

Making Sense of Humanity in a Posthumanist Age

Ann Chinnery

Simon Fraser University

In proposing the 2017 conference theme, “Making Sense of Humanity in a Posthumanist Age,” our intention had been to mark the 30th anniversary of Bernard Williams’ 1987 Stanford Lecture, “Making Sense of Humanity.” We invited authors to consider what remains of “humanity” or “the human” in a time when artificial intelligence, sophisticated robotics, and radical shifts in scientific, social, legal, and political thought have blurred the boundary between the human and non-human. When we posted the call for papers, the US presidential election had not yet happened, and most of us had no idea how urgent the question of what remains of humanity would become, as dehumanizing rhetoric became a regular feature of campaign rallies and reports on the nightly news. In the weeks leading up to our meeting, PES members from countries named in the then-newly-instated travel ban faced uncertainty about whether they would be allowed entry into the US to attend the conference or whether they would be turned away at the border. Some non-US-based members declined to cross the border as a matter of conscience, and others felt torn about whether to attend. These were challenging times on many levels, but once we came together in Seattle, the conversations were thought-provoking, invigorating, and inspiring, and technology enabled us to accommodate those presenters who could not be with us in person. Since then, we have continued to be pressed, not only intellectually, but also personally, politically, and socially, by questions of what it means to be human and how to respond to those who are most vulnerable in a way that affirms and supports their humanity.

In revisiting the articles in this year’s collection, it is clear that our work as philosophers of education plays a vital role in helping us begin to address the educational aspects of these questions. In this brief introduction I will not mention each article individually, but will instead speak to a few thematic threads that emerged.

The three Featured Essays all take on the conference theme explicitly, but from quite different angles. Stephanie Mackler's, "Raising a Human: An Arendtian Inquiry into Child-rearing in a Technological Era," offers a critique of the proliferation of methods and techniques of parenting, calling instead for a recognition of the parent-child relationship as between human beings navigating their world(s). In "Educating Cyborgs" Ben Kotzee disentangles the metaphysical and epistemological arguments for reconceiving what we mean when we talk about the mind. He argues that it is not the mind (or learning) that extends into technology, but rather it is our use of technology that has become extended. Oded Zipory's "Gabriel Marcel and the Possibility of Non-anthropocentric Hope in Environmental Education" rejects the romantic approach to hope in environmental education, arguing instead for Marcel's concept of hope as a mystery that involves the human and the non-human, and which rejects technocratic and anthropocentric approaches towards nature.

This collection also includes articles that address the conference theme through strands of scholarship not often represented at PES. Adam Greteman's "Queer Replication: Viral Gifts in the 21st Century," for example, asks how the transmission and replication of HIV via barebacking disrupts education's normative logics of health and reproduction. And in "Fabricating the Posthuman Child in Early Childhood Education and Care," Therese Lindgren and Magdalena Sjöstrand Öhrfelt explore how the fiction of "the posthuman child" is created through educational research and policy, as a response to the crises of our time.

Another thematic thread that emerged is a focus on the ecological aspects of posthumanism and posthumanist discourses. In "Holding the Pieces: Pedagogy Beyond Disruptive Environmental Education," David Chang explores the emotional pitfalls that threaten to ensnare students as they come to understand the implications of the ecological crisis; and in her "Reclaiming Human Vulnerability in the Age of Anthropocene," Huey-Li Li argues that modern schooling must embrace and engage ecological and human vulnerability in order to assume ethical responsibilities for mitigating the ongoing ecological decline. Claudia Ruitenberg's "Barefoot in the Kitchen: New Materialism, Education, and Reproductive Labor" takes up Jane Roland Martin's argument for

education in the reproductive processes associated with the home, but explores it through a new materialist lens, focusing on the ecological-political role of reproductive labor.

In contrast to articles that focus on the “post” in posthumanism, several authors took the theme as an opportunity to argue for reclaiming a space for the human and the cultivation of humanity in education. Examples of this approach include Stephanie Burdick-Shepard’s “Cultivating Childhood Friendships as an Educative Aim: Virginia Woolf’s Non-Humanist, Humanist Challenge to Philosophers of Education,” Naoko Saito’s “Excellent Sheep or Wild Ducks? Reclaiming the Humanities for Beautiful Knowledge,” and Cara Furman’s “To Be at Home: Including Each Human in the Classroom.” The collection is rounded out by excellent papers on a variety of perennial PES themes such as democratic education, neoliberalism and the politics of education more broadly, moral education, and the arts in education.

In addition to the refereed contributions, the collection includes Georgia Warnke’s Distinguished Invited Essay, “Historical Understanding and the Blemish of Extraordinary Moral Legacies.” Warnke turns to philosophical hermeneutics to articulate a pluralist interpretive framework, as a path between the triumphalist discourses of American exceptionalism and the realism of Charles Mills and others who insist that the US is a fundamentally racial polity. In her response to Warnke, Kal Alston draws on teacher Abel Meeropol’s 1937 poem, “Strange Fruit” (later made famous by Billie Holiday’s song recording), and Frederick Douglass, to name the urgency of what is at stake, and the risks and “potential cost of interpretive slip and fall,” in a hermeneutic framing.

Finally, Deborah Kerdeman’s Presidential Essay, “Pulled Up Short: Exposing White Privilege,” gives us a glimpse of the philosopher as teacher, as she recalls a conversation with her doctoral students that gave her new insight into white privilege and her self-understanding. Kerdeman argues that while such experiences of being pulled up short cannot be planned or predicted, they have the potential to be profoundly educative. In responding to Kerdeman, Ron Glass draws on the Black Lives Matter movement’s taking up of the notion of being “woke,” not as a critical moment or an encounter, but as an ongoing embodied

vigilance and a continuous critical awareness of racial and social justice. He proposes the experience of being pulled up short as a potential starting point for an ongoing praxis of getting and staying woke. Chris Higgins responds to Kerdeman from a different perspective, focusing on her identity as teacher, her sense of pedagogical responsibility, and her commitment to both difficult self-knowledge and to being accountable to her students.

In closing, then, a few words of gratitude. This *Philosophy of Education 2017 Yearbook* has been made possible only by the collective effort and goodwill of many. First, my sincere thanks to Debby Kerdeman for the invitation to serve as Program Chair, for her quiet, yet strong leadership, and for our many phone calls and consultations along the way. I am also deeply indebted to the 2017 Program Committee, whose names appear on page ii of this volume, and whose prompt, critical, and careful reviews played a key role in shaping the program and this collection. In addition to the authors of papers and alternative session presenters, I want to make special mention of the respondents whose critical engagement with the papers serves as one of the most important features of our annual meetings, and which, in my view, enriches immensely the conversations in our field. Sincere thanks also to Jacky Barreiro, our Graduate Assistant, for her organizational skills and readiness to step in whenever needed, and to our Executive Director, Josh Corngold, whose attention to detail, steady hand, and seemingly endless patience made my job truly a pleasure. Finally, my warm thanks to Naomi Hodgson, Managing Editor of the Yearbook, whose fine work, almost entirely behind the scenes, has brought this collection to fruition.