Conclusion: Humanity and its Aftermath

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Conclusion

Humanity and its Aftermath

The goal of this book has been to show that the writing of Michel Houellebecq helps us to think about what it means to be human in an era that can be considered posthumanist in two respects: first, that more than ever we have an understanding of how our own species is governed by patterns of behaviour whose causality is ultimately not that different from that found in other animals; and second, that we have within our grasp the possibility of real genetic and prosthetic modifications that could operate an ‘improvement’ upon the basic model of Homo sapiens. In his discussions of sexuality, Houellebecq shows how we are caught between these two conceptions. On the one hand, sex remains a brutal competition for the most eligible mates and one’s stock in the sexual marketplace is largely determined by genetic factors entirely beyond one’s own control. But, on the other hand, we are irreparably alienated from relating to our sexuality in any ‘natural’ or instinctual way because we are surrounded by sexual prostheses. These may include literal bodily additions such as sex toys or cosmetic enhancements, but most commonly these prostheses take the form of the endless sexual representations we are obliged to consume and that have the ultimate effect of turning our own sexuality into a representation from which we are chronically distanced (hence the problem of ‘performance anxiety’ which arises from the fear that the instinctual physical response will not match up to the representation). In ideological terms, our western societies circulate both a persistent social Darwinism, leading to the belief that only the strongest and most genetically ‘blessed’ deserve sexual happiness, but also a popular democratic socialism implying that everyone is entitled to expect their share of sexual ecstasy. In all this confusion, it is unsurprising that some individuals slip through the
erotic net altogether, and are left unsure whether their reaction should be one of resignation to their fate or bitterness at a perceived injustice. *Plateforme* and *La Carte et le territoire*, meanwhile, create a vision of the economic universe. Here is a humanity irrevocably overtaken by the prosthesis of the global economy, a superstructure that grows out of human relations and yet comes to determine those relations in unpredictable and unintended ways. *Plateforme* can be understood as an experiment in trying to think through the consequences of conceiving human relations from the perspective of this posthuman logic. In both novels can be detected a nostalgia for forms of work that could be more immediately meaningful to our human condition, and yet this nostalgia is little more than a distant echo, barely articulable from our position following decades of alienated, post-industrial labour. After all, as Jed Martin’s eerie artworks demonstrate in *La Carte et le territoire*, all work is already a sort of technology, an improvement, or at least a supplementation of the human, including and perhaps especially the work of art, so there is doubtless no way out of this bind. *La Possibilité d’une île* is, in many ways, Houellebecq’s most representative book, the fullest expression of his vision, both of the ruthless contest that organises our socio-sexual world, but also of a genuinely posthuman successor that might finally surpass this model. It remains that, from within the blinkered perspective of our individualist consciousness, both visions of life come across as frankly miserable. This is why Houellebecq may ultimately be seen to suggest that the only way to transcend our social problems is not through politics but through a reshaping of society and thought that would be more akin to a religion. In the end, however, we must accept that Houellebecq is not really prescribing solutions, and nor is it necessarily his role to do so. Like earlier generations of utopian writers, Houellebecq uses his hypothetical futures in order to point up the problems and contradictions of the present (indeed, *Plateforme* presents something like the parody of a ‘solution’ as though to demonstrate the absurd inadequacy of the current ideological deadlock in which capitalism can only propose itself as a solution to the problems caused by capitalism). What Houellebecq is doing, through the posthumanist perspective of his novels, is allowing us to see ourselves in a new light, to diagnose our problems more clearly and to feel them more keenly, and this is why he has been widely acclaimed as the most important writer to emerge from Europe in recent decades.
Throughout his work, Michel Houellebecq consistently places human beings within a continuum that stretches from the animal, through the human, to the posthuman. In doing so, he invites us to interrogate the nature of the human, and to replace humanity within the broad evolutionary sweep of organic life on this planet. Given that various of Houellebecq’s characters confess to hating nature (PE, 262; 314; L, 24; 24), it is remarkable that, the more one looks, one can find numerous examples of animal life in his novels. Plateforme, just to take one example, mentions everything from insects to rhinoceroses, via all manner of fish (the curious passage, at once dreamlike and matter-of-fact, about silurids and silurid fishers (P, 14–15; 9–10)), amphibians (the toad that inspires a moment of existential contemplation in Michel (P, 127–8; 129–30)) and sundry mammals, a word never employed innocently by Houellebecq but always intended to remind us of humanity’s animal inheritance, as in the tourist diners described as ‘Deux mammifères devant un crustacé’ (‘Two mammals in search of a crustacean’ (P, 105; 105)): we are never allowed to forget that human beings, too, are part of the natural world, subject to instincts and appetites and perhaps, ultimately, to predation and extinction.

Of course, comparing humans to animals is, in itself, not very meaningful or original; it is, in fact, as Mary Midgley pointed out in the 1970s, ‘obscure’ since we have no clear basis for opposing humans to animals. As Midgley put it, ‘Drawing analogies “between people and animals” is, on the face of it, rather like drawing them “between foreigners and people” ’. In reality, according to Midgley, what we do most often when comparing people to animals is to project human traits on to the rest of the animal kingdom. We like to think of ferocity as an ‘animalistic’ quality, yet most large predators are rarely aggressive to members of their own species: if they were, given the highly adapted killing equipment of their claws and fangs, the species would doubtless soon die out. On the contrary, it is human beings who have shown the most persistent and exaggerated tendencies towards intra-species aggression and Midgley speculates that this may be because, lacking the bodily tools that allow for swift and effortless killing, humans never evolved the inhibitions that seem to go along with them in order to ensure species survival. To take another example closer to Houellebecq’s interests, it is also common to use animal analogies to imply that a person is unusually fixated upon, or frenzied in the pursuit
of, sexual behaviour. Again, however, it is only for *Homo sapiens* that sexuality is such a constant and all-pervading source of attention and anxiety; for most other species, writes Midgley, sex is confined to ‘a seasonal disturbance with a definite routine, comparable to Christmas shopping’.  

Is Houellebecq guilty of such thoughtless comparisons between people and animals? From time to time, perhaps. *Plateforme* contains a handful of examples in which animals are hastily ascribed certain conventional characteristics that ultimately bespeak human categories of judgement: thus lizards are ‘lethargic’ (*P*, 17; 11), sheep are ‘stupid’ (*P*, 25; 21), dogs are obedient (*P*, 46; 42) and pigs dirty (*P*, 105; 104). Elsewhere, however, the comparison to animals, even animals of relatively low status in human eyes, serves to reflect badly on *Homo sapiens*. Sheep may be stupid, but so is the brother of Aïcha who murdered Michel’s father, and at least sheep are not prone to violent reactions (*P*, 25–6; 21). The copulation of the cockroach apparently has none of the grace or joy of human lovemaking, but it is far more efficient in terms of the reproduction of the species, which will doubtless be around long after humans have perished: ‘nous ne pouvons absolument rien contre les cafards’, notes Michel wistfully (‘There is absolutely nothing we can do about cockroaches’ (*P*, 54; 50)). Most often, perhaps, the comparison to animals serves to imply that humanity’s claims to superior intelligence and (especially) social sophistication are greatly exaggerated. The descriptions of humans’ herd-like behaviour – with their inescapable, if distant, echoes of Nietzsche – memorably have this effect, as when Michel observes that people do not so much live ‘together’ but rather ‘les uns à côté des autres comme des bœufs’ (‘alongside one another like cattle’ (*P*, 26; 21)). By the same token, when Houellebecq evokes higher mammals, such as apes or dolphins, it is not in order to exclaim over their most advanced characteristics (intelligence, sociability, language), but instead to stress the more basic and less charming aspects of their behaviour that are often overlooked: contrary to their popular image, insists Valérie, dolphins live in strictly hierarchical communities and often display aggression towards one another (*P*, 215; 222), characteristics all too evident in human beings. Human society, in short, can be considered, in Houellebecq’s novels, as ‘a natural environment’, comparable to a jungle or a savannah, to whose laws people are obliged to adapt in order to survive (*P*, 320; 330).
The implication of all this, of course, is that human beings, if they are indeed comparable to all other animals, are no more free than other animals, that is to say that they are just as tied to their genetic inheritance and species-level instinct as spiders, or porpoises, or leopards. The British political philosopher John Gray would agree with Houellebecq in this respect. He argues that the belief in human beings’ ability to choose the way they live is a Christian moral inheritance and that a naturalistic, or Darwinian, conception of the world affords no such hope. As Gray notes: ‘We do not speak of a time when whales or gorillas will be masters of their destinies. Why then humans?’ Or, as Houellebecq puts it, when Michel muses on what he sees as the predominantly hormonal determinants of his personality: ‘Dans la plupart des circonstances de ma vie, j’ai été à peu près aussi libre qu’un aspirateur’ (P, 94; 92). But what exactly does all this mean? Must we conclude that there is no such thing as free will? This would probably be hasty since, even if we are able to identify certain genetic or chemical causes for particular patterns of behaviour, Mary Midgley cautions that ‘all causes are incomplete’ and that ‘determinism remains something highly theoretical and remote’. As John Dupré has noted, in an example close to Houellebecq’s own areas of interest, if it were possible to identify a mechanism in the human brain that disposed men to select very young women as ideal mates, it is still not clear that this would tell us ‘anything much about the behaviour or even behavioural dispositions of modern humans’, because this atavistic mechanism would be only one of several inputs affecting mate selection and might itself affect a variety of other behaviours in unpredictable ways.

It is therefore dubious to use evolutionary theory as a straightforward argument against the existence of any kind of free will and, by extension, any moral doctrine, as Houellebecq does sometimes seem tempted to do. In Ennemis publics, for instance, after Bernard-Henri Lévy upholds the Judeo–Christian notion of the special dignity of human beings because they have been created by God, Houellebecq rejects this idea, arguing that there is no difference of nature, only a difference of degree, between humans and other living creatures. All simply represent different points within the vast adventure of evolution and if, at some stage in the not-too-distant future, machines develop consciousness, then they too will simply constitute another stage of the same process. Importantly, however, Houellebecq goes on to argue that Lévy’s very public declarations of
political commitment around a number of worthy causes are ultimately underwritten by his faith in the special (i.e., divinely favoured) nature of humanity. The implication is that since Houellebecq does not share this faith he is not capable of any such commitment and he admits he is baffled by the political engagement of atheist friends which strikes him as altogether groundless (EP, 147–8; 142–3). Now, questioning the grounds of a political commitment is not the same thing as denying the legitimacy of any morality, but the potential for slippage between the two is worrisome, and perhaps explains some of the controversy that Houellebecq has succeeded in stirring up in his work. But the idea that human behaviour is largely dictated by a complex set of genetically determined instincts is not necessarily incompatible with a moral sense. Mary Midgley speculates that primitive Homo sapiens, like other large creatures, may have had some kind of in-built inhibition against killing his own kind, but that, relative to other species, this inhibition was ‘weak and often overborne’. This leads Midgley to the intriguing, if somewhat counter-intuitive suggestion that human morality may have developed, along with intelligence, as a way of making sense of the feelings of remorse that would accompany the infringement of a more basic, instinctual prohibition. As she puts it, ‘Conceptual thought formalizes and extends what instinct started’.8

In any case, when seeking to account for human behaviour, we must consider not only Darwinian natural selection, but also cultural evolution, which, as John Dupré points out, operates quite differently. The transmission of culture can occur laterally, within the same generation, which may exert a stronger influence than the vertical inheritance of cultural norms and values from preceding generations; cultural evolution must be assumed to be Lamarckian, in the sense that acquired characteristics are transmitted to recipients; and, if cultural evolution may also require some concept of ‘fitness’ to determine ‘the tendency of cultural variants to be transmitted to other individuals’, it is not clear to what extent this concept would map on to the equivalent notion within the theory of natural selection.9 It is this process of cultural evolution that Houellebecq is most often describing in his novels, especially, and most famously, in the ‘sociological’ passages of Les Particules élémentaires. This is how Houellebecq documents the change in attitudes towards sex that ultimately leads to the dispiriting sexual predicament that he has been lamenting since Extension du domaine de la lutte. Les Particules shows how Bruno’s generation acquire their patterns of sexual behaviour less from their parents than from their peers within the same
generation, drawing influence from media representations, countercultural movements in North America, etc. These acquired sexual characteristics are then passed on to, and developed in, the subsequent generation, leading to the kind of casual sexual ruthlessness that we witness in Esther’s generation in *La Possibilité d’une île*. If this cultural understanding of sexuality is ‘fit’ to be transmitted between individuals and between generations, it is because it aligns itself neatly with the globally dominant ideology of acquisitive capitalist individualism and not necessarily because it maximises the chances of our species to perpetuate itself; on the contrary, Houellebecq repeatedly suggests that the opposite may be true.

**Posthuman**

One of the most intriguing questions posed by Houellebecq’s novels, and in particular by the futuristic finales of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, is the extent to which human cultural evolution might be consciously guided or directed by humans themselves. It is accepted that the process of natural selection is taking place blindly, in response to local environmental conditions, and is not organised by any purpose, direction or goal. On the other hand, writes John Dupré, ‘cultural evolution suggests no obstacle to the idea that change may be directed, and may even be directed in the service of objectives such as freedom and justice’. Indeed, argues Dupré, since it is cultural evolution, rather than natural selection, that ‘accounts for the speed at which human nature changes over historical time’, it is possible to surmise that ‘human nature may perhaps, in the long run, be a product of human creation’. John Gray, of course, would object to such an optimistic view. He writes: ‘The idea of humanity taking charge of its destiny makes sense only if we ascribe consciousness and purpose to the species’, but consciousness and purpose, to the extent that they exist at all, are characteristics of individuals and not species; species, in Gray’s evocative phrase, ‘are only currents in the drift of genes’. The idea of a directed cultural evolution – in short, the humanist belief in progress – is, in Gray’s blunt dismissal, ‘not science, but religion’. With this in mind, I would contend that one of the most far-reaching insights in all of Houellebecq’s work is the idea, most fully explored in *La Possibilité d’une île*, that, for humanity to embrace and accelerate its own evolution towards a posthuman successor would require a massive conversion
whose character we can only identify as religious even if, as the deadpan satire of *La Possibilité* makes clear, many of the adepts have less than purely spiritual motivations for converting. After all, mass conversions on this scale and in this manner are not without precedent in the history of humanity, as the last 2000 years have amply demonstrated.

John Gray, on the other hand, argues that the posthuman evolution of our species, if and when it happens, will not come about as the result of some unified paradigm shift but rather will be effected ‘haphazardly, as an upshot of struggles in the murky realm where big business, organised crime, and the hidden parts of government vie for control’.

Any such transformation will necessarily be propelled by developments in technology but, insists Gray, we would be just as deluded if we saw ourselves as masters of our own technological progress: ‘Technology is not something that humankind can control’, he writes ominously, ‘It is an event that has befallen the world’. Some commentators have sought to imagine a future in which genetic technologies would be harnessed by governments in a sort of positive eugenics designed to engineer social justice. ‘Eugenics’, here, would no longer mean the genocide or enforced sterilisation of certain groups, but rather guaranteeing the availability of biotechnologies to all in order to facilitate the social mobility of ‘genetically disadvantaged people’. But such progressive legislation seems frankly implausible when we take into account the vast profits to be made in biotechnology by private enterprise, especially in a society like that of the USA where the medical establishment is geared more towards the profits of pharmaceutical and insurance corporations than towards preventive medicine or social welfare. A beneficent state-sponsored biotechnology seems further unlikely given the conflicting biases of different political groups: as Francis Fukuyama points out, it is hard to see how this issue could fail to provoke what may be irreconcilable divisions between economic libertarians and social conservatives. Chris Hables Gray argues that change in this area will be driven less by governments than by individual parents ‘who will be the strongest advocates for cloning, just as they have pushed for surrogacy and in vitro fertilization despite government refusals to fund such research’.

This is another aspect of human cultural evolution of which Houellebecq has shown himself to be acutely aware: the tendency of the short-term, egotistical choices of individuals to generate unpredictable consequences for whole societies. *Les Particules élémentaires* showed how the desires of individuals for more sex, free from guilt and from domestic responsibilities, led, for many, to irreparable social isolation while threatening a
variety of demographic emergencies (see below). *La Possibilité d’une île* and *La Carte et le territoire* argue that the same generation’s clamour for the ‘right to die’ – inspired by the questionable belief that, because suffering is unwanted, it must be undignified and unfair – may usher in a future in which the elderly find curtailed their very right to live. It is by no means far-fetched to suggest that millions of individual choices, facilitated by medical technology, can have population-level effects: Francis Fukuyama points to the example of sex ratios in contemporary Asia, dramatically altered by a cultural preference for boys and the ready availability of sonograms and legal abortions. With the proliferation of ever more sophisticated genetic diagnostic technologies, it is possible to envisage the creation of a ‘genetic overclass’ among those wealthy enough to maximise the genetic potential of their offspring while eliminating all ‘defects’. The real problem is that, in such a scenario, what constitutes a ‘defect’ would come to be defined by the class with the technological power to avoid it. Fukuyama offers the following thought experiment: assuming a genetic predisposition to homosexuality was located, and assuming gayness could be prevented by a drug taken during pregnancy, what proportion of pregnant women – necessarily heterosexual in the vast majority – would choose to take that drug, even as they protested that they had ‘nothing against’ gay people? What would be the consequences for the gay population, and for the presumably much smaller number of gay people remaining in that generation? To what extent could we say that humanity had been ‘improved’ by such genetic engineering? Chris Hables Gray, citing the work of Michael Gruber, wonders whether the posthuman future that our species is embarking upon may represent a new Age of Exploration, but reminds us that the last one – the period of colonial expansion – was not accomplished without massive programmes of genocide.

This may come across as somewhat alarmist, but it is worth pointing out that, even in the absence of advanced technologies of genetic modification, human cultural evolution over the past few decades has brought about some dramatic demographic shifts that may give rise to unpredictable and possibly violent consequences over the coming century. Everyone seems to agree that current rates of population growth are unsustainable given the finite resources of this planet, but there is little consensus as to how and when this growth may be reined in. John Gray seems to believe in a naturally occurring, species-level retrenchment. Humans, he writes, ‘are like other animals in responding to stress. They react to scarcity and overcrowding by tuning down...
the reproductive urge'. But, as Chris Hables Gray’s warning, above, implies, it could be that the competition for resources takes place at the expense of certain unfavoured groups in society. This too is an area in which Houellebecq has shown himself to be a shrewd observer. In his book *Our Posthuman Future*, Francis Fukuyama indicates a series of potential demographic time-bombs, all of which resonate richly with Houellebecq’s novels. Fukuyama suggests that, given the ageing population in the developed world, and given the rapidly growing population of the developing world, together with its skewed sex ratio, by the middle of this century the planet may be divided into a northern hemisphere ‘whose political tone is set by elderly women’ and a South dominated by ‘super-empowered angry young men’. Now, although, as we have repeatedly suggested in this book, Houellebecq’s residual sexism would make it difficult for him to imagine a feminine politics, it is true that the posthuman Utopias of both *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* have a partly feminine, or at least emasculated, character: ‘Demain sera féminin’ becomes the slogan of *Les Particules*’s new species (*PE*, 311; 374), while *La Possibilité*’s neo-humans observe a code of behaviour set down by the Supreme Sister. At the same time, for all the casual sexism of *Plateforme*, Houellebecq is aware that a significant proportion of the clientele for an expanded sex tourism would be drawn from the ranks of affluent, unattached, older western women, attracted to the virility of southern males. But the novel’s conclusion implies that such a disposition of economic and sexual power could not long go unchallenged by the inhabitants of the South.

Secondly, Fukuyama suggests that, within the developed world, increased life expectancies and decreased birth rates will mean that ‘political, social, and intellectual change will occur much more slowly’, potentially creating a situation in which a large, elderly, conservative majority stifles the ambitions of a small, young, radicalised minority. In this case, predicts Fukuyama, ‘generational warfare will join class and ethnic conflict as a major dividing line in society’. Not only that, but Fukuyama wonders whether ‘in another fifty years, most developed societies may have become “post-sexual”’ since the majority of the population will be past their prime reproductive years. To what extent will a society continue to allow its media, its clothing industry and its cultural values to be defined by the image of twenty-year-olds when such people constitute only a tiny minority of the population? Could it be that the post-sexual Utopias of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* are merely fictional exaggerations of a reality that awaits us,
not within the body of our posthuman successor, but in our own ageing 
body politic?

Finally, Fukuyama notes that one of the consequences of the uneven 
sex ratios in Asia is that, before long, some 20 per cent of China’s 
marrige-age men will be unable to find a partner. As Fukuyama 
comments, ‘It is hard to imagine a better formula for trouble, given 
the propensity of unattached young males to be involved in activities 
like risk-taking, rebellion and crime’.29 We know, from the horrific 
evocations of male adolescence in *Les Particules élémentaires*, how 
destructive Houellebecq considers male sexuality to be when deprived 
of an outlet. His early work – *Les Particules* and *Extension* – insisted 
upon the criminal tendencies encouraged by sexual frustration in single 
men. Perhaps, far from the shocking, amoral provocations they have 
sometimes been portrayed as in the media, we will one day come to see 
Houellebecq’s books – like other novels of anticipation such as *Brave 
New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – as rather tame and almost 
comforting visions compared to the reality that awaits us.