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The Upper Ontology of the World

Who or *what* gets to be counted as human? This paper is a response to the questions raised

by the idea of inhumanism, in particular, two papers in the e-flux Journal, editions #52 and

#53, by the philosopher Reza Negaretsani, respectively, *The Labor of the Inhuman, Part I*

(Negarestani, 2014) and *Part II: The Inhuman* (Negarestani, 2014a).

In Part I, Negarestani addresses the paradox of orienting ourselves between the cultural

tropes of humanism and anti-humanism, of operating via 'consensus or dissensus'

(Negarestani, 2014). In Part 2, Negarestani elaborates the commitment to a discursive

inhumanism, one which requires rational agency to allow for the emergence of the human,

albeit a speculative rationality which has the potential, (for Negarestani at least) to undergo

a form of assimilation to an artificial, *genera*l *intelligence,* in which we 'only become rational

agents once we acknowledge or develop a certain intervening attitude toward norms that

renders them binding' (Negarestani, 2014a).

Negrestani describes an augmented rationality which inhabits 'the "area of maximum

risk"—not risk to humanity per se, but to commitments which have not yet been updated,

because they conform to a portrait of human that has not been revised' (Negarestani,

2014a). The obvious question we are left with is whether the division between the human

and the non-human is sustainable, and in asking this question, do we naturalise an ontology

which always foregrounds humanism, even if it is filtered through an anti-humanist lens?

For Reza Negaretsani, inhumanism is a constructivist strategy to counter the infinite regress

of the humanism-anti-humanism binary, in 2014, he wrote: 'Inhumanism is exactly the

activation of the revisionary program of reason against the self-portrait of humanity'

(Negaretsani, 2014a). But it is imperative to remember that who gets to count as human has always been ideological, likewise the form of logic invoked by rational discourse is also always political, implicated with a colonial continuum.

185 years since the abolition of slavery in the UK, the stability (or otherwise) of our ontological status as homo-sapiens, is still contingent, and arguably an issue of ever more palpable cultural and political urgency, with rising nationalisms and far-right politics, the question of who gets to count as human, agential and 'rational' has not gone away.

Aside from the resurgence of racist populisms which deny the humanity and equality of all people, the ontology of humanism is also threatened, it would seem, by emerging forms of materiality, by the putative breakdown of separations between computers and humans, between, for example, communication networks and the spaces we inhabit, by the proposed accordance of 'human' rights to artificially intelligent entities, or, by the longstanding fact that corporations in America, 'enjoy many of the same rights as American citizens. Both, for instance, are entitled to the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion.' (Winkler, 2018). Indeed, the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868, which was intended to protect the rights of former slaves, was often invoked to protect the rights of big business:

> *Between 1868, when the amendment was ratified, and 1912, the Supreme Court*
>
> *would rule on 28 cases involving the rights of African Americans and an*
>
> *astonishing 312 cases on the rights of corporations. (Winkler, 2018).*

In 2017, Saudi Arabia granted a robot citizenship, to 'promote Saudi Arabia as a place to develop artificial intelligence – and, presumably, allow it to become a full citizen. But many pointed out that those same rights aren't afforded to many humans in the country.' (Griffin, 2017). Yampolskiy (2018) reminds us there is loophole in US law by which potentially 'anyone can confer legal personhood on a computer system, by putting it in control of a limited liability corporation in the U.S. If that maneuver is upheld in courts, artificial intelligence systems would be able to own property, sue, hire lawyers and enjoy freedom of speech and other protections under the law.' (Yampolskiy, 2018).

Despite the accordance of human rights to robots and potentially polluting corporations, the catastrophic warming of the Earth threatens the future of all life and objects supported by it, meaning that we are *in it together*, regardless of our ontological or social status. One might argue, in light of constructs such as the *Anthropocene*, that our ontology is inextricably entangled with our environment. But writers such as Todd and Davies remind us that the Anthropocene is a deceptive term, occluding an inextricable link between the warming of the planet and centuries of colonial domination, in which the:

extension and enactment of colonial logic systematically erases difference, by way of genocide and forced integration and through projects of climate change that imply the radical transformation of the biosphere. Universalist ideas and ideals are embedded in the colonial project as it was enacted through a brutal system of imposing "the right" way of living. In actively shaping the territories where colonizers invaded, they refused to see what was in front of them; instead forcing a landscape, climate, flora, and fauna into an idealized version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland. (Davies and Todd, 2017)

For Negarestani a constantly dialogic relationship to the human and the inhuman is how 'reason' emerges, it is a 'landscape of navigation rather than an *a priori* access to explicit norms. The capacity to engage discursive practices is what functionally distinguishes sapience from sentience' (Negaretsani, 2014). However, Neagrestani's rational discourse appears to have a lineage which goes back to Aristotle, to the Eurocentric framing of what counts as knowledge, a vector which flows from Aristotle to Boolean Logic. Dixon (2017) reminds us of the lineage of modern computing, in which:

> *Boole's goal was to do for Aristotelean logic what Descartes had done for Euclidean*
> *geometry: free it from the limits of human intuition by giving it a precise algebraic notation.*
> *To give a simple example, when Aristotle wrote:*
>
> *All men are mortal.*
>
> *Boole replaced the words "men" and "mortal" with variables, and the logical words "all" and*
> *"are" with arithmetical operators:*
>
> *x = x * y*
>
> *Which could be interpreted as "Everything in the set x is also in the set y." (Dixon, 2017).*

To be clear, Aristotle's reduction of human knowledge to axiomatic statements is the logic from which modern symbolic logic and computation stems from. Aristotle derived the rest of his logical system (Dixon, 2017) from the following axioms:

- *An object is what it is (Law of Identity)*

- *No statement can be both true and false (Law of Non-contradiction)*

- *Every statement is either true or false (Law of the Excluded Middle)*

For many non-European epistemic traditions, the reduction of reason to language and abstraction is irreconcilable with 'the relatedness of land and flesh' (Davies and Todd, 2017), irreconcilable with the concept of *Place-Thought*:

> *the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated*
>
> *because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the*
>
> *premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive*
>
> *agency through the extensions of these thoughts* (Watts, 21, 2013).

For Todd and Davies 'Industrialized capitalism might make us forget our entwined relations and dependency on this body of the Earth, but we are surrounded by rich traditions and many people that have not forgotten this vital lesson' (Todd and Davies, 2017). The theme of humanness, whether it be Non-European, Post-human, Trans-human or Inhuman, appears to be the question of our time, it is, of course, always contentious, a filter for our most pressing concerns, a crucible for a continuum which encompasses right-wing technological determinisms and techno-feminist futures with myriad genders and races, but it is always, in Negarestani's terms, a discursive space, in which sapience might emerge. The capacity for sentience and sapience is deeply implicated with the materiality and sustainability of our ecosystems, but it is also implicated with cognition and computation and with the materiality, or otherwise, of the digital, in an era in which we are confronted

by *deep-fakes*, increasing efforts to automate insights into human activity, to mechanise

language and action, to reduce everything to number via the pervasive metrics of Big Data.

In this context, is there any more value to be gained by defining ourselves as distinct from

the rest of everything – to separate ourselves from *the Upper Ontology of the World* (Norvig

and Russell, 2003)?

The sinister metrics of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook have arguably made objects of us

all (even those who do not access the internet). To paraphrase the artist Katherine Behar,

the psychometric mechanisms of AI make our personalities into objects, into data points

and ideological constructs which are separable from our bodies, from our situatedness

(Behar, 2018).

 In the huge, canonical text, 'Artificial Intelligence, a Modern Approach' (Norvig and Russell,

2003) there is a diagram which purports to represent everything we can know. It is

satisfyingly plain, lacking in ambivalence or noisy indecision. The title of the diagram is 'The

Upper Ontology of the World', at the top of the diagram is, *Anything*, which branches into

Generalized Events and *Abstract Objects,* both these branches hold further sub-categories,

such as *Places* and *Numbers*, *Things* and *Stuff*. The ontology offers a God's eye view, one

which Haraway might term a 'God-trick' a view from above' (Haraway, 1988) *the view from*

nowhere. Though Norvig and Russell's book has served as the mainstay for many Computer-

Science courses concerned with AI, the authors are wisely cautious about the limitations of

such an ontology, they do not go as far as to identity the colonial nature of ontological

hierarchies, or, indeed the epistemicidal injustices which such knowledge systems have

served. But it is important to also note that Humans are not at the apex of Norvig and

Russell's diagram, they are at the bottom, beneath *Animals, Agents* and *Things*, but they are categorically not the same as *numbers, sets, sentences or measures.* For Norvig and Russell, unlike Cambridge Analytica, Humans cannot be representational objects.

Despite the enormity and thoroughness of Norvig and Russell's text, it does not currently address the issue of colonialism, but at the time of writing (February 2019), there is an ever growing movement towards recognising the impact of colonialism, in particular acknowledging how data itself colonises and ontologises, towards addressing the cognitive injustice (Visvanathan, 1997) which arises from the dominance of Western regimes of knowledge and Western appropriation of, for example, mathematics and philosophy; There is also a growing movement to address the damage wrought by a Western relegation of the body – that which is uncontrollable, messy and inconvenient, wild, female, black male or brown - into something which is unrelated to reason and enlightenment. As Nina Power (2017) writes:

> *Historically, and not only historically, however, vast swathes of humanity have,*
> *for reasons of prejudice, acquisition, and other violent motives, been excluded*
> *from this image of the bearer of reason.*

Authors such as Boaventura de Sousa (2018), Noble (2018), Eubanks (2018) and O'Neil (2017) and movements such as *Data4Blacklives,* critique the idealisation of Western rationality (or, more accurately, that of the *Global North*) in particular, the idea of a rationality which is transcendental, God-like in its neutrality. The decolonial movement necessitates a critique of humanism, and is, one might argue, more prescient than Negarestani's Inhumanism. Ali (2016) writes how:

the modernity which colonialism engendered persists, albeit transformed under

the condition of postmodernity, which has meant the persistence of certain

'sedimented' colonial ways of knowing and being – that is, colonial epistemology

and ontology – based on systems of categorisation, classification and

taxonomisation and the ways that these are manifested in practices, artefacts

and technologies (Ali, 2016).

Humanism emanates from a Western notion of rationality which excluded not only the body as a site of knowledge, but women, black, and working-class people, as well as those who were criminalized for their sexuality. The project of decolonialization necessitates an 'intellectual inquiry concerned with engaging this legacy from a 'critical' perspective, contesting colonial domination from the vantage point of formerly colonised peoples' (Ali, 2016).

The term *Inhumanism* originates from the poet and environmentalist, John Robinson Jeffers, (1887-1962) whose work resonates with environmental concerns, with the need to flatten the ontological hierarchy which always places the human at its apex, indeed, in the poem *Carmel Point*, Jeffers writes:

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;

We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident

As the rock and ocean that we were made from.

(1995)

Is such creative articulation. still a solely human trait, can we even speak of such exclusive traits without resorting to the solipsism John Robinson Jeffers warns us of? For Negarestani, 'inhumanism registers itself as a demand for construction, to define what it means to be human by treating human as a constructible hypothesis, a space of navigation and intervention' (Negarestani, 2014).

The value of inhumanism is that it provides scope for a discourse which prevents us from becoming ensnared in the idea *there is no alternative*, it has the capacity to stop us falling into a state of despair, in which the 'rubric of liberal freedom causes a terminal deficit of real alternatives, establishing for thought and action the axiom that there is indeed no alternative' (2014).

The lack of an alternative to Capitalism is the theme of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2010). Fisher wrote of a 'reflexive impotence' (Fisher, 2010, 21) in the face of Capitalism's apparent inevitability. But where does such resignation take us in these parlous times, what can we hold onto as a counter to the rapacious business ontology which dominates every facet of our lives? For Negarestani 'Sociopolitical philosophies seeking to safeguard the dignity of humanity against the onslaught of politico-economic leviathans end up joining them from the other side' (2014).

In Negarestani's terms, 'antihumanism is revealed to be in the same theological boat that it is so determined to set on fire' (2014), the reactive orientation of antihumanism, creates 'a fog of liberty that suffocates any universalist ambition and hinders the methodological collaboration required to define and achieve a common task for breaking out of the current planetary morass.' (2014) And yet, the objection to humanism is hardly theological for those

who are concerned with cognitive injustice, with the vital decolonising project which de Sousa Santos's book title embodies: *The End of the Cognitive Empire* (2018).

Now, more than ever, on the brink of apparent global disaster, it is imperative to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric thought over myriad other knowledges; the moment is overdue for oppressed social groups, for those who were never counted as human by humanism or enlightenment epistemology, to represent the world as their own, in their own terms. Rationality could be framed as a humanist construct, if we define it as Boolean logic, even acknowledging the scope of mathematics as a global practice, we must ask ourselves if, by evoking a constructivist methodology, a kind of Aristotelian dialogue with our ontology, Negretsani is constricting us to a specifically humanist reason, one which has historically excluded the colonised and other-wise marginalised, those not deemed rational enough to be granted a vote: historically the black, female, working-class and queer; if so, we must revert to the question which opened this paper, albeit in a slightly different form – who or *what* gets to count as inhuman?

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