

The Contribution of C. S. Lewis for a Critical Analysis of Posthumanist Education

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Abstract: This paper aims to bring C. S. Lewis's views on education into the contemporary arena of Posthumanist philosophy. The latest debates in the academic world and in Posthuman studies, in general, focus on the 'Posthuman condition,' 'Life' as a non-essentialist form of contemporary vitalism, and 'Life' as a complex materialist system. According to this worldview, Posthuman education seeks to value various concepts such as Karen Barad's 'agential realism,' Luciana Parisi's 'theory of complexity,' Rosi Braidotti's 'Anthropocene studies,' or Katherine Hayles's 'digital posthumanist studies.' As interesting and rich as these innovations may seem, we argue that they do not capture the complexity of reality or consider the human condition, including its metaphysical dimension. This is where C. S. Lewis comes onto the scene. His deep insights on the importance and value of education are more necessary than ever, especially as we interact with Posthuman Philosophy.

Keywords: Posthumanist Education, C. S. Lewis, Posthumanism, New Materialism, Environmental Education, Virtue, Metaphysics

Introduction

As society is rapidly changing, little—or better to say, nothing—remains unchanged and unchallenged. Education is not an exception. In the words of Lewis, “our whole education tends to fix our minds on this world” (Lewis, 2009, p. 135). Therefore, it is no surprise that changes in the world are prompting new reflections on education. Some basic questions arise: What kind of education should we develop nowadays? What paradigm of education should we pursue? To answer these questions, we need to decide how we define the contemporary era and which worldview we embrace.

Several scholars (Hayles, 1999; Badmington, 2000; Ferrando, 2019) argue that contemporary society is characterized by a post-anthropocentric worldview shaped by Posthumanism. In this context, 'Posthuman' refers to the universe at large, while 'Posthumanist' refers specifically to human beings. Although there is no single way to define Posthumanism, it is mainly understood as a movement “oriented toward rethinking how humans may cultivate a closer relationship with nature and other animal species and is related to new materialism” (Duoblienè & Vaitekaitis, 2021, pp. 37-50). Indeed, everything in Posthumanism concerns this monistic, materialist perspective on the universe (including humans).

Posthumanist philosophers argue that a new approach to education is needed, one that resonates with the type of ontology and worldview advanced by posthuman philosophy. However, we will discover that posthumanist education is not unquestionable and that there are valuable, indispensable aspects that do not fit within the posthuman paradigm. C. S. Lewis's insights into education highlight the limitations of posthumanist thinking and call for a more comprehensive understanding of the human being and his status in the world.

The objective in this paper is twofold: first, we will explore the basics of posthuman philosophy and posthumanist education, then, we will uncover ways in which C. S. Lewis may contribute to a critical analysis of this educational experiment.

From posthuman philosophy to posthumanist education

Mapping posthumanism

Posthumanism is more of a *praxis* than a coherent philosophy or an intellectual movement. It has to do with an ongoing process of “deconstruction of the entire intellectual tradition and the set of values that humanism is based on” (Herbrechter, 2018, pp. 728-745). However, it is important not to confuse posthumanism with antihumanism, as advocated by thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), Roland Barthes (1957), Louis Althusser (2003), Michel Foucault (1994), among others. Nor should it be confused with the transhumanist movement, as envisioned by figures such as Max More, Raymond Kurzweil, and Nick Bostrom. While some kind of “popular posthumanism” shares the transhumanist vision of transforming humans into something else, “critical posthumanism places the emphasis on a re-evaluation of humanist tradition and refers back to proto-posthumanist approaches, which already exist in various humanist traditions and antihumanist stances” (Herbrechter, 2018, pp. 728-745). Ferrando (2019) notices that both movements mentioned above are reinstating and reinforcing humanism: one by seeking to deconstruct it, and the other by trying to bring it to the next stage of its evolutionary trajectory.

It is true that posthumanism emerges from postmodern philosophy, beginning with Ihab Hassan’s *The Postmodern Turn* (1987) and continuing with the works of Jacques Derrida (1981), Jean-François Lyotard (1984), and other postmodern thinkers. However, borrowing from Gianni Vattimo’s concept of the ‘dissolution of the new’ (Vattimo, 1991), posthuman philosophy seeks to avoid polarization, axiological hierarchy, and ontological pluralism. Posthumanist thinkers reject any form of ‘centrism’ and dualism, advocating instead a relational ontology in which we can speak of a nonhierarchical, nomadic subject. This ‘subject’ is placed in a rhizomatic network—a concept derived from Deleuze and Guattari (1987)—one that is radically monistic and materialistic. Stefan Herbrechter writes:

From a sociocultural point of view, posthumanism emerges precisely out of this (postmodern) discussion about pluralism, but, crucially, adds another component to it. This component is based, on the one hand, on technological development, and, on the other hand, on environmental change. Both developments lead to, what might be called, the emergence of a postanthropocentric world picture, as can be seen in the idea that humans are, from now on (but, in retrospect, have always been) only one group of actors among many other nonhuman forms of agency. Although this has always been the case, the spreading awareness that humans and ‘their’ environment (humans and nonhuman animals, humans and machines, objects, etc.) form units and are in fact networked is relatively new. When taken seriously, this has far-reaching consequences for ‘our’ current and future human self-understanding and thus, of course, for the education of future generations. (Herbrechter, 2018, p. 729)

One may certainly ask, how can we explain these ‘nonhuman forms of agency’ (animals, machines, and the universe itself)? Without getting into details, the notion of ‘new materialisms’ found in the works of Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) and Karen Barad (2007) is relevant to this question. The new materialisms are deriving from the latest evolutions in quantum physics and the proliferation of ‘String Theory’ (Greene, 2003). According to the new materialisms, matter—human or nonhuman—is not static. On the contrary, it is lively, energetic, continuously organizing and expressing itself in new ways, thus making room for an ‘agential realism,’ namely for a phenomenon which is “the ontological inseparability of intra-acting ‘agencies’” (Barad, 2007, p. 333).

The new conceptualization of the universe and of human beings is impacting all areas of philosophical and sociological reflection including education (see Ghioancă, 2021). The following section highlights key ideas central to ‘posthumanist education.’

Posthumanist education

If the entire reality is radically materialistic, monistic, and immanent, if humans and non-humans belong to a rhizomatic network, if there are no hierarchies among humans, animals, and various objects, then what are the meaning, objectives, and methods of posthumanist education?

Certainly, posthumanist education is based on *a reconsideration of the ways of knowing, curriculum, educational objectives, and knowledge creation*. According to Herbrechter, posthumanist education should aim towards “developing a new impartiality outside anthropocentrism, wary of our most strongly and invisibly ingrained humanist reflexes” (Herbrechter, 2018, p. 743). This impartiality needs to consider *environmental challenges*, to the point that all sciences will be designed to foster an “environmental consciousness”. Such a consciousness includes all reality, humans and non-humans, and it stresses the ‘environmental entanglement’ of all forms of (intra) – agency.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's insights into environmental challenges are valuable. He advances four theses which should impact the way we perceive the relationship between humans and the environment: “Thesis 1: Anthropogenic Explanations of Climate Change Spell the Collapse of the Age-old Humanist Distinction between Natural History and Human History”; “Thesis 2: The Idea of the Anthropocene, the New Geological Epoch When Humans Exist as a Geological Force, Severely Qualifies Humanist Histories of Modernity/Globalization”; “Thesis 3: The Geological Hypothesis Regarding the Anthropocene Requires Us to Put Global Histories of Capital in Conversation with the Species History of Humans”; “Thesis 4: The Cross-Hatching of Species History and the History of Capital Is a Process of Probing the Limits of Historical Understanding” (Chakrabarty, 2009, pp. 197-222)

Each of these represents Chakrabarty's answer to the contemporary climate change crisis, offered from a historian's perspective. He analyzes the concept of Nature and Humans and realizes that both are active forces. Nature reacts to the geological forces exerted by Humans through various means, including extractive industries. So, “most of our freedoms so far have been energy-intensive” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 208). He goes on to say that various geological changes have facilitated human technological innovation, thus strengthening the entanglement between human history and the environment. Then he adds that we face many historical limitations – we can experience some effects of climate change, but we can never envision its effects at large, at a universal level, or in the future. Thus, we understand that in Posthumanism, education ceases to be *child-centered* and becomes *environmentally oriented*.

Furthermore, we observe that the role of posthumanist education is not to pursue or transfer objective, scientific knowledge, which is a humanist construct. Rather, it seeks *to replace knowing with meaning*, “understood as the interactions among patterns of information creation and the randomness of unperceived patterns” (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 51). Based on the fact that “we think through, with, and alongside media” (Hayles, 2012, p. 1), we arrive, by means of interaction between human and computer, at what is called an ‘extended’ or ‘distributed cognition’. Consequently, Katherine Hayles's suggestion is that posthumanist education should establish ‘comparative media studies’ as a subject matter in schools and universities. The author writes:

Learning to read complex texts (i.e., “close reading”) has long been seen as the special province of the humanities, and humanities scholars pride themselves on knowing how to do it well and how to teach students to do it. With the advent of digital media, other modes of reading are claiming an increasing share of what counts as “literacy,” including hyper reading and analysis through machine algorithms (“machine reading”). Hyper reading, often associated with reading on the web, has also been shown to bring about cognitive and morphological changes in the brain. Young people are at the leading edge of these changes, but pedagogical strategies have not to date generally been fashioned to take advantage of these changes. Students read and write print texts in the classroom and consume and create digital texts of their own on screens (with computers, iPhones, tablets, etc.), but there is little transfer from leisure activities to classroom instruction or vice versa.

A Comparative Media Studies perspective can result in courses and curricula that recognize all three reading modalities—close, hyper-, and machine—and prepare students to understand the limitations and affordances of each. (Hayles, 2012, p. 11).

So, the purpose of Comparative Media Studies is to help students and teachers alike move from a content-oriented education to problem-solving inquiry and project-based research within collaborative environments. This new approach is characterized by “software utilization, analytical and statistical tools, database designs, and other modalities intrinsic to work in digital media” (Hayles, 2012, p. 9).

The ubiquity of digital media and of what K. Hayles labels as ‘distributed cognition’ introduces a sensitive topic. Luciana Parisi points towards it when she writes that “we are witnessing the advance of a dynamic form of automated reasoning” (Parisi, 2016, p. 471). Consequently, reasoning should not be understood as something specific to humans; rather, the aim of posthumanist education is to erase dualisms and binaries such as male-female, humans-animals, humans-machines, etc.

Posthumanist education is more like a ‘journey of discovery’ in which teacher-learner relations are nonhierarchical and non-oppressive (Blaikie et al., 2020, p. 4). These objectives are reached by using various *pedagogical strategies*, such as ‘flipping’ the classroom (Harvard University, n.d.; Pedersen, 2009) while we remember “that we are animals, and no hard and fast ethical/political/ontological line can be drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 46).

Another strategy used in the posthumanist pedagogy is the so-called ‘diffractive methodology’ (Murriss, 2022, pp. 174-177), which involves “reading texts intra-actively through one another, enacting new patterns of engagement, attending to how exclusions matter” (Barad, 2010). This type of reading is more of an experience than a search for the text's meaning. There are no subject-object relationships, conceptual prerequisites, guidelines, or specific objectives. It is an undirected experience, one where „the ‘what’ of the study must be able to participate, to *surprise* the researcher” (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 55).

This brief survey revealed that posthumanist education is both challenging and innovative. The emphasis on experience and active learning has reached a whole new level since John Dewey (1980, pp. 180-189) advocated reforming educational philosophy. However, some critical questions arise, and at specific points, C.S. Lewis’s perspectives diverge from the posthumanist narrative of education.

C.S. Lewis’s relevance for a critique of posthumanist education

With his deep analysis, clear communication, and prophetic spirit, C. S. Lewis is a highly relevant companion as we critically discuss some of the posthuman educational tenets outlined above. C. S. Lewis’s book *The Abolition of Man* (2017a) seems to be a conversation with the posthumanist philosophy *avant la lettre*. Lewis rightly delineates the corresponding relationship between someone’s worldview and his perspective on education:

Hence the educational problem is wholly different according as you stand within or without the Tao. For those within, the task is to train in the pupil those responses which are in themselves appropriate, whether anyone is making them or not, and in making which the very nature of man consists. Those without, if they are logical, must regard all sentiments as equally nonrational, as mere mists between us and the real objects. As a result, they must either decide to remove all sentiments, as far as possible, from the pupil’s mind; or else to encourage some sentiments for reasons that have nothing to do with their intrinsic ‘justness’ or ‘ordinacy’. The latter course involves them in the questionable process of creating in others by ‘suggestion’ or incantation a mirage which their own reason has successfully dissipated. (Lewis 2017a, pp. 973-974).

Posthumanist educational philosophers situate themselves outside *Tao*, a universal conformity in nature and supernature, and adopt Lewis’s first alternative: to remove all sentiments from human beings, after previously labeling them merely biochemical

epiphenomena. C. S. Lewis clearly notices that those who confine the human being to the realm of Reason are embarking on a project of creating ‘men without Chest,’ and, consequently, it is unreasonable to expect those men to cultivate virtue: “We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst” (Lewis, 2017a, p. 976).

The posthuman philosophers go much further, not only do they remove emotions from the constitution of a human being, but they also dissipate human beings into a nomadic, materialistic network of subjectivities, where *homo sapiens* becomes *homo evanescens*. Within those parameters, it is inconceivable to eliminate all axiological and ethical hierarchies while simultaneously developing an environmentally sensitive educational philosophy! How could posthumanist educators teach children to be virtuous if virtue is redefined in materialist terms?

C. S. Lewis is speaking as a Christian (for his conversion, see Lewis, 1956), and he is suggesting that Christianity is in itself a form of education: “Anyone who is honestly trying to be a Christian will soon find his intelligence being sharpened: one of the reasons why it needs no special education to be a Christian is that Christianity is an education itself!” (Lewis, 2009, p. 78). This means that various virtues—including the protection of the environment—are already ingrained in Christian teaching and in specific narratives of the Bible, such as the one of Creation (Genesis 1-2).

Lewis would agree with posthumanist thinkers that we must be ethically oriented in our educational endeavors: “‘Niceness’—wholesome, integrated personality—is an excellent thing. We must try by every medical, educational, economic, and political means in our power to produce a world where as many people as possible grow up ‘nice’; just as we must try to produce a world where all have plenty to eat” (Lewis, 2009, p. 215). However, these ethical objectives cannot be achieved unless we embrace the idea of *Tao*, of conforming to a (meta)physical pattern of appropriateness, of right and wrong, and of honorable and despicable. In an even more striking way, C.S. Lewis anticipates the political correctness propagated by posthumanist education. A passage from *The Screwtape Letters* is very relevant:

In that promising land the spirit of I’m as good as you has already become something more than a generally social influence. It begins to work itself into their educational system. How far its operations there have gone at the present moment, I would not like to say with certainty. Nor does it matter. Once you have grasped the tendency, you can easily predict its future developments; especially as we ourselves will play our part in the developing. The basic principle of the new education is to be that dunces and idlers must not be made to feel inferior to intelligent and industrious pupils. That would be ‘undemocratic’ (Lewis, 2017b, pp. 353-354).

In another one of his writings on democratic education, Lewis tackles the same issue: “Such total egalitarianism in education has not yet been openly recommended. But a movement in that direction begins to appear” (Lewis, 1986a, p. 25). This is exactly what has already happened in posthumanist education. There is a strong emphasis on what is called *zoe*-egalitarianism (Hayles, 1999, p. 79), that is, an equality among all forms of human and non-human existence. Although C.S. Lewis is not against equality *per se*, he considers that it should be treated as medicine, as a protection from the destructive consequences of the Fall of man. On the other hand, “When equality is treated not as a medicine or a safety-gadget but as an ideal, we begin to breed that stunted and envious sort of mind which hates all superiority” (Lewis, 2017a). This sort of ‘hate’ can affect various areas of education and subject matter, such as teaching English in schools.

For instance, after reading *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools: Report of the Committee of the Secondary School Examinations Council Appointed by the President of the Board of Education in 1941* (known as the Norwood Report, named after its chairman, Sir Cyril Norwood), whose authors argues that “English” can be supplied “by any teacher” and that there is no need for external examinations, C.S. Lewis warns: “A subject in which

there are no external examinations will lead to no State scholarships; one in which no school teachers are required will lead to no livelihoods” (Lewis, 1986c). The stakes are even higher. Not only is English taught precariously in school (or not taught at all), but this sort of leveling of humanity may contribute to the emergence of totalitarian, dystopic societies. The bloody history of Communism has shown that many heinous crimes can be committed in the name of radical equality.

Those in charge of maintaining this *zoe*-egalitarianism would play at being God, as in *That Hideous Strength*. Lewis’s novel develops the themes introduced in *The Abolition of Man* and draws attention towards the importance of respecting human dignity and freedom and towards an education that is not reductionist and materialist, as in the case of posthumanism. Lewis writes, “Materialism is in fact no protection. Those who seek it in that hope (they are not a negligible class) will be disappointed. The thing you fear is impossible. Well and good. Can you, therefore, cease to fear it? Not here and now. And what then? If you must see ghosts, it is better not to disbelieve in them” (Lewis, 1946, p. 236). For C.S. Lewis, a meaningful education cannot be separated from the metaphysical or transcendent world because, like in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the spiritual world is more real than the physical one. Commenting on Lewis’s views on meaning and epistemology, Starr (2007, article 14) mentions, “Heaven is that higher reality in which everything means more because matter and spirit, and therefore subject and object, are more completely connected there, and one-for-one abstract thoughts give way to the multiplicity of concrete-experiential thought.”

It is interesting that, in posthumanist education, knowledge is understood through performance (i.e., a practice in which no cognition / affect binary is assumed). However, when posthumanist educators try to convey their theories, they appeal to human reasoning and transferable knowledge through grammar, syntax, and logical deduction. It is true that they use the practice of diffraction when they ‘play’ in their own courtyard, but they cease to do it when the aim is to inform others about posthuman philosophy. C. S. Lewis connects the idea of certainty with the validity of human reasoning:

If the feeling of certainty which we express by words like *must be* and *therefore* and *since* is a real perception of how things outside our own minds really ‘*must*’ be, well and good. But if this certainty is merely a feeling in our own minds and not a genuine insight into realities beyond them — if it merely represents the way our minds happen to work — then we can have no knowledge. Unless human reasoning is valid no science can be true. (Lewis, 2017c, p. 668).

In the swirl of postmodern pragmatism, another feature of posthumanist education is an increased emphasis on practicality. Thus, posthumanist educational methodologies and curricula seek to make room for crafts, practical projects, ‘flipped’ classes, etc. While underscoring the importance of experimental learning is something good, we agree with C.S. Lewis that the question of truth and falsehood should not be left outside of the pedagogical endeavors:

Man is becoming as narrowly “practical” as the irrational animals. In lecturing to popular audiences I have repeatedly found it almost impossible to make them understand that I recommended Christianity because I thought its affirmations to be objectively true. They are simply not interested in the question of truth or falsehood. They only want to know if it will be comforting, or “inspiring”, or socially useful (Lewis, 1986d, p. 51).

If an educational system ceases to be interested in truth and falsehood, it has failed. There is no education at all. If humans are indeed connected to the environment and mutually constitutive, then people cannot adequately interact with the real world unless they have been educated in the company of notions such as true or false. Such matters are important because “the natural purpose of the school is not to teach, but first of all, to awaken by cultivating the intellectual skills in the heart of the student, the need to learn all their life” (Rotaru, 2021, pp. 190-196).

Concluding remarks

Posthumanist education stems from posthuman philosophy, which is immanent, materialistic, egalitarian, and rhizomatic. The result is that posthumanist education aims to develop an environmental consciousness, rejecting ontological hierarchies and all forms of dualism. However, is this kind of ‘environmental consciousness’ sufficient?

C.S. Lewis’s contribution to a critical analysis of posthumanist education is very relevant. He emphasizes the importance of cultivating virtues, embracing the reality of the spiritual world and the benefits of the Christian religion. He proves that we cannot develop a strong ethical mindset if we reduce all reality to materiality.

Moreover, he warns about the dangers of political correctness and of the idolatry of totalitarian egalitarianism. Lewis underscores the importance of matters of truth and falsehood and argues convincingly that the educational system should not be driven exclusively by practicality. As interesting and innovative as posthumanist education may be, C. S. Lewis’s reflections on education are timely and serve to preserve essential aspects of humanity in the context of Posthumanism.

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