came to be challenged. Apropos the consequences of, and approaches to, such universalization, Davies says: “One of the effects of a universalising notion like ‘Man’ is to dissolve precisely such particularities as race, sex and class; and for that reason it is always prudent to ask what specific historical and local interests may be at work within grandly ecumenical notions” (26). The next section represents an investigative summary of the struggle of the particular against the universal.

### Claims of the Subaltern Particular

The grand narratives of humanism were not only problematic but also seen as endangering the human. For instance, postcolonial critiques have revealed the racist subtext of Western humanism whose universalistic proclamations and claims brutally advanced a partisan cause. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon angrily responds to this contradiction when he asks his “comrades” to “[l]eave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them” (311). The hegemonic discourse of humanism that Fanon is alluding to involved a dehumanization of the other. In his preface to Fanon’s book, an existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre foregrounds the violent othering that paradoxically constructs a ‘common’ humanity and takes to task the “racist humanism” in which “the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters” (26).<sup>ii</sup>

In their *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley refer to humanism’s utility as “a benign mask to hide a politically motivated agenda” (184), giving the example of Tony Blair, who used the rhetoric of humanism to justify morally the war in Iraq. Similarly, Noam Chomsky writes of a “new military humanism” (in the book of the same title) in the context of the American involvement in the Balkan conflict. Chomsky makes explicit what most know only too well – “virtually every use of military force is described as humanitarian intervention” (147). The gap between what is said and what all could be meant is tremendous! As we know, humanitarianism is a banner in the legitimacy game whose strategy is to use a benign-sounding idea to mask powerful interests, those of what President Dwight D. Eisenhower termed “the [American] military-industrial complex” in this case. Thanks to such a rupture between the concept and its supposed content, between the signifier and the signified, humanity has become as contestable a notion as other dubious euphemisms like ‘common good’ and ‘national interest.’ Travesties have been so many that Davies remarks: “It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity” (131). Alain Finkielkraut, in his book interestingly entitled *In the Name of Humanity*, deals with the scepticism to which these “many crimes” gave rise (90). In short, humanism is a discourse in which in the name of the human, the human cause can be both enabled and hindered. Due to the ideological baggage that the term carries, any benign proclamation in its name is innately suspect.

The above account summarizes two faults in the humanist discourse: mystifying generalization and hegemonic travesty. The problem of the human, however, is not entirely a matter of corrupt appropriations either. Obviously, there are other problems at the conceptual heart of the human. Anti-foundationalist thought of the last one century has gnawed at humanist fundamentals. Friedrich Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of values,” Michel Foucault’s “discursive formations,” and Jacques Derrida’s “deconstructive” analyses have “undermine[d] the credentials of humanism not only in its more inflated or



self-serving pretensions but at the very heart” (Davies 37). Critique, however, is a double-edged sword. Just as it would be naïve to take *l'uomo universale* at face value, it would be “stupid and unnecessary,” as Davies says, “to conclude that because they have so often secreted the lineaments and interests of a powerful minority within a generalising rhetoric of universal humanity, humanity itself is a hopelessly contaminated concept, to be thrown out with the dirty bathwater of humanist delusion” (59). Though we can subject the content of the human to endless scepticism (critique of the human in the humanist cause), we need the category of the human as a benchmark to indicate degradations – in our own lives and those of fellow humans – a point which is often forgotten if we are bowled over by the now trite constructivist games.

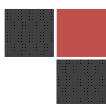
### Humanoclasm in Language and Discourse

The ‘linguistic turn’ in the humanist/antihumanist discourse can probably be traced back to Nietzsche. In the essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (*Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*), Nietzsche asks:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations which, poetically and rhetorically intensified, became transposed and adorned, and which after long usage by a people seem fixed, canonical and binding on them. Truths are illusions which one has forgotten *are* illusions, worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the sense. (46)

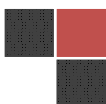
Using the metaphor of a coin on which the imprint of a monarch’s head got abraded over time, Nietzsche argued that our concepts could lose any putative connection to the objects to which they purportedly corresponded. The apparent solidity of our concepts, Marxist theorists, especially György Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno, would say, is the result of a rarification – attributes that are accidental to a thing are perceived as an essential part of it – a “thingification,” to borrow Udaya Kumar’s more appropriate term, as opposed to the common “objectification.” As Kumar has observed, what we need to do with concepts, according to Adorno, is not to attempt to cleanse them of historical encumbrances (ironically, such ‘purification,’ as it were, would amount to distortion) but to work with them, to problematize them, and to unravel their relation to other concepts and anything that they claim to correspond to. The concept of the human is no exception to such encumbrances and the imperative to problematize. Moreover, because it is a concept vital to the many choices that we make and much praxis that we are engaged in, its problematization has a bearing on questions of human agency, well being, and more. Sometimes, as we saw at the end of the previous section, rather than bring about an automatic empowerment, such problematizations might even compromise the humanist cause.

Retrospective analysis has demonstrated that ‘the human’ is the historical part of a Wittgensteinian “language-game” (*Sprachspiel*), in which, in order to understand words, one has to look for the function served by them rather than their putative referents. But from a traditional perspective a greater antihumanist challenge was mounted by the tendency (which, to me, also betrays the scientific aspirations of the humanities) to explain human reality in terms of impersonal systems and codes, Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language being a typical example. Saussurean linguistics deprived the individual subject of claims to both singular speech and his consciousness as the originator of



meaning. Saussure reveals language, once thought the transparent medium of human agency, as an impersonal system in which meanings are merely a function of differential relations internal to the system, and are fixed arbitrarily by convention. The individual is no more than a cog in the linguistic system, analogous to his status, according to a Marxian critique, in capitalist structures of production. Man does not speak language; language speaks him. The subject is produced in language, the once-sovereign 'I' being a mere position in it. For Derrida, the concept of man was at the fluid centre of the logocentric Western metaphysics, which he saw as dissipating itself in signifiatory *différance*. In his extreme poststructuralist position, Derrida maintains that "language necessarily binds the human being ... to a pre-existing network of signs into which we are born and by which we are acculturated" (qtd. in Halliwell and Mousley 48). Man itself is an effect of prior textual arrangements. When poststructuralism seized departments of English, the auctorial cogito became irrelevant as writing was deciphered as a configuration of linguistic and cultural codes. "To write," as Roland Barthes has it, is an intransitive verb. Writing has neither an object nor a subject (the author is dead!). As Terry Eagleton remarks, citing Osip Brik, "Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* ... would have been written even if Pushkin had not lived" (2-3). Apparently, the humanities abandoned the human element.

Louis Althusser's structural Marxism argues that our assumed position as autonomous, rational subjects is implicated in the need of capitalism to produce the kind of subjects for its continuance. "Ideological State Apparatuses" (the church, the family, political parties, the media, and the educational system) "hail" concrete individuals and fits them into a particular role and pre-fixed "subject-position" through a process called "interpellation." According to Althusser ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"), if individuals experience themselves as autonomous subjects, it is the result of ideology. It is this notion of the objectified non-subject which Althusser's disciple, Michel Foucault, has popularized, and is bandied about in contemporary theory. According to Foucault, institutions and practices (he calls their ensemble of statements "discourse") produce socially integrated subjects. He sees the conception of 'man' as a mere 'grammatical convenience' in the discourses which normatively constitute such categories as the 'mad' and the 'sane,' the 'criminal' and the 'homosexual.' The chief spokesperson of what I call the 'death-of-man' school, Foucault says: "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end." He sees the figure of man "erased" like "a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea" (387). Why such revels over the demise of man? Contrary to the apparent nihilism<sup>iii</sup> of Althusser's and Foucault's concepts, no one who knows the rationale of their work would suggest that they compromise human subjecthood. Both are concerned with struggle (class struggle in Althusser's case, resistance in Foucault's). They contest and destabilize notions of the autonomous subject only to shake him/her out of complacency and make him/her more human ultimately. Foucault argues that "humanism actually offers only the illusion of sovereignty, freedom and self-empowerment" whereas the truth of the situation is "a 'strange regression' into evermore pervasive forms of social domination, political surveillance and debilitating governmentality" (qtd. in Halliwell and Mousley 166). In fact, Foucault does discuss "technologies of the self" which help the individual actively to become a subject. Finkielkraut believes that antihumanism of this kind is still humanist because it unsettles "the self-confident subject to the very core of his being, to make man anxious in order to make him more human" (37). The primacy accorded to language in this

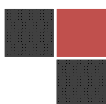


second mode of challenging the human also brought to the fore the role of rhetorical strategies in ‘constructing’ man. The more one engages with them, the more one will be able to devise and execute counter-strategies to amend the unacceptable constructions.

Theorists such as Foucault, and there are many of them, illustrate the inevitable but delightful paradox of the antihumanist humanist who destabilizes entrenched notions of the human in the service of the human. This is not solely a feature of poststructuralism but is much older. As Althusser himself points out, “Marx broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man” (“Marxism and Humanism”), but his objectives – espousal of genuine human needs – in seeing man as the effect of historical forces were humanist. If these thinkers focus on impersonal forces and problematize the notion of the subject, it is with an aim to penetrate their true nature so as to retrieve a modicum of agency and subjectivity for human subjects who have lost these possibilities, or are unaware of the loss. Further, what is actually challenged is not the validity of ‘the human’ or the ideals associated with it, but the micro-concepts and micro-values which constitute, stand in for, or get camouflaged under dubious ideological alliances surrounding the ambiguous macro-concept of the human. The bottomline here is that we have to distinguish between the human as a concept and the human as a cause lest we fail to perceive the possibility of a conceptual antihumanism which paradoxically serves the humanist cause. It is in this sense that Kate Soper declares that most antihumanisms “secrete a humanist rhetoric” (182). From this nuanced perspective, conversely, the apparently ‘truer’ humanism of the past was antihumanist in its workings. So is the modern mass-marketing utopia of global capitalism, wherein the consuming man and woman are king and queen, and everything that they do for gratification, including fetishization of commodities, can be considered, often erroneously, a fulfilling expression of the human. Human freedom is a strategic concept in capitalism, and human fulfilment, the all-in-all of advertising. Personal self-assertion, encouraged by contemporary capitalism, is a guise for marketing commodities in idiosyncratically appealing ways. Further, in the homogenizing culture of technological capitalism people become clones of one another, inadvertently surrendering their individuality and everything related that is at stake. As poststructuralist thinkers Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze demonstrate in their work, an uncritical perspective in situations such as these can yield only delusions of human autonomy and empowerment.

### **Transgressing Boundaries: Science, Technology, and the Redefining of the Human**

In comparison with the two previously discussed modes of contesting received humanisms, which have been the staple of critical theory, the discussion in this section deals with developments of a different order. What one finds here is, by and large, a case of empirical developments (and/or recognitions) paving the way for conceptual rethinking, not to mention the novelty value of the whole techno-scientific enterprise – technological possibilities questioning the limits of the human – that enchantingly borders on the fantastic. Small wonder such techno-scientific developments have become the favourite raw material for fictional world creation in a free ontological fashion. Conversely, several such techno-scientific developments – artificial intelligence and robotics, submarines and space as well as moon travel, aviation, satellite television, and nuclear weapons – were anticipated by fiction writers (e.g., Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Isaac Asimov), thus demonstrating the possibility of pushing off boundaries of imagination and conceptualization.



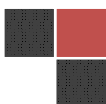
In the light of scientific discoveries of the last half-a-century or so, a plea is also afoot for expansion of the category of the human to include those species which are closer to man on the evolutionary spectrum. Of course, with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, man, once the crowning glory of Judeo-Christian creation narrative, had lost his distinctness from other species. Complex and more adaptive (not higher) forms of life develop from simpler (not lower) ones when natural selection operates on random variations in organisms for evolutionary purposes. Ever since, the once impermeable boundaries between the human and the non-human have become increasingly permeable. As Felipe Fernández-Armesto, in his fascinatingly titled book *So You Think You're Human*, observes,

as we look back over the fossil record, we see features once thought definingly human – such as bipedalism, big brains, use of tools, omnivorous diet – shared among various species, including some from outside our line of descent. The intensity over the current scholarly debate over the Neanderthals ... reveals the depths of insecurity some humans feel at the discovery that other species can be like us, with similar minds, emotions, and ethical capacities. (4)<sup>iv</sup>

This is not to deny that there are inalienably human features, such as consciousness of death,<sup>v</sup> use of complex symbolic systems, and abstract reasoning. If at all science has discovered shared features of an inner life with other species, do we need to feel insecure about such discoveries? Indeed, this will undermine speciesism, which assumes human superiority over non-human life species (and, theoretically, warrants differential consideration of any two or more species on the sole basis of species membership), leading to their unethical treatment, including exploitation. Reconsideration of species boundaries certainly has a whole lot of ethical ramifications. The larger point, however, is that when boundaries are transgressed, inherited contrastive conceptualizations lose their efficacy, no matter how accustomed we are to these contrasts.

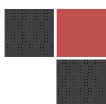
Can we go on expanding the definition of the human to include animal species, or delimiting the expanding spectrum to exclude cyborgs, or vice versa? There is always something unstable about frames and boundaries, an instability which has only been exacerbated by recent technological developments. The current posthumanist/transhumanist debate furnishes us both a precedent and a model to redefine the human in relation to the non-human (remember that the nonhuman is a capacious category). For conceptual clarity, let us define the terms involved here – posthuman and transhuman – at least tentatively. Neil Badmington uses the term “posthuman” to identify a historically distinct period coinciding with the rise of machines. Halliwell and Mousley define the “transhuman” as denoting “those who are actively preparing themselves for a posthuman nature (by means of simple exercises or calorie restriction, taking food supplements, using mnemonics to improve brain power, investing in artificial intelligence or cryonics) suggesting that the transhuman is always in service of the posthuman” (191).

Let us take the example of the cyborg. A cyborg (short term for cybernetic organism coined by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline), is a hybrid of body and machine, combines organic and mechanical elements, and changes the biological parameters of what it is to be human. Craig Klugman identifies two myths surrounding the cyborg: “the ‘replacement’ myth in which damaged body parts are exchanged to restore human capacities and return individuals ‘to something approaching former functioning’; and the ‘enhancement’ myth in which the ‘cybernetic implant allows an individual to do things



that were not possible before” (44). If biotechnology and bioinformatics can augment organic life in either of the two aforementioned ways, the cyborg may be seen as serving the humanist cause. You have means by which either you can get compensated for losses you ‘naturally’ incurred, or you can get your capacities upgraded, that too in unprecedented, unthought-of ways. But the fall out, at least from a technosceptic point of view, is that the label human (in a conventional sense) may no longer be applicable (by way of an analogy, one may recall Thomas Hobbes’s famous “The Ship of Theseus” thought experiment, also called the Theseus paradox, which he developed drawing upon Greek mythology and a Roman Plutarch). But unlike technosceptics, Donna Haraway finds in the liminal status of the cyborg “a conceptual tool for rethinking the relationship between humanism and technology,” and welcomes its ontological, ethical, and gender problematic. She even envisions “the possibility of individuals acting more responsibly in the careful reassembly of ... categories [human/machine, man/woman, nature/technology]” (qtd. in Halliwell and Mousley 174). She also flexibly invents new creative roles out of old static binaries. As of now, all these creative and desirable social and ethical consequences remain in the realm of theoretical possibilities.

In *Redesigning Humans*, Gregory Stock, former biotechnology advisor to President Bill Clinton, argues from a neo-Darwinian perspective for a posthuman future driven by biotechnology: “we are on the cusp of profound biological changes, poised to transcend our current form and character on a journey to destinations of new imagination” (1). Obviously, this will have profound implications in the columns of costs (inequalities between those who can and cannot afford) and benefits (removal of negative traits), but as far as the conceptual evolution of the human is concerned, the question is whether to hold on to the dubious metaphysics of man, which leads to the view that the posthuman is “potentially tragic laying waste of the human” (Halliwell and Mousley 191), or abandon or transform it in the larger human cause of an improved being though it may come via a quirky free play. Given the future possibilities to intervene in the natural circle of genetic transference through embryo selection, in vitro fertilization, cloning, and human self-design, Stock finds it strange to maintain that the current stage of human development is the last – perhaps a reason to believe that the human is realized only futuristically. In this sense, the posthuman is a continuation of the human story taken to new levels. We may even take posthumanism and transhumanism as a mere phase in the ongoing revolt of conceptual possibility against historical delimitations and received hegemonies (What Sartre – recall his aphorism “existence precedes essence” – achieves with an existential *tabula rasa*<sup>vi</sup> transhumanism does with technology!). Similar revolts can be expected in the future too. We may also celebrate them as humanity’s propulsion towards its as-of-know perceived maximal possibilities (hyperhumanist realizations), but only a stage in its infinite becoming. If so, we can make a distinction between the matrix of human possibilities and its present realization. It would be erroneous to consider either as identical with any essentialist meaning of man.





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**Notes:**

<sup>i</sup>For a critical survey of Western humanism, see Jibu Mathew George, “The Discourse on the Human in Philosophical Retrospect,” *Humanities Circle* 3.2 (2015): 37–59. The article presents a critical history of humanism as a prelude to delineating concerns (e.g., climate change, destruction of biodiversity) in the Anthropocene, the geological epoch when human activities have altered atmospheric, hydrologic, biospheric and other earth system processes in an unprecedented manner.

<sup>ii</sup>Sartre endorses the counter-hegemonic, liberative violence advocated by Fanon as “positive humanism” (*Communists and Peace* 55). Travesties beget travesties!

<sup>iii</sup>Nihilism, despite its associations with extreme pessimism and radical scepticism, by contesting the innateness of values to the world, places upon human subjects the responsibility of creating values – as well as meanings – and hence needs to be seen as a source of positive empowerment.

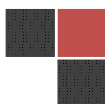
<sup>iv</sup>Fernández-Armesto adds that “[a]rguments over the human status of Neanderthals have been conducted in terms startlingly reminiscent of nineteenth-century controversies about blacks” (4) – a theme that is tied to the arguments of our first challenge.

<sup>v</sup>As Arthur Schopenhauer points out, “The animal learns to know death only when he dies, but man consciously draws every hour nearer his death; and at times this makes life a precarious business, even to the man who has not already recognized this character of constant annihilation in the whole of life itself. Mainly on this account, man has philosophies and religions ...” (37). Many may not endorse Schopenhauer’s claim about animals with regard to death, which they think is false. I am grateful to Prof. K. A. Jayaseelan and Prof. R. Amritavalli for pertinent insights on this topic.

<sup>vi</sup>As I clarify elsewhere,

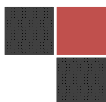
Sartre places a potent vacancy at the centre of the human subject – the bare being. In an absurd, inchoate world devoid of metaphysical moorings, man [has] no pre-given/God-given essence. ... the atheistic eighteenth-century encyclopaedists, and even an agnostic Freud, continued to believe in some essence – in the form of what they all considered a more or less fixed ‘human nature.’ But for Sartre an individual, once stripped off his social masks, cannot experience individuality in advance of existence. He is free to and responsible for creating his essence through choice and action. The very act of choosing, the decision to act, is a momentous creative move through which one defines oneself, earns one’s essence, and owns [up] one’s values. What is significant for us here is the fact that the existentialist conception (rather, non-conception) of human, devoid of metaphysical essence, opens up new avenues for re-conceptualizations. Sartre’s existentialism empties the category of the human of any solid content. (George 46)

It is in this sense that I have added the appellation “existential” to the phrase *tabula rasa*, the empiricist theory which holds, as opposed to innatism, that human minds do not have any built-in content, traceable to Aristotle’s *De Anima* but associated in its modern version with John Locke.



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