
Short Essay

We have never not been inhuman

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Abstract This essay uses a reading of an emblem of Fortuna from George Wither's *Collection of Emblemes* (1635) to challenge one interpretation of Western modernity: the notion that a mathematicized theory of nature involved an unprecedented inclusion of limit cases – counterfactual or impossible states of affairs – into accounts of the real behavior of bodies. Instead of viewing the arrival of such mathematical limit cases as the beginning of a worldview that embraced the inhuman, the essay argues that pre-modern texts and cultural forms also made use of known impossibilities in the form of visual or narrative abstractions: these too were limit cases of actual experiences (rather than pure impossibilities), thus, we have never not been inhuman.

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The image (see Figure 1), taken from George Wither's *Collection of Emblemes* (1635), depicts the classical goddess Fortuna or Occasio, famed for her ability to balance on a ball. I have added several lines and a sphere to the original engraving in order to make a visual point: this classic emblem, a common one in the Renaissance, is also a diagram of sorts. Three elements in the image come together here: the goddess herself; a winged ball that supports her weight; and the circular frame of the image, which hugs the sphere she is standing on and cuts off the hilly landscape in the background. One can imagine Fortuna rotating around the circumference of the circular frame here, like a ball bearing, or even remaining exactly where she is, balanced with a kind of superhuman poise.



Figure 1: From George Wither, *A collection of emblemes, ancient and moderne* (London: Printed by A.M. for Richard Royston, 1635). From the Thordarson Collection. (By courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison.)

Of course this is not how the image was intended to be read, and my interpretation of the emblem as a diagram of forces deliberately ignores a certain visual history of *Fortuna* and *Occasio* that emphasizes their connection with variability, wheels, the sea, razors (held in the hand) and the tuft of hair that can never be grasped once she has passed. What I am focusing on here, perhaps opportunistically, is a certain abstract potential in the elements that make up the emblem. What if we focus only on the state of balance or poise implied by this image, inferring a poetics of force from the shape of the object that Fortune sits perched upon? How smooth is this sphere? How flat is the ground? How often does she begin to fall this way and that? What is the

meaning of her capacity – pictured here in the arc of her body and the winds whipping around her – to self-correct her movements in an instant and so regain her poise? If the sphere is round and the ground is flat, isn't she constantly falling in multiple directions? When does a particular correction begin and end? What is the appropriate interval – of time, of space – in which to think this minutest of capacities for dynamic change?

Whether we draw the lines on the emblem or not, this image introduces us to a visual problem that is immanent in its very form: the problem of accounting for intervals of change that are potentially very small, infinitesimally small. If we ask what it is that is inhuman about Fortune's powers – what it is about her virtuoso brand of dynamic poise that Renaissance thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Niccolò Machiavelli jealously wanted to approximate – it is her ability to act in an instant that exhausts specification. She exemplifies the limit case of improvisation or *sprezzatura*: accommodation so quick it may ultimately be invisible. (This is what poise is, after all: the local reconciliation of constantly interacting forces.) But if the emblem provides us with a diagrammatic reduction in the complexity of what it depicts – do bodies really stand like this? are balls really round? does the wind move this way and the hair that? – it does so in a way that amplifies another kind of complexity: the complexity of forces impinging upon one another in a constant, changing flux. That form of motive complexity, what would eventually be further reduced or strategically re-described with the help of the calculus, is really the subject of this image. I don't think it takes a Newton (or even a mathematician) to see that there is something provocative about this pose and the type of contingency or variability that is being rendered in pictorial form.

I draw attention to this diagrammatic quality of the image to make two points. First, it would be a mistake to view the Renaissance image of Fortune on her ball as simply an *iconographic revival* of a classical form – an iconography that is eclipsed by the image of Fortune-as-axis, holding her wheel in the Middle Ages. The intellectual context that subtends this revival gives new meaning to the kind of balance that is depicted in this image: by the end of the seventeenth century, both the theory of *conatus* (which for Hobbes is the instantaneous movement of the endeavoring will) and a dynamic theory of force (accompanied by a calculus of infinitesimals) will make the obviously fabulous state of affairs in this image a limit case of the real world in which humans act and deliberate. While it may be impossible to say exactly when Fortuna begins a particular correction or what the smallest possible interval of movement might be in this ideal situation, the diagrammatic state in which forces balance and counterpoise one another is nevertheless continuous with reality. The ball, once moved to the left, will continue to do so until acted upon by Fortuna, even if we never see the correction. As Amos Funkenstein points out in his *Theology and the Scientific Imagination in the Seventeenth Century*, the seventeenth century is the period in which factually impossible states of affairs (a body naturally continuing in its



rectilinear motion forever without interference) become the basis on which to calculate real changes in the world. One sees the action of forces in the deviations of objects from their natural inertial tendency: but one can never observe that natural state itself without qualification.

But there is another consequence to the rise of a dynamic theory of force which we might also glimpse in this image. If the ball begins to move left but is shifted right by Fortune's foot, there will be a moment of correction (where, how long?) when the ball – about to stand still – nevertheless expresses a real inertial tendency to move left and a countervailing force that pulls it to the right. Both forces are real, but neither is fully expressed in motion because they are summed. (You'll remember this from the parallelograms you had to manipulate in high school physics.) Dynamism creates conditions in which a body's capacity for movement is not fully visible: for any apparent state of balance, there may be hundreds of forces acting on the system of ball, figure and ground which are reconciled in the shiver of balance. Real but unexpressed; possible but not actualized; abstract but nevertheless real: there is something about Fortuna's balance that makes the whole world a diagram of converging forces. Mathematics will become the preferred language for reckoning this kind of complexity, and the diagram will be its most persuasive visual form, but we might recognize that narrative too can express such states of poise, counterpoise and – to use an old phrase a new way – overdetermination. Think for example of Claudius' complaint in *Hamlet*, when he cannot pray:

Pray can I not.
 Though inclination be as sharp as will,
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
 And like a man to double business bound,
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
 And both neglect. (3.3.38–43)¹

Here poise turns to paralysis: two forces are at work (guilt, desire to confess) and manifest themselves as opposed inclinations, neither of which can be expressed. The passage does what the image of Fortuna does, but to different effect: it shows us a plurality of forces – here, inclinations – that can be summed without being expressed. The narrative of the play, which is itself a diagrammatic reduction of the complexity of human impulses, dispositions and inclinations, does the same thing that a fully developed theory of force would do for the emblem above. It makes visible the presence of potential movements, states unrealized, and in doing so suggests a level of depth and interrelation of elements that is itself a function of those unrealized possibilities.

This brings me to my second point, which is really more of a question. Mathematics and diagrams have often been associated with an anti- or inhuman

¹ The citation of *Hamlet* is from the Norton (1997) edition of Shakespeare's plays, by act, scene and line numbers.

reduction of complexity into ‘graphs and numbers,’ a reduction that we associate with the rise of experimentalism in the seventeenth century. Why should this be so? Are there not, on the one hand, ways in which narrative itself is – particularly in terms of plot – designed to implement a strategic reduction in complexity among the social and physical sources of change and transformation in the world? Why can’t a narrative life from the *Legenda Aurea* marshal counterfactual ideals – virtues, inclinations, dispositions – that are strictly speaking impossible to realize in the lived world but which nevertheless impinge on that world in all sorts of visible and invisible ways? Perhaps motion and mathematics are late arrivals here, taking up the position of ‘limiting cases’ (as in, a body moving rectilinearly to infinity) that were already being plotted in moral and imaginative literature? What, on the other hand, are we to make of the claim that mathematics in particular and perhaps diagrams more generally are inhuman because not fully particularized? This last claim seems to be on the minds of contemporary philosophers, and so I will close with a reflection on the ‘languages of reduction’ that we are willing to accept in the humanities or human sciences.

There are some new strains emerging in Continental philosophy that offer a greater role to abstractions – even mathematical abstractions – in the apprehension of the real. Baidou’s embrace of set theory is well known, but I’m thinking here of Graham Harman’s use of medieval occasionalism to describe what he calls the ‘vicarious causation’ between the minimal elements in his ontology, what he calls ‘objects.’ Also of interest is the work of Quentin Meillassoux, whose critique of ‘correlationism’ has re-contextualized the Kantian critical turn with the following effect: language loses its privileged status as the mediator between mind and whatever reality exists (mathematics takes its place). Both of these philosophies represent a turn in Continental thinking to the extent that both Harman and Meillassoux refuse to make language the main object of study or the allegorical substrate of their respective ontologies. Instead, things in the world are granted full mediating power: their interactions with each other are as real as our interactions with them and with other humans. The Kantian ‘Copernican Revolution’ thus looks a lot less Copernican, because Kant is seen as installing the human – and human language – as the transcendental switchpoint from which intelligible being arises. Meillassoux looks to mathematics to take over this mediating function, precisely because it is indifferent (on his account) to human existence and cognition. Harman is a bit more friendly to the traditional humanistic enterprise, suggesting that reality – which is constantly unfolding with or without a human observer or mediator – can nevertheless be gestured at or alluded to with metaphors or other forms of linguistic indirection. In either case, the inhuman is introduced into our traffic with the world; language is demoted somewhat, in part because it is associated with a certain kind of species narcissism that makes all problems human-mediated-language problems.



I think the pre- and early modern archive, particularly the archive of narrative, ought to be consulted as we attempt to re-introduce non-human actors into our accounts of the social and physical world. Part of the correction offered by Harman, Meillassoux and others of the ‘speculative realist’ school is welcome, since they do in my opinion draw attention to a certain linguistic tunnel-vision in the Continental project.² There is something *other* about nature – Meillassoux’s fossil that was produced well before humans ever evolved to look at it – just as there is something other about linguistic artifacts of human culture. If you think one of these types of alterity is illusory, you need to explain why. But with reference to these new approaches, I think scholars of the pre- and early modern have something to contribute to the overall shifts that are taking place in the philosophical landscape. Our work with narratives puts us in touch with forms of reduction or compression that are every bit as diagrammatic and so (potentially) inhuman as those who study the compression algorithms of physics or planetary biology. The key for us is the way in which narratives of human action introduce counterfactual ideals – impossible, limiting, but also operative and effectual – that are immanent in the objects we study, not simply projections of the creators or interpreters of those objects. The issue here is where one locates the absence of the human, just as a century ago, it was where one located its essence. If a narrative shows a disposition or inclination to virtue, and that virtue is unrealizable, shouldn’t we then say that such a disposition or inclination is unreal or inhuman? As abstract as a line headed off into space without end?

Our traffic with fictions – the hypothetical landmarks that attend the creation and interpretation of any narrative – is powerful precisely because it is difficult to locate along the human/inhuman continuum. We didn’t become inhuman, however, in some fabulous modern moment when mathematics or language became the pivot of the world. If, according to Bruno Latour, we have never been modern, then we ought to add that we were never not inhuman either.

About the Author

Michael Witmore is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the author of *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England* (Stanford, 2001), which won the Perkins Prize for Narrative Analysis in 2003. He is also the author of *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Cornell, 2007) and *Shakespearean Metaphysics* (Continuum, 2008), and the editor, with Andrea Immel, of *Childhood and Children’s Books in Early Modern Europe, 1550–1800* (Routledge, 2006) (E-mail: witmore@wisc.edu).

2 Speculative realists, a group that includes such figures as Alberto Toscano, Ian Hamilton Grant, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux, is a loose configuration of thinkers who are attempting to overturn the Kantian critical turn in Continental philosophy. Two recurring themes in their work are: a refusal to place the human or language at the center of epistemology, and an insistence that one can be a realist without being a naïve empiricist. They are associated with the UK philosophy journal *Collapse*; see especially Volume 2, ‘Speculative Realism,’ at http://blog.urbanomic.com/urbanomic/pub_collapse2.php.



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