Concept of Humanity in Nicholas Gane’s Essay Posthuman: Critical Analysis

Nicholas Gane’s 2006 essay, ‘Posthuman’, addresses the concept of the posthuman in contemporary culture. The essay covers the origins of the term and the concept of the posthuman and how the human body can be altered by technology. However, combining the human body and technology invoked the question of how the human body can be removed to its ties of nature, how evolution of the body can be controlled and how society could be affected by such technological changes in the future. These ideas are reflected upon greatly in media which in turn frames how society thinks about the posthuman.

Gane describes the posthuman through its origins and theories in the public discourse. The concept of the posthuman is derived from multiple interpretations, Gane citing the origin of the concept to be from the “cybernetic movement of the 1940s”, from the “writings of Norbet Wiener” and its traction in the mid-1990s with Donna Haraway’s ‘Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature’ which whilst not using the term ‘posthuman’, Haraway notes that boundaries that initially separated organisms and machines are not definite. Gane states how “this age of technology” is “geared towards the transformation of the human species”, quoting Robert Pepperell, however Gane notes Pepperell’s misuse of the word “progress” as rather than a continuation, the posthuman is an ‘other’ where the “purity of human nature gives way to new forms...that refuses to keep...machines and humans apart”. Gane notes figures Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston who questions if the posthuman will keep the body being ‘human’. Gane then mentions Katherine Hayles who critiques separating the mind and body for the mind could never do without the body, stating that “information can never do away with...the body” as information “must always be instantiated in a medium’”, being the body. Hayles also critiques “downplay[ing] the role of consciousness for the human identity”, and as such, Hayles proposes that the posthuman should focus on the human identity. Gane notes Hayles’ “dream” for the posthuman, embracing the “possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality”. Gane uses Hayles’ viewpoint on posthumanism in order to describe the possibility of embodying technological possibilities which maintain human identity.

Gane presents discourses on the posthuman and the positives and negatives that the topic begets. Specifically, Gane discusses about the state of liberal democracy in relation to the posthuman. Gane cites Frances Fukuyama, former Bioethics Council member, to illustrate concerns over technology as Fukuyama has been vocal for regulations for biotechnologies that can influence human nature, thus bringing into question what makes up the essence of a human. For Fukuyama, “behaviours and characteristics that are typical of the human species” are important factors that are based more upon the ”genetic”, stating the “uniqueness of human language, consciousness and emotions” is human and “underpins the basis of liberal democracy”. Fukuyama notes the American constitution, stating how “political equality...rests on the empirical fact of natural human equality” and that sharing a “common humanity” is dire in a world where “we vary greatly as individuals and by culture”. Although Fukuyama warns how the “posthuman world” may not have “natural equality” like “life today”, Gane notes that “natural human equality” is not an “empirical fact” as it ignores “fierce inequalities of global capitalism” in today’s world. Gane uses Hayles perspective to challenge Fukuyama, arguing

that ideas that “humans are special” due to “human nature” is a “false separation of human nature from technology”, and that it is “‘human nature’ to use technology” as ”human beings have always used technology” throughout history, thus technology has “co-evolved” along humans shaping “human nature what it is”. Moreover, the term 'technology’ refers to tools humans have always used, from prehistoric tools like fire to the iphone. The term ‘technology’ originates from Greek, ‘techne’ meaning ‘the science of craft’ and ‘logia’ meaning ‘skill’, which applies to all tools1. Through Hayles and similar figures, Gane describes how it is by “downplaying the differences between” humans and machines that their convergence can be a comfortable and possible future. Hayles wants to “achieve the future we want”, stating that “what it means to be human” is dependent on creating “just societies” in a “transnational global world” that could include “both carbon and silicon citizens”. Hayles’ vision for a posthuman future leads to issues regarding human rights for cyborgs, however this is volatile as recognising posthumans as humans affects other discourses such as on abortion. Thus Gane states that “rethinking what we call human values” in the face of “fast-developing bio-technologies” that redefine the human can lead to a thriving posthuman world.

The concept of the cyborg is prevalent throughout society, especially media in which ideas Gane discusses are reflected, thus illustrating society’s impressions on the posthuman. During the 1980s and 90s, the cyborg was topical for many with the posthuman being prominent in the public discourse. ‘Tetsuo: The Iron Man’ is a film from the eighties featuring a salaryman transforming into a mechanical being through the possession of a machine fetishist. The salaryman undergoes a violent and prominently phallic mechanical change, one scene shows his genitals transforming into a drill. The transformations are depicted to be uncontrollable and harmful, with the salaryman fusing with the fetishist, they become a grotesque phallic-like cyborg. However, ‘Tetsuo: The Iron Man’ is not just a warning of technological developments getting uncontrollable but also how human organs are similar to mechanical parts and thus how humans are similar to machines as the salaryman’s body is slowly replaced with machinery, invoking Gane’s thoughts on “downplaying the differences between” humans and machines which leads to an embodiment of each other. Another film of a similar time is ‘Akira’, similarly portraying the anxieties of technological change in the character Tetsuo who is eventually overwhelmed by uncontrollable power that is somewhat technological. Although these films reflect on anxieties on technology, it also portrays how new identities can be created with technology through the embodiment of it. Stanley Kubrick's ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’ explores how technology has developed alongside humanity through the comparison of a prehistoric human using a bone and comparing it to the large spaceship floating in space, Kubrick thus depicting how humanity has always used technology as well as how technology has given humanity power. This connects to Hayles’ thoughts on how it is “‘human nature’ to use technology” and that they are closely related to each other. In ‘Blade Runner’, the question of what separates humans and machines permeates throughout the film, the main character, Deckard, questions whether he is a human in a world with cyborgs. Similarly, ‘Ex-Machina’, made in 2014, also questions the differences between cyborgs and humans with Ava, an advanced cyborg, and Caleb who is meant to test Ava’s AI and humanity. Similar to ‘Blade Runner’, Caleb believes in Ava’s humanity and even questions his own. ‘‘Ex-Machina’ is created thirty years after films like ‘Blade Runner’, thus it continues the posthuman discourse as well as introduces key ideas distinct to its time such as gender roles and hierarchies, as Ava fights against the male characters’ subjugation2. Society’s views on the posthuman is therefore cautious, with anxieties that technology may get out of hand as well as a focus on how the essence of humanity may continue in a world that expands on the essence of humanity.

Gane's 'The Posthuman' is a focus as to how society thought of the posthuman as well as how it may deal with it in the future. Gane focuses on theories that make up the posthuman to give the concept clarity as well as on the essences that may discern humanity from machine despite its blurred separations. Gane is therefore hoping that society will be able to adapt to a future posthuman world in hopes that such a change may be able to thrive with such an embodiment.

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