



# The Ends of the Humanities

**Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences**

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**Superposing Ends**  
**In Sight of Posthumanities**

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The Ends of Humanities - Volume 1: The Ends of the Humanities  
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Melusina Press 2021

Published in 2021 by **Melusina Press**

11, Porte des Sciences

L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette

<https://www.melusinapress.lu>

Melusina Press is an initiative of the University of Luxembourg.

Concept: Niels-Oliver Walkowski, Johannes Pause

Copyediting: Carolyn Knaup, Niels-Oliver Walkowski

Cover: Valentin Henning, Erik Seitz

The digital version of this publication is freely available at <https://www.melusina-press.lu>.

ISBN (Online): 978-2-919815-24-1

DOI (Publication): 10.26298/melusina.5k4k-cv56

DOI (Volume): 10.26298/melusina.qmp0-vm61

DOI (Series): 10.26298/2716-7550

ISSN (Online): 2716-7550

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# Superposing Ends

## In Sight of Posthumanities

In recent decades, digital technologies have not only brought about enormous ruptures and disruptions in the field of digital communication and information processing. They also have extended the repertoire of the methods of inquiry towards understanding human and non-human interaction. ‘Non-human entities’ conceived of as mostly technological, digital, or discrete entities are intrinsically shaping our everyday lives. They also have substantially impacted all fields of research and education in the arts and sciences. In contrast to most STEM fields in which new technology continues to be incorporated and applied, the Digital Humanities signify the emergence of those new digital modes of research and education that have recently been introduced into the humanities discipline.

Recent debates focus on the emergence of the Digital Humanities as a discursive construct (Kirschenbaum 2014), on how digital technology is applied to various disciplines and their practices (Burdeck et al. 2012), on the implications of Big Data (cf. Gitelman 2013; Reichert 2014), on the materialist dimension of digital cultures (cf. Reichert/Richterlich 2015) and their implicit political turn (cf. Fiorimonte/Numerico-Tomasi 2015) when it comes to accessibility and manipulation of data, in the media, for example.

In my presentation, however, I will focus briefly on the different ends between traditional and Digital Humanities, and on their superposition, that is, on how their tasks can be rethought, or reoriented by fusing them into a *Post humanities*. I will also focus on the conditions of a posthuman inquiry and its implications for a posthuman science.

## What is Posthumanism?

What is at stake in such a fusion is an acknowledgment of the increasing intertwining between technology, human and non-human. In going beyond the concept of assemblages and milieus, poststructuralist inquiries into *What comes after the subject?* have addressed this intertwining and have paved the way for what is now called *posthumanism* in its many variations.

An inquiry into what a posthuman subject may be is closely linked to the question of how autonomous or heteronomous its interactions are. How to conceive of more or less defined entities, if everything is interconnected, and if we can no longer isolate the human subject from its natural and technical environment?

Critical Theory in some form resembles one of the core ends of the traditional Humanities, that is, the concern with retaining the autonomy of human beings, or as Max Horkheimer phrased it—“to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them,” (1982: 244) may it be technology, ideology, or teleology. The digital hu-

manities, in contrast, take on a rather posthuman position that addresses the relationship between humans, non-humans and technology as being interdependent, and not as a limitation from which one needs to be liberated. Between forms of posthumanism, however, the anthropocentric orientation, or the extent to which technology is oriented toward and used as an end for the maintenance and survival of the human species, varies.

Tamar Sharon has adequately distinguished the varying forms of posthumanism into a fourfold taxonomy (2014: Chapter 2), which I will briefly explain: She distinguishes between *dystopic posthumanism* (bioconservatism), *liberal posthumanism* (transhumanism and liberal bioethics), *radical posthumanism* (*cyborg theory*) and *methodological posthumanism* (STS and contemporary philosophy of technology). She maps those four forms according to their positions towards anthropocentrism.

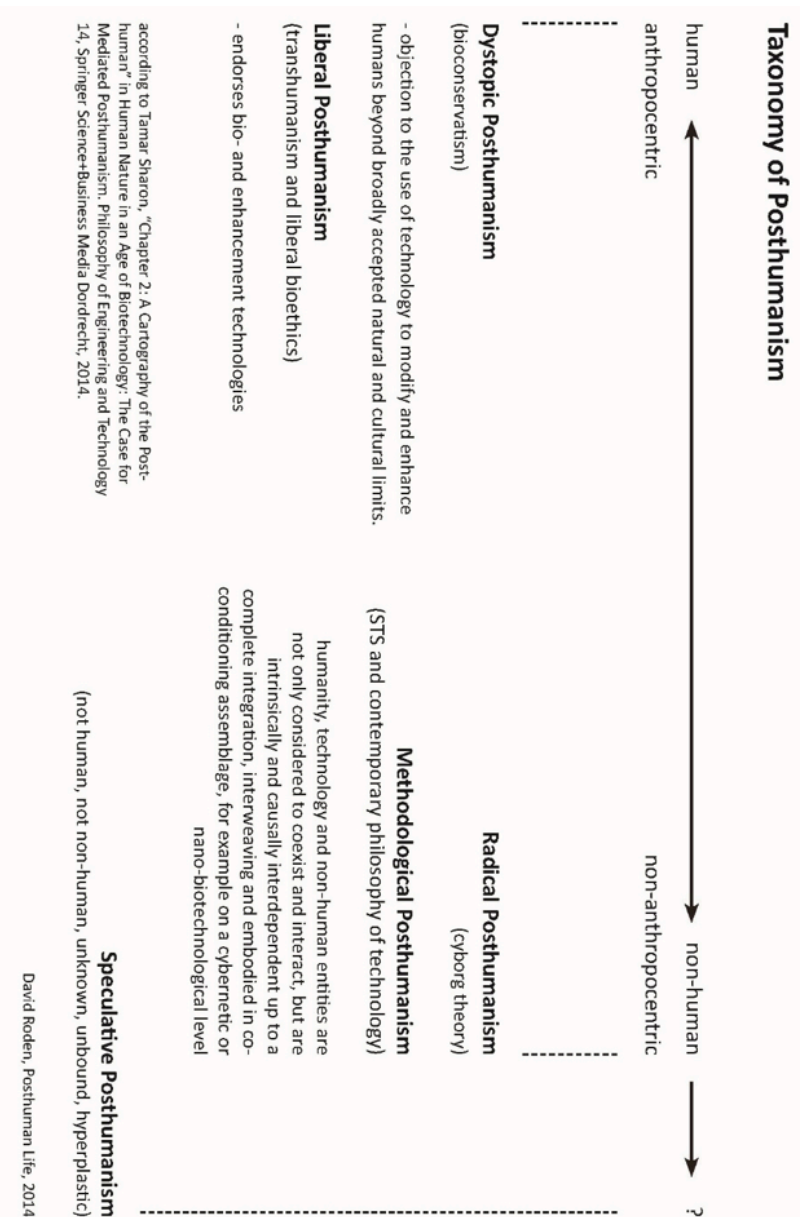
“Dystopic posthumanism is characterised by an objection to the use of technology to modify and enhance humans beyond broadly accepted natural and cultural limits.” (Ibid.: 17) Liberal posthumanism, in contrast, endorses bio- and enhancement technologies. But whereas these two forms remain focused on the human, radical posthumanism, as well as methodological posthumanism hold that humanity, technology, and non-human entities not only coexist and interact but are intrinsically and causally interdependent up to complete integration, and interweaving in co-conditioning assemblages, for example on a cybernetic or nano-biotechnological level. These developments are either used to enhance humanity’s capabilities and augment humanity’s ontological superiority, as in dystopic and liberal posthumanism, or to deconstruct humanity’s ontologically distinct position and to stress its equal position with all non-human entities as in radical and methodological posthumanism.

In addition to the four types of posthumanism by Tamar Sharon, David Roden proposes a fifth type of posthumanism—a so-called speculative posthumanism (SP). Roden (2015) conceives of posthumanism not as a condition, in which we are technologically already entangled, but as a condition we cannot even foresee or anticipate—in close proximity to Nick Bostrom’s notion of the posthuman: “A posthuman would no longer be a human being, having been so significantly altered as to no longer represent the human species.”

In aiming for a frame of analysis based on an equal ontology of the human and non-human, methodological posthumanism is particularly controversial, because it challenges traditional understandings of subjectivity and free will. More radically, however, speculative posthumanism anticipates a human extinction, a catastrophic end or a radical transformation that then provides the conditions for something radically new and unknown,—a new species completely unbound from the human species.

What, however, despite an attempt to be consistent with the premise of methodological posthumanism that we are already posthuman, would make a fusion of traditional and digital humanities into a posthumanities discipline seem viable?

## Taxonomy of Posthumanism



### Taxonomy of Posthumanism

## Why a Posthumanities?

The relatively recent uncoupling of the digital humanities from the traditional humanities as a discipline itself stands very much in contrast to most STEM fields, in which new technology continues to be incorporated and applied consistently. The focus of the digital humanities on the ‘digital’—as an object *and* as a technique of study or means for scholarly communication—is often seen as an innovation (Fitzpatrick 2012: 12). However, it subsequently emphasises the separation between traditional and digital humanities—the separation based on the *technique of study*, and the separation based on the *object of study*. I will contest both aspects of this separation for the following two reasons:

The “Digital” as a technique of study is not unique—hybrid technology is very common.

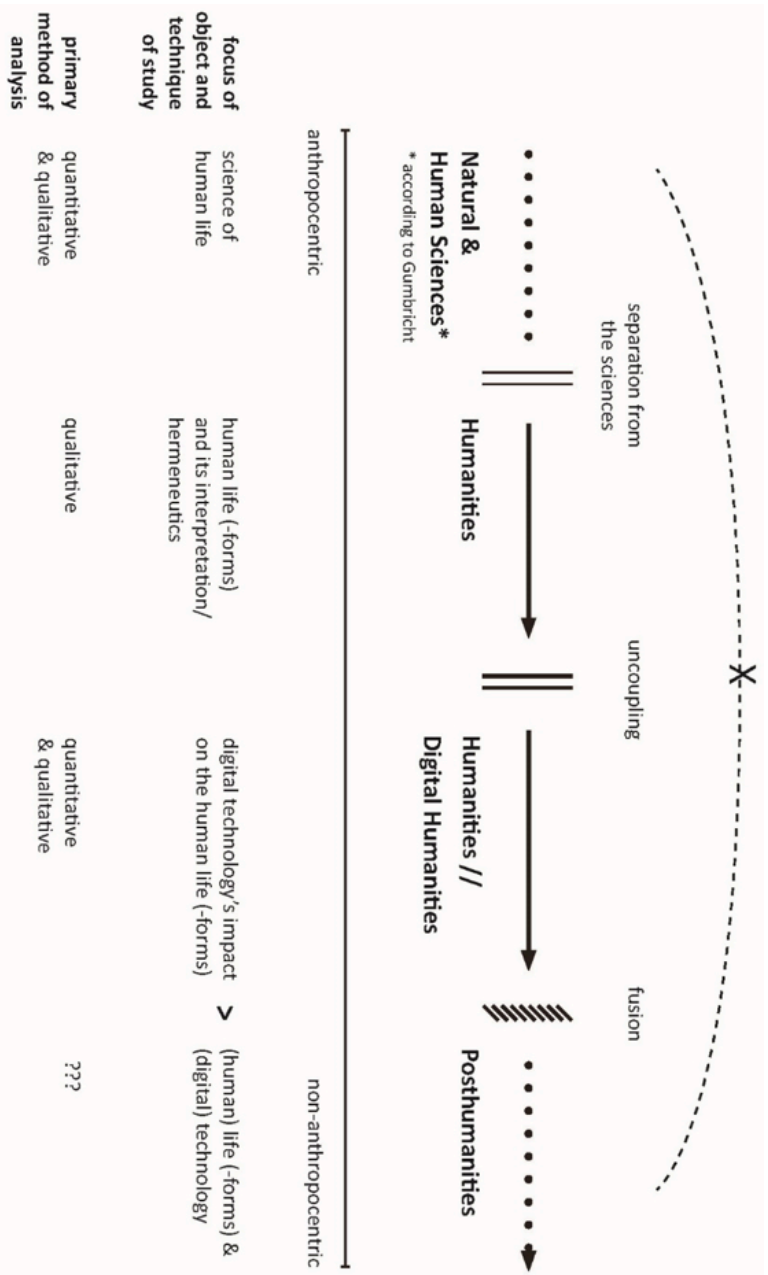
First, for the Digital Humanities, or any discipline, to stress the degree of technological deployment in the research as a justification for its existence perpetuates a dichotomy between the emergence of concepts and methods, on the one hand, and the technology applied, on the other. This singling out of digital technology, or any technology, from their entanglement in the formation of concepts and methods no longer stands out as a decisive factor for increasing the quality of research—given the fact that digital technologies seep into every aspect of life and research. Only in rare cases is research undertaken without any support by digital technologies. Research mostly draws on hybrid technologies that combine analogue and digital technologies.

The sole focus on digital technologies’ impact on humanity, as well as the sole focus on humanity as an object of study, are too limited.

Second, a *focus on the impact of digital technologies on human life* in separation from traditional *focus more broadly on human life* leaves out the fact that humans and technology have been intertwined since the dawn of history, long before the rise of digital technologies. Moreover, such a singling out of digital technology as the focus of study does not consider technology in interaction with human and non-human practices as an interwoven and increasingly posthuman assemblage. Taking into account the inseparability and fusion of digital technology and human life shows that both, the sole focus on the impact of digital technologies on human life in the Digital Humanities, and the sole focus on humanity and human practices in the traditional Humanities *as separated objects of study*, are too limited and insufficient.

Instead of choosing one focus over the other, a rearrangement of the traditional Humanities and Digital Humanities into a fused *Posthumanities* discipline would enable both, the technique of study and the object of study, to be thought in conjunction and as informing each other. Such a *Posthumanities* would take human and non-human actors *as well as* all forms of technologies into account. Moreover, the advantage of such a more comprehensive field of study and research would avoid privileging the Digital Humanities in terms of funding and would offer new options for study and research that would exceed mere transdisciplinary approaches.





However, such a broadening shift requires a reevaluation of the conditions of knowledge production under the pretext of a subject that is not an autonomous entity, but a heteronomous, altered, enhanced, hybrid or even abolished posthuman subject.

## **Posthumanities' foci**

A Posthumanities evolves from its historically preceding disciplines, such as the initially united Natural and Human Sciences, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has shown in his keynote lecture, the Natural Sciences and the Humanities as the result of the subsequent split between them, and recently the Digital Humanities that seems to appear as a bridge between the Natural sciences and the Humanities. A Posthumanities would distinguish itself from its preceding disciplines in terms of its objects and techniques of study and its methods of analysis.

Posthumanities' *objects of study* would focus on the following questions: What would posthuman assemblages or entities consist of (ontologically)? What would it mean for a posthuman subject to 'recognise' itself—does it? Which type of knowledge, if any, would such posthuman assemblages be able to produce or generate?

Posthumanities' *techniques of study* adapt according to posthuman forms of knowledge production. Whereas in the traditional Humanities and the Digital Humanities, it is always a human subject that conducts research, even in machine learning—What would it mean for a posthuman assemblage or subject to undertake any inquiries or do research?—Would that even be possible and if so under which conditions?

## **Superposition and flattening of anthropocentric binaries—onto-epistemological implications**

If posthumanism, in its variations, and according to deconstructive philosophies, is to be understood as a general break-down of anthropocentric binaries, such as mind/body, human/non-human, inner/outer, language/matter, nature/culture, then coming to terms with posthuman forms of subjectification could be thought of in two ways:

1. Posthuman subjectification can be seen as a superposition of binaries, as the simultaneous occurrence of two or more incommensurable phenomena. It entails the notion of a posthuman subject not as identity or essence, but as an existential event, "produced" through a complex of known and unknown factors. In relational-materialist terms, according to Karen Barad (2007), subjectification is not brought about by actors, but by their relationship or intra-action ("intra-action" challenges that things or objects precede their interaction. Rather, 'objects' emerge through particular intra-actions. Thus, phenomena are not produced by assemblages of humans and nonhumans [as in actor-network theory], rather phenomena are the condition of possibility of 'humans' and 'non-humans'). It is not only linguistic-discursive but material-discursive, which involves a weakening of

the priority of signification and representation between entangled matter. However, meaning and matter remain always ontologically entangled, in opposition to an anthropocentric epistemology, in which the making of meaning is solely a process generated by humans. In such a superpositional or eventful approach to posthuman subjectification, knowledge is primarily understood as material-discursive, non-objective, non-systematic, rather gnostic and non-conceptual, not located or stored, but enacted. Knowledge is understood as an action, or what Foucault already has described as “savoir” (2010:15, footnote 2: The English ‘knowledge’ translates the French ‘connaissance’ and ‘savoir.’ Connaissance refers here to a particular corpus of knowledge, a particular discipline – biology or economics, for example. Savoir, which is usually defined as knowledge in general, the totality of connaissances, is used by Foucault in an underlying, rather than overall, way. He has himself offered the following comment on his usage of these terms: “By connaissance I mean the relation of the subject to the object and the formal rules that govern it. Savoir refers to the conditions that are necessary in a particular period for this or that type of object to be given to connaissance and for this or that enunciation to be formulated”).

2. Posthuman subjectification can be seen as a flattening or levelling of cognitive capabilities within a posthuman entity as the basis of some hybrid forms of agency. Given an increased gathering of relational data and an unprecedented capacity for storage and data processing by so-called big data, N. Katherine Hayles notices, that “[i]n highly developed and networked societies [...], human awareness comprises the tip of a huge pyramid of data flows, most of which occur between machines.” (2006: 159) Furthermore, “[h]umans will intervene only in a tiny fraction of that flow of communication. Most of it will go on unsensed and really unknown by humans.” (2007: 350) Hayles recognizes the potential of human intervention as being limited to the relatively small amount of data that humans themselves produce—at least what they are aware of and have control over, compared to the massive flows of communication between machines and software. This asymmetry of “cognitive” capacities between humans and technology to access and process flows of data that renders technology more capable, is paralleled by an asymmetry of inventive capacities over the development of concepts and methods, frameworks of analysis or rules for algorithms, which is currently dominated by humans.

However, digital technology’s capacity to reproduce inventive human capacities is increasing due to advances in automated machine learning algorithms, pattern recognition, live stream data processing and other automated, rule-based technology that incorporate the emergence of formerly unknown events. Similarly, developments of technologically altered and enhanced brain capacities or other augmenting modes could raise the cognitive capacities of humans to access the massive flows of data.

These complementary trends of levelling human and non-human/technological cognitive capabilities could bring about an emerging hybrid and co-constitutive posthuman agency based on a locally stored, data-based, linguistic-discursive, systematic, ob-

jective, and conceptual type of knowledge. It would thus be capable of scientific inquiry as we know it, or of what Foucault described as “connaissance” (see above) and it will certainly continue to change it.

## Conclusion

The two modes of posthuman subjectivation that I presented—the superpositional and the levelling mode—and their different ways of producing knowledge provide a starting point to think about the implications of methodological posthumanism for a posthumanities as a scientific discipline.

Such a posthumanities, no doubt, radically challenges any primarily anthropocentric orientation of the current “humanities” disciplines (its focus on hermeneutics and qualitative research). Such a non-anthropocentric orientation does not mean to leave out humanity or to abolish it primarily, but to put humanity into a different non-privileging perspective with our environment, a perspective that is not asking what the environment or what technology can do for us, but how we can co-exist together.

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