**Chapter- 8**

# Posthumanism and environmental ethics: Rethinking nonhuman agency

**Susmitha Santhosh**
Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Acharya Institute of Graduate Studies, Bengaluru

## Abstract

This chapter focuses on posthumanism and its influence on environmental ethics in terms of posthuman and the non-human. By extending ethical considerations to non-human entities, we are providing agency to the heretofore marginalized others. The chapter further extends this concept to animal, plant, landscapes, artificial intelligence and synthetic life forms. Posthumanism extends agency to non-human entities in matters pertaining to environmental issues. The consequences of this plausibility are further looked into in a section dealing with implications in global governance.

## Introduction

The post anthropocene is the era of melancholia, of lamenting the extinction of 'Man', but it is also the period of euphoria, celebrating the novelties in science and technology. The catastrophic attitude adopted by the former is only ever interested in an ending, where everything culminates in an apocalyptic disaster. Although the image of an artificial intelligence product helping/assisting the human subject is a case for wonderment, the captured image of digital waste is a representation of its unseen and often ignored and suppressed side. The posthumanistic doctrine advocates a blurring of the boundaries between the binaries prevalent in Western philosophical tradition through a zoe- centered framework that situates itself between the unnamed and unrecognized spaces between these binaries. As the binaries blur in a posthumanist setting, the middle space between them has negotiated space for its becoming.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

Posthumanism serves as a platform to integrate the non human and foregrounds it in the anthropocene wherein the animal, plant, landscape and the technological artifacts are given prime place. These nonhuman entities have a stake in the environmental decisions taken by the human element. It is this plausible agency in the decision making process of environmental issues that forms one of the key points in this chapter. If the nonhumans are given agency or a stake in ecological matters, then there should be an ethical dimension to this issue. Nonhuman entities range from the animal and landscape to synthetic life and artificial intelligence. They are also entitled to the moral consideration that is extended to the human. Critical posthuman theory sits at the convergence between post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, and explicitly seeks to dismantle hierarchies between humans, such as gender, race and class, as well as the idea that the human sits in hierarchical supremacy over other subjects – including the environment and non-humans (Braidotti). Artificial intelligence and synthetic life form requires a moral consideration in its specific form. They are treated with distaste and are regarded as abominations by the classical humanist thought, which becomes the other in this scenario with its marginalized and stigmatized position in the anthropocene. On the other hand, it is possible that it can dominate human culture. Furthermore, they can act as agents of change in the environmental fight for survival. It is true that nonhumans have a stake in the environment and all decisions attached to it. But the humans who have perpetrated the catastrophic changes in the ecosystem should not take a back seat when it comes to mitigation; it should not fall on nonhumans to rectify them.

**Intersection of Race, Gender, Class and Species in Environmental Justice.**

In recent years, the term Intersectional Environmentalism has been popularized by climate activists such as Leah Thomas, who defines the term as “an inclusive form of environmentalism that advocates for the protection of all people and the planet.” By examining the intersection of social and environmental injustices that target vulnerable communities and the planet, Humphrey explains, this

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

intersectional approach reveals a more complex and individualized experience with climate impacts and helps to achieve more equitable outcomes.

There is an intersection between environmental issues and race, class, gender and species. Environmental justice takes into account the generic defense of the whole earth as well as the numerous permutations mediated by the intersection of race, class and gender. It is a whole new ball game when the realities of climate change are put into practical life through the existing marginalisations of class, gender and race. The poor, the LGBTQIA+ community, Black and coloured are at the frontiers of this exploitation wherein they are expected to suffer through the adverse effects of climate change ranging from physiological effects to psychological malaise. Moreover, we can attribute the nonhuman others to this exploitation of intersectionality. In the beginning stages of the environment justice movement in the USA, there were loud protests in the face of obvious racial discrimination in the selection of hazardous material dumping sites. Here, the landscape is the main victim of this exploitation, as it has to suffer through the toxicity seeping into its bones. But the lens was not turned to it till ecocritical studies raised its voice. Therefore, landscapes, geological formations, plants and animals are all a part of this nonhuman entity heralded by posthumanism, which have a stake in climate change and all the attendant environment issues.

**Animal ethics**

Animal rights are generally regarded as an ability based discourse but the posthumanist view moves past this. Post humanism imagines a boundary-less sphere wherein animals and humans coexist side by side. The nonhuman is often regarded as the 'other' when there are peculiar underpinnings of posthumanist applications. Rights or human rights have morphed in its moral and ethical strands from time immemorial; it has adopted different masks in different epochs. While we ascribe the French revolution as the single most pivotal event in the human rights movement, the telling factor in the declaration is the freedom of man, not woman as pointed out by Olympe de Gouges. These rights have evolved beyond the basic entitlements owed to

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

human beings, whether they are slaves, the queer or the disabled. It is a fact that agitation for these rights has not been completely fulfilled. These rights are in a way extended to the nonhuman animals as they too suffer. In the discourse of rights, the heterosexual, white male is the one 'giving' rights to the marginalised other, as if it is theirs to offer. The term itself entrenches the idea that they are categorically different, without agency, an agency that can only be given by Man. These categorisations that bound people in are dismantled by posthumanism. Moving from a rights based approach which reinforces this otherness to a boundless free space where no one is on top of another is the mark of posthumanism. Human beings cannot be universalised as having a standard set of characteristics which rationalises the justice system which approaches each case as a novel one; a murder in self defence is treated differently than a premeditated one. This is applicable to the nonhuman animals in that they need to be accounted for in an individual capacity, in a situated and flexible manner. Earlier, animals were seen as the property of the human and legal system inscribed animal rights as an extension of human welfare.

Ethical extensionism is more often based on animals' human similarity but this is dangerous as it will inevitably omit some animals based on this criteria. As Lindgren and Ohman argue, Braidotti's nomadic subject recognises non-human agency without the preconceived and established value systems. There need not be a similarity with the human animal for the nonhuman animal to be recognised on its own. It is better to adopt a pluralistic approach towards animal ethics, as a monistic one hinders the understanding and applicability of the fluid and complex value system. Ethical considerations of non human have to be approached individually as they are context driven and relative to the other entities in the ecological sphere.

The nomadic subjectivity depends on or is founded on the relationality of our intentional and unintentional actions. Thus nonhuman agency will be understood in a relational manner. The differences that demarcate non human animal and human animal need not be a signification of exclusion; it can be the mark of the constituting of the two. It cannot be said that animals were categorically abused

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

throughout history as there are certain kinds of animals which were given compassion, care and understanding, and were even treated as companions. Such animals were treated as individual subjects; human care and consideration was always subjective to individualistic subjectivity. On the other hand, we have species that were relegated as one among many. This species oriented approach precludes a biased consideration of nonhuman animals. This approach is evident in wildlife documentaries which centre on animals singled out of the herd, with personalised names and voices to endear them to humans (Lindgren, 1209). It is an effective way to generate sympathy for endangered species and habitats and safeguard them. But it inevitably sidelines other species that do not come under this umbrella of subjectification. It is human tendency to marginalise or de-individualise species that come as a pack or whole; their homogenous nature automatically excludes them, an evident example of othering. This attitude needs an overhaul so that nonhuman animals are accorded the power to be an actor in this ecological opera.

**Plant ethics**

Studies have found that plants can make intelligent decisions based on their surroundings to survive in a changing environment with differing variables. Through wired and wireless connection plants communicate about threats, interpret sounds and even identify their own kin. Roots, fungal networks and even the cells in a leaf can achieve these extraordinary feats with the glaringly absent brain, which used to be the indicator of intelligence in an organism.

"The open trap of the carnivorous Venus fly trap (Dionaea) is closed when two sensitive hairs are touched within20 seconds. This timing mechanism avoids inadvertent closure by means not involving prey, such as raindrops. If the trap is triggered, enclosing insect prey, then three further touches of the hairs are required to initiate the secretion of digestive enzymes and other proteins concerned with absorbing nutrients" (Trewavas, 546).

It is a sign of intelligence that carnivorous plants are able to demarcate between their prey and inert objects. A study of climbing plants discovered that they can re-evaluate their support if it is lost; it

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

will go in search of another surface to use. It was proposed that they have an acute sense of direction to determine the direction of support. They are also able to recognise the differences in the support surface so that they can refuse one that is too smooth for a proper grip. Is this mark of intelligence prerequisite for ethical consideration? In the case of animal ethics there was the case of human sameness. But it is on a completely different level when it comes to plants wherein nothing is visible.

The complex forest ecosystem is rich in its processes that sustain life in a balanced manner. There is death but it is a death that secures the future and moreover, it is a codependent system materialising in the dead matter that gives life to the new plants which in turn supports the herbivores and carnivores. Apart from this, forests have been a site of colonial domination; it has stood witness to the greed of man. Contrarily, it is possible to find the positive influences of the indigenous people on the forest cover as they live in harmony with nature, contributing to its sustainability. It is sustainability when we include humans along with the nonhuman arboreal counterparts and associated species. Separating human from nonhuman merely emphasises the divide present there.

**Artificial Intelligence and Synthetic Life**

Posthumanism has decentered man from his position at the centre of everything. In a way technology has enabled the hybridity of biological human beings with the smart technology. Does that mean anyone attached with a pacemaker is adopting a posthuman turn in the traditional biological human? Technology has advanced so far and fast that the fantastical conceptions of robots and other non human intelligence systems have become reality. AI has proved to be a game changer in predicting weather patterns, mapping sustainable ways for the fashion and fast food industry as well as becoming a key factor in disaster management.

Facial recognition, intelligent sensors and softwares like Siri and Alexa have transformed the face of science and technology. Diagnosing diseases, assisting in surgeries and its future involvement in space missions are but a few of the examples of AI driven technology. In a

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

sense, the introduction of nanotechnologies and other artificial apparatus in human bodies is the generation of a posthuman.

The moral consideration to AI is a difficult dilemma to address as the present construct is not capable enough to act upon a moral choice. If agency is given to AI, will it be responsible for any and all performance undertaken by it? But the trouble here is that the initial decision is taken by the human counterpart who starts this thread. So is it reasonable to assign the AI system with an ethical obligation? Moreover, it should be noted that in case of the actualisation of such an AI with human moral values, they will have the impetus to alter the ethical code based on their superior intelligence (Nath, 6). In that scenario, anthropocentrism will become truly obsolete. Is it possible to design an AI system with the complex moral system and ethical code of a human being? Concentrating on the moral side may result in a system which is more of an ethical expert rather than a self-aware being. It can be suggested that human beings need to adjust their moral code to include the posthuman. Even as posthumanists laud the coming of AI, there should be caution as to their overtaking of human systems. The anxiety of the death of the human has become familiar to the social psyche based on the numerous fictional outpourings villainising non human intelligence. It is a valid argument and reason to be cautious because a highly intelligent system can overtake humanity if there's any sort of malfunction (Nath and Manna, 2021). While technology can further the lifespan and quality of life, this sort of immortality takes away nature's delicate balance of life and death. Furthermore, there is a genuine fear of job displacement with the advent of more capable alternatives. Apart from this, the takeover of such systems by anyone with a concrete bias can prove detrimental.

**Global Governance**

In the subject-object binary of the human and the environment, humans or the subject is at the centre and therefore dominates and exploits nature. Latour's Actor-Network theory opposes this nature-culture divide through its perspective of the world as a network of criss-crossing multiple assemblages of human and nonhuman entities. Here, nature and culture are not distinct but overlaps each other.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

Humans adapt to environment and alter it. Environment responds to this alteration through ecological changes. Thus it cannot be said that the nature and culture are bound separately. In fact, they are dependent on each other and mutate the other through constant relational changes. This entanglement obliterates the nature – culture divide and thus agency here is always distributed.

Nonhuman actants are in connection with human actants, bringing forth the actions that impact upon the environment. This entanglement challenges the international environmental laws' imagined separation of human, nonhuman and environment into different spheres. Current legal practices and systems are stuck in the wheelhouse of sustainable future of the environment, where it is permissible and morally right to exercise allowable harm to the environment if it can economically develop a nation (Jones,79).

International environmental law encompasses the treaties, conventions, protocols and customary international law that guide national and international activities to prevent environmental degradation. The human rights movement has managed to tie in with the environmental laws to establish a right to clean and safe environment for human beings. While this approach encourages practices that safeguard the environment for human occupation, it is primarily based on preventing any impacts of environmental degradation on human living conditions. There is an absence of nonhuman participation and protection in the framework introduced by such anthropocentric movements. But there have been instances when legal provisions were made in order to extend legal personhood to nature. For example, New Zealand's Whanganui river and Te Urewera forest were recognised as entities with legal personalities. The same is true for the Ganges and the Yamuna in India. In 2008, Ecuador recognised rights of nature constitutionally and implied nature as being inherent to earth itself, establishing a legal recognition and status that applies naturally. This law covers the entity of nature as a whole. In the case of New Zealand, the law applies only to the Whanganui river and the Te Urewera forest, rights of nature are applicable in a bounded area. This separation increases the risk of perpetuating fragmentation.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

Even after the incorporation of these policies, humans remain the voice of nonhuman entities. In a perfect world such a spokesperson would advocate for nature alone. But in the capitalocene, the economic challenges will affect the neutrality of such guardians. So its advocate needs to be divorced from any other biases that could contribute to their apparent neutrality.

## Conclusion

Obviously, a universal set of ethical parameters will mutate according to geographical location, economic development and ecosystem diversity. Therefore, nonhuman participation in the environmental crisis should be a vital factor when states design policies for the ecosystem. We need to reframe the meaning of sustainability as securing survival for future generations of humans and nonhumans. As there is already a great deal of debate and policies regarding environmental change affecting humans, the focus needs to turn towards nonhuman animals, plants and other material masses. Even though ecosystems and species remain the object of environmental depredations, the concern is mostly geared towards the human subject. Even as the actions are struck upon the ecological systems, the damage is measured based on human harm. This perspective needs a massive overhaul so that nonhuman presence is categorically classed as a major player.

## Works Cited

1. Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity, 2013, ageingcompanions.constantvzw.org/books/The_Posthuman_-_Rosi_Braidotti.pdf.
2. Cieleme Cka, Olga, et al. “Global Public Life Posthuman Sustainability: An Ethos for Our Anthropocenic Future.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 36–8, 2019, pp. 67–87, doi:10.1177/0263276419873710.
3. Jones, Emily and School of Law and Human Rights Centre, University of Essex. “Posthuman International Law and the Rights of Nature.” *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment*, vol. 12, no. Special Issue, 2021, pp. 76–102,files. Harmonywith natureun.org/uploads/upload1167.pdf.


DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398

4. Lindgren, Nicklas, and Johan Öhman. "A Posthuman Approach to Human-animal Relationships: Advocating Critical Pluralism." *Environmental Education Research*, vol. 25, no. 8, Mar. 2018, pp. 1200–15, doi:10.1080/13504622.2018.1450848
5. Nath, Rajakishore, et al. "From Posthumanism to Ethics of Artificial Intelligence." *AI & SOCIETY*, 24 Aug. 2021, d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/69375902/s00146_021_01274_1-libre.pdf
6. Palmer, Clare. "Does Nature Matter? The Place of the Nonhuman in the Ethics of Climate Change." *Ethical Discussion About Climate Change*, 11 Nov. 2010, pp. 272–91, web.archive.org/web/20161020141325id_/http://hettingern.people.cofc.edu:80/Environmental_Philosophy_Fall_2011/Palmer_Does_Nature_Matter.pdf
7. "The Impacts of Climate Change on Human and Non-Human Rights." *The University of Sydney*, 5 Dec. 2023, www.sydney.edu.au/law/news-and-events/news/2023/12/05/the-impacts-of-climate-change-on-human-and-non-human-rights.html.
8. Trewavas, Tony. "Plant Intelligence: An Overview." *BioScience*, vol. 66, no. 7, Apr. 2016, pp. 542–51, doi:10.1093/biosci/biw048.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26524/224.8 ISBN: 9789388413398