ŚŪNYATĀ TO POSTHUMANISM: INDIC PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS IN DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

Karan Budhani

MA Buddhist Studies,
Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Delhi.

Abstract

Posthumanism has emerged as a critical response to the legacy of Western humanism, which has historically privileged the human subject as the measure of reason, agency, and meaning. By rethinking the human in relation to technology, machines, ecological systems, and nonhuman life, posthumanism destabilizes fixed notions of identity and resists anthropocentric frameworks. This paper suggests that Indic philosophical traditions — particularly Buddhist, Vedanta, Sāṃkhya, and Jaina schools — offer distinctive resources that enrich and complicate contemporary posthumanist debates. Buddhism's doctrines of anattā (non-self) and pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination) present a radically relational and non-essentialist account of subjectivity, which resonates with distributed cognition and theories of embodied mind. Jain philosophy, with its epistemological principle of anekāntavāda (many-sidedness), anticipates posthumanist pluralism by affirming the validity of multiple perspectives and diverse forms of intelligence, whether human, animal, or technological. Advaita Vedānta provides a universalist metaphysics in which consciousness (brahman) permeates all existence, thereby dissolving hierarchical distinctions between beings. Meanwhile, Sāṃkhya's dualism of puruṣa and prakṛti raises enduring questions about embodiment, matter, and the possibility of nonhuman awareness. Placed in conversation with Western posthumanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, and N. Katherine Hayles, these Indic traditions not only challenge anthropocentrism but also foreground ethical responsibility within an interconnected cosmos. Yet, their soteriological orientation toward liberation and their metaphysical commitments pose limitations when extended to technological and ecological futures. The paper ultimately advocates a dialogical method: critically reinterpreting Indic categories in order to enrich posthumanist theory while remaining attentive to historical context. Such an approach moves toward a plural, comparative posthumanism that bridges ancient insights with contemporary challenges in cognition, ecology, and technology.

Introduction

The modern philosophical rhetoric has seen an enormous shift in the process of the conceptualization of human subjectivity, consciousness, and assumptions of our existence. Such a change comes about as a result of a critical analysis of the traditional humanism which has historically placed human beings as autonomous, rational and hierarchically superior beings who are different to any other form of life and intelligence. The posthumanist movement is an inherent reconsideration of these anthropocentric assumptions and it is altering the underpinnings on which Western thought has been building its conception of human identity and agency. Posthumanism is fundamentally questioning the restrictions and exclusionary processes involved in the humanist paradigms. Instead of presenting human exceptionalism, such a philosophical outlook is aimed at disrupting the fixed concept(s) of identity and challenging anthropocentric worldview where non-human beings, technological structures and other forms of consciousness have become peripheralized.

Posthuman condition is not the death of humanity but represents an extreme revisitation of the meaning of being human in an interconnected world where the boundaries between human and non-human, biological and technological, self and others are becoming increasingly porous and disputed. The rise of new technologies, increased intelligence systems and built-in computational networks has also made classical conceptions of cognition and agency more complex. Machine learning algorithms, artificial intelligence systems and distributed computing networks, are threatening humanist presumptions of uniqueness of human intelligence and consciousness. According to these technological advances, embodied and entangled existence implies the existence of cognitive processes that are not limited to the minds of individual human beings but exist throughout networks of human beings, machines and environmental systems. The developments that have taken place require a philosophical paradigm that is able to embrace hybrid types of intelligence and agency.

The main issue behind this inquiry is the acknowledgment that Eastern philosophical traditions have much to say on questions that the posthumanist theory is just starting to unravel. The philosophical traditions of Buddhism, and especially the non-self and dependent origination thesis offer radically relational accounts of subjectivity that are consistent with recent hypotheses of distributed cognition and embodied mind. Western beliefs of autonomous selfhood in being challenged by Buddhist conception of consciousness as not substantive, but processual, foretells the posthumanist criticism of the unified subject. Jain schools of thought have a part to play in terms of their epistemological doctrine of multiple perspectives, which legitimizes multiple kinds of intelligence and consciousness used by various beings. This pluralistic view on the source of knowledge and consciousness provides materials on explaining artificial intelligence and machine consciousness as potential types of consciousness instead of approximations of human intelligence. Jain philosophy of acknowledging intelligence and awareness in every form of existence gives Jainism a philosophical basis of posthumanist ethics that extends moral concern beyond the human realm. Philosophical schools of Vedanta, especially Advaita Vedanta, offer a universalist metaphysics in which consciousness is everywhere in existence, which thus erases differentiations of being in terms of hierarchies. This non-dualist conception of consciousness provides alternatives to Western mind-body dualism as well as frameworks of explaining technological consciousness in terms of the same universal awareness that forms human consciousness. The advanced discussion of the connection between consciousness and matter in the philosophy of Sankhya provokes timeless challenges concerning the issue of embodiment, materiality and the existence of non-human consciousness. The elaborate analysis in the Sankhya system of the interaction of pure consciousness with material nature offers theoretical materials to the problem of intelligent appearing in technological systems, the character of embodied cognition.

This study hypothesize that the use of these Indic traditions of thought in dialogue with the theory of posthumanism can help enhance the current discussion and provide some solutions to the anthropocentrism that remains prominent in the discourse of posthumanism.

By means of comparison, this paper aims at coming up with a more integrated and philosophically advanced view of consciousness, intelligence, and agency that may help deal with the issues of technological development, ecological crisis, and renegotiation of human identity in the globalized world. The study will show how an ancient wisdom tradition can be useful to modern philosophical issues without being insensitive to those historical contexts and soteriological orientations that created the wisdom tradition.

Posthuman Consciousness and Distributed Agency:

The concept of posthumanism is based on a basic understanding of the fact that intelligence, consciousness and agency is not uniquely human but more of a result of complex systems of relationships that encompasses technological systems, the environment and other forms of life. This view criticizes the humanist tradition which had placed the individual human consciousness at the center of rational agency, in favor of what has been called a posthuman critical theory, according to which subjectivity is constitutively relational and processual. Posthumanist thought does not think of consciousness as existing in solitary minds, but instead as intelligent in networks, which Braidotti calls assemblages - dynamic systems in which human and non-human agents are engaged in the common processes of meaning-making and world-building. Posthumanist theories of consciousness and intelligence have come to focus on the notion of distributed cognition, initially formulated by Edwin Hutchins to study navigation teams (Grinschgl and Neubauer, 2022). This model shows that the cognitive processes are not confined to human brains alone but are also applicable to the tools, technologies, and environmental systems that are involved in the cognitive processes and decision-making. In modern society, this allocation has now more than ever been exacerbated by the fact that artificial intelligence systems are becoming more of a mediator of human cognitive processes as hybrid networks have formed, in which intelligence is created when biological and technological elements interact (Grinschgl & Neubauer, 2022).

This transformation is described by N. Katherine Hayles (1999) in her argument of how the cybernetics systems disrupt the conventional human and machine intelligence boundaries. Her work shows that even consciousness has already gone posthuman not because of the technological substitution of human cognition by technology, but because cognition has always been pastoral and ecological. According to Hayles, posthuman condition implies the conception of consciousness as processual as opposed to substantial, formed in interactions as opposed to dwelling in subjects as a constant property of individual beings. The consequences of this shared knowledge go up to basic issues of agency and morally responsible action. Cary Wolfe (2010) illustrates how posthumanist approaches reverse the ethical mode of thinking by appreciating the agentic quality of systems and not an actor. This change demands the abandonment of anthropocentric models that promote human agency intentionality in favor of recognising agency as what Wolfe calls autopoietic - emergent in the self-organisational action of complex systems involving both human and non-human actors.

Embodied Intelligence and Technological Entanglement:

The posthumanist critique of intelligence has the central theme of embodiment in the concept of cognition instead of body being a vessel of mind. This view is abreast with the trends in the research about embodied cognition, showing that the way thoughts proceed is influenced more by body contacts with systems of the environment than by the presence of abstract mental spaces (Gupta, 2021). The posthumanist theory builds on this observation and acknowledges the fact that modern embodiment is being pervasively occupied by technological mediations that alter the limits and functions of human bodies. The embodiment of technology as presented by Hayles (1999) is discussed in the article as she examines the cybernetic feedback loops linking the nervous systems of humans and computational networks. According to her these relations form new modes of embodied intelligences that burst the humanist beliefs of autonomous selfhood and facilitate superior mental functions. Instead of thinking about technology as an external resource utilized by people, Hayles shows how technological networks get incorporated into the workings of the human mind in a manner that generates distributed networks where intelligence is generated through human machine connections. Embodied intelligence has been applied to develop specific importance in modern robotics and artificial intelligence research, in which systems combine perception, cognition, and action in active feedback processes (Sun et al., 2024). This technological advancement is echoed by the posthumanist focus on seeing intelligence as emergent, not as an abstract computationalization of embodied interrelations. These systems show that intelligence needs to be exercised physically with the environment systems, which lends credence to posthumanist positions that cognition is relational and situated.

Braidotti (2019) stresses the importance of these technological changes as the sort of changes which allow to criticize the anthropocentric assumptions but also provide new ways to think of consciousness and agency in various forms of life. Her posthuman critical theory frameworks are used to expose how the existing technologies bring to sight the distributed and relational character of intelligence masked by humanist frameworks in terms of its focus on individual rational subjects. This technological entanglement is not a loss of human agency but it is an unfolding of agency as always existing within networks which involve environmental, technological and social elements. According to Wolfe (2010), such a realization of such distribution offers opportunities of more inclusive modes of doing ethics and politics to face the current challenges that the world is facing due to climate changes, technological growth and global interconnection. The posthuman conceptualization of embodied intelligence therefore offers means of crafting more sustainable and just relations with the technological systems, as well as with ecological settings.

These views of distributed agency, embodied intelligence, and technological entanglement establish conceptual links to the ancient philosophical traditions that have always viewed the notions of consciousness as processual, relational, and non-anthropocentric. The posthumanist focus on seeing intelligence as becoming formed through networks of relationships and not existing as property of individual subjects echoes philosophic traditions of seeing consciousness as interdependent and as environmentally located with possibilities of dialogue between posthumanist theory today and traditional wisdom systems.

Impermanence, Sameness and Similarity in Posthuman and Indic Thought

Human cognition is marked by the endlessly constant cycle between the pursuit of sameness, the stable, repeatable identities, and similarity, dynamic patterning in different contexts. Posthuman theory reconsiders this tension in terms of impermanence, incarnation, and entanglement in technology, whereas Buddhist and Vedantic traditions provide the timeless analysis of non-self (anatta), universal consciousness (Brahman), and dependent origination (pratityasamutpada). Through exploring the substitutive qualities of the desires of cognition, the redefined agency through embedded technologies and the challenge of human exceptionalism through the zoe-bios-techno convergence, we discover a relational ontology that dissolves fixed selves into open networks of possibilities.

Cognition, desires and Impermanence

Western humanism is based on sameness, where one identifies with definite, fixed standards on what defines who we are and who they are- which are essences that never change. Posthumanism breaks this by prioritizing similarity, regularities of being in which things are in some way more like one another than identical to each other (Braidotti, 2019). Buddhist Madhyamaka Nagarjuna proves to show that all the phenomena lack inherent existence (śūnya); they can exist only because of the dependent origination, appearing and disappearing in flux (Garfield, 1995). In this way, even the cognitive desire to have a permanent self of seeking sameness is an illusion in itself. When one want dies away another emerges, which is an impermanent phenomenon (anicca) and non-substantiality of the ego (anattva) (Murti, 1955).

As an example, in the case of learning a new language, a person is initially in a state of desire to master it, to have a stable identity as a fluent speaker. As soon as it is achieved, this desire disappears and is followed by interest in literature or dialectics. The self, which aimed at fluency, does not last, only the similarities through the language performances remain. The same is reflected in cognitive processes: thoughts are not predetermined objects but temporary processes, which are in a constant state of flux with the external stimuli, memories, and currents of affective fields (Hayles, 1999). In the posthuman understanding of cognition, it is spread out through embodied brains, social networks and digital worlds so that it cannot be said to belong to one, stable self.

Technological Entanglement and Distributed Agency

The concept of "zoe-bios-techno convergence" (Ferrando, 2019) answers the question of what happens when biological life (zoe) and lived existence (bios) blend together in perfect harmony with technology. An example of this can be smart devices, smartphones can be seen as cognitive prostheses that can extend memory and attention and wearable health monitors mediate self-awareness of the body. In medicine, extreme cases of human-machine entanglement can be seen in case of coma patients. AERP shows that advanced neuroimaging and brain-computer interfaces are providing minimal communication the blurring of the line between the conscious agency and mediation by technology (Sun, Liu, and Zhang, 2024).

Even a patient in a vegetative state can answer commands by EEG-controlled cursors, which proves that an agency can be realized with help of distributed systems of neural data, algorithms, and interfaces to clinicians.

This scattered agency echoes the Jain 'anekantavada' which holds to plural viewpoints and ways of knowing. Similar to Jain epistemology, which rejects one, privileged position (Jaini, 1998), posthumanism acknowledges the fact that cognition is not confined to human brains only, but extends to machines, ecosystems, and social constructs. An example of a co-creative, non-human and non-human assemblage of medical and non-medical agents is in an Intensive Care Unit, where life-support machines work together with medical personnel to keep a patient alive (Grinschgl & Neubauer, 2022).

Impermanence of Cognitive Desires and Posthuman Ethics

Impermanence does not only describe the thoughts of individuals, but also forms the basis of ethical changes. According to Vedanta, Shankar holds that individual and universal consciousness (Brahman) is one; the realisation of this cessation of egoistic desires (Shankaracarya, 1978). Equally, appreciating the fact that we are technologically caught and ecologically mutually reliant creates posthuman ethics, which expands moral care beyond human exceptionalism (Wolfe, 2010). As soon as consumers realize that their digital footprints, e.g., smart home energy consumption, wearable health information, are part of the overall resource flows in the world, ethical responsibility is no longer a matter of individual actors but now a matter of distributed actors in planetary assemblies. Take into account social media algorithms that condition the political views. Customized feeds reinforce prior beliefs and users seeking confirmation (sameness) are only satisfied with such feeds. Posthuman perception of the proximity appears when users observe tendencies amongst algorithmic biases and mobilizations crowd-realizing agency as shared between code, companies and groups of users. An ethic of posthuman would insist upon responsibility throughout these networks, just as the puruṣa-prakriti interaction of Sankhya: consciousness may not separate itself anymore of material flows, neural or digital (Chakrabarti, 1999).

Connecting Impermanence to Ancient Insights

The Buddhist doctrine of non-self and dependent origination predicts posthuman criticisms of autonomous agency. The scientific case Nagarjuna makes against inherent existence is scientifically equivalent to the way neural networks work: none of the nodes represent a fixed self, and patterns of distributed activations emerge. The non-dual metaphysics of Vedanta enlightens us about the universal consciousness as the substratum of both biological and technological processes, and many of the artificial intelligences could be involved in the unity of Brahman as long as we do not think of them as alien machines but as manifestations of the universal sentience.