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Monkey Wrench?: Virtues of a Weak Posthumanism

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Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism by Christopher Peterson. Fordham University Press, 2018. 160 pp. Hardcover: $95.00, Paperback: $28.00.

Posthumanism comes in many varieties. Some theories are focused on the importance of technology that could lead to transhumans, others engage in the decentering of the subject and the problematic privileged position of the human race, both epistemologically and morally. In addition, there are numerous ways by which human-animal-matter divisions are being criticized. It is often telling if it is possible to spot a hero in a theory: Is it other large animals that display emotions, or all of Earth's fauna? Should flora be included, or is matter as such the real new hero? Obviously, the human is not a hero, but not always a villain either.

In *Monkey Trouble*, a lively and passionate book, Christopher Peterson asks how this can be, and criticizes work in the field of posthumanism for having thrown out a lot with the bath water of anthropocentrism. Some of the motives behind radical discourses may be the urge to create a strong position in academia, Peterson argues in the opening, and suggests that an element of academic branding is taking place (21). On the other hand, we certainly live in a time where both the future of the Earth's ecosystem and the question of human identity, and its possible interventions into its own nature, makes it difficult to blame anyone who wants to tackle these issues for being overly

grandiose. Peterson's suggestion that a "'weak' posthumanism" is worth pursuing, implicitly following Gianni Vattimo's call for a "weak thought," is a sympathetic proposal, not least in the light of Peterson's critique of the tendency to go for the paradigmatic shifts. Peterson deftly shows how one of the foremost scholars of the field, Cary Wolfe, evades the temptation of building a strong thinking but keeps the aporia open.

Monkey Trouble's four chapters take up questions of language and ontology. Chapter 1 argues that the advanced stage of human language does make a difference and separates humanity from other species without giving it a higher moral status, and Chapter 2 continues in this track but shifts the perspective to the silence of the others. Object Oriented Ontology is criticized in Chapter 3 for going all in on a flat ontology that preaches immanence, which Peterson is not the only one to be skeptical about, also getting in a few zingers: "Size apparently doesn't matter for OOO (unlike its XXX counterpart)" (71). However, *Monkey Trouble* is a short book, and Peterson has wanted to bring too much into it. Art, literature, and film are drawn on frequently but mostly in a way that does not go beyond the thematic level. J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*, the poetry of Walt Whitman, and the films *Gravity* and *Melancholia* are all quite relevant to explore the discourses of posthumanism, but they neither provide the basis for a new and convincing argument nor are they analyzed in a way that does justice to the works themselves. The human-animal divide seen through Coetzee, immanence seen through Lars von Trier's and Alfonso Cuarón's films, and the totality of everything seen through Whitman all makes sense, but also seems to evade a more thorough discussion as well as a clearer engagement with the political dimension of posthumanism. Nonetheless, there is of course an elegant rhetorical point in juxtaposing the arguments of works of fiction and their distinctive viewpoints with the positions taken in posthumanist theory, not least because the artistic visions are not based on undisturbed abstractions but engage with fully-fleshed worlds. Peterson also seeks to clear up arguments concerning posthumanism through recurrent references to the work of Jacques Derrida. He shows how Derrida's work today remains relevant for understanding discourses of posthumanism, and Derrida's regular but scattered presence in the book shows the value of pushing conventional wisdom out of its comfort zone.

There are number of important issues that are touched upon but are not developed more thoroughly. Race, which Peterson has

written about in a previous book, and gender are both important issues in posthumanism, but do not take up much space in his new work. The same goes for other drivers of posthumanist discourses—not least transhumanism, computational systems, and climate change—that each in their way challenges anthropocentrism. The question of rights and politics is also mentioned rather than discussed, although it is certainly a key issue for Peterson. The lure of a "cosmocracy," where everything is equal, is contrasted at the end with democracy and the need for being able to steer. Peterson rightly asks how this is possible when humans are fully decentered and a flat ontology of pure immanence has become dominant. So, for all the flaws that could be pointed out, *Monkey Trouble* is a welcome and refreshingly provocative book that urges people to think carefully about lavish claims on the state of the world that may not need heroes or superstars but rather a continued involvement with the complex web of beings.

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