

**Research Article****The Genealogy of the Human: Philosophical Foundations of the Subject Prior to the Posthuman Turn****Dr. Bindu L.**

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**Corresponding Author: Dr. Bindu L.****Abstract**

This research paper explores the philosophical genealogy of the human subject from the early modern period to the mid-twentieth century, tracing the conceptual architecture that preceded the posthuman turn. Historically, the modern subject emerged through the Enlightenment's construction of "Man" a rational, autonomous agent defined against the natural world. This trajectory begins with Cartesian dualism, which established the cogito as a secure metaphysical foundation, separating the thinking mind from the mechanical body. John Locke furthered this by redefining the person through psychological continuity and memory. Immanuel Kant's focus on autonomy and the categorical imperative solidified the human as an exceptional moral end in itself. The paper further examines the nineteenth-century biological turn, where Darwinian evolution challenged intrinsic essentialism by situating *Homo sapiens* within a historical, genealogical nexus. Despite this, the early twentieth-century tradition of Philosophical Anthropology sought to recover human uniqueness through Max Scheler's concept of "spirit," Helmuth Plessner's "eccentric positionality," and Arnold Gehlen's view of the human as a "deficient being" that compensates for biological lack through cultural exteriorization.

The mid-twentieth-century crisis of humanism is analyzed through the debate between Jean-Paul Sartre's radical freedom and Martin Heidegger's anti-metaphysical critique, alongside the structuralist "erasure of man" proposed by Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser. Finally, the study considers the cybernetic transition, characterized by Norbert Wiener's feedback loops and the "erasure of embodiment" noted by N. Catherine Hayles, which bridged the gap between organic and mechanical systems. By mapping these shifts, the paper concludes that posthumanism represents the final disintegration of the humanist "Man," recognizing the inherent instability of a subject that was always already entangled with the non-human world..

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, Philosophical Anthropology, Posthumanism.**Introduction**

The conceptualization of the human being in Western philosophy is not the discovery of a static, transhistorical truth but rather a complex, multi-layered architecture of thought that has undergone radical transformations from the early modern period to the mid-twentieth century. Before the emergence of posthumanism, a movement characterized by the deconstruction of anthropocentric privilege and the blurring of boundaries between the organic and the synthetic modernity was defined by the construction of a rational, autonomous, and exceptional subject. This specific iteration of humanity, often referred to as "Man," was a unique invention of the Enlightenment, born from shifts in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge that prioritized consciousness, agency, and a distinct separation from the natural world. To understand the

posthuman, one must first engage in an archaeology of this pre-posthuman subject, tracing its origins from Cartesian dualism through Enlightenment moral philosophy, the biological turn of the nineteenth century, and the eventual anti-humanist critiques that heralded its fragmentation.

### **The Cartesian Foundation and the Emergence of the Rational Subject**

The modern understanding of the human begins with the systematic skepticism of René Descartes, whose publication of the *Discourse on the Method* in 1637 established the thinking subject as the secure metaphysical foundation for all scientific inquiry. Descartes' celebrated dictum, *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"), prioritized self-consciousness as the primary evidence of existence, effectively inaugurating a period in which the human was defined not by a biological substrate, but by the capacity for rational thought. This turn toward the internal subject created a fundamental dualism between the mind (*res cogitans*) and the body (*res extensa*). In this framework, the mind is a non-extended, immaterial substance that serves as the seat of subjective experience, while the body is viewed as a mechanical system governed by the laws of physics, essentially no different from a machine or an animal.

This Cartesian dualism had profound epistemological implications, establishing the problem of objectivity in empirical knowledge as the central challenge of modernity. By denominating the material world as an "external" realm known only through the mediation of internal ideas, Descartes created a divide that future philosophers would struggle to bridge. Implicit in this move was the elevation of the human above the rest of the natural order. This metaphysical exceptionalism provided the groundwork for the Enlightenment's confidence in humanity's intellectual power to achieve systematic knowledge of nature and to serve as an authoritative guide in practical life.

The refinement of this subject occurred through the empiricism of John Locke, who shifted the focus from the metaphysical soul to the psychological continuity of the "person." Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) famously proposed the mind as a *tabula rasa*, with identity formed through the association of ideas and the persistence of consciousness over time. For Locke, the term "person" was a forensic one, denoting an agent capable of law, morality, and accountability. This allowed for a secularized understanding of human identity that remained centered on internal mental states rather than biological essence, a move that nonetheless maintained the human as a uniquely thinking being capable of reflection.

### **Enlightenment Autonomy and the Moral Architecture of the Human**

If Descartes provided the epistemological anchor for the modern human, Immanuel Kant provided its moral zenith. Kant defined Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity," an immaturity characterized by the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. At the heart of the Kantian project is the concept of autonomy, the capacity of the rational will to be a law unto itself, independent of natural inclinations or external dogmas. The Kantian human is a rational being possessing an innate right to freedom, which must be realized through the social contract and the rule of law.

Kant's moral philosophy elevated the human to a position of supreme dignity. As beings capable of universalizing their will through reason, humans must always be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means. This moral exceptionalism creates a sharp divide between the human and the instinct-driven animal world. While animals are governed by hypothetical imperatives actions taken to achieve specific desires, humans alone can act according to categorical imperatives, performing duties for their own sake out of a "good will" purified from natural desires. This vision of the human as a self-legislating agent provided the philosophical justification for individual liberty and representative government, cementing the "modern man" as a rational, autonomous individual who shapes the world with reason and free will.

### **The Buffered Self and the Secular Experience of Humanity**

To understand the lived experience of the pre-posthuman subject, one must consider the transition from the "porous self" to the "buffered self," a concept articulated by Charles Taylor. In the pre-modern era, the human self was porous, vulnerable to external cosmic forces and divine influences that were seen as objectively real and capable of penetrating the boundary of the individual. The modern age, characterized by secularization and the rise of the natural sciences, produced the "buffered self" an inward, autonomous individual insulated from these external supernatural influences. This buffered self views the mind as a self-contained space where meaning is generated internally, rather than being received from a transcendent order.

This shift reflects a move toward an "immanent frame," a worldview where only the natural order exists and the goals of human life are defined entirely in terms of human flourishing. The buffered self is thus a hallmark of the modern humanist paradigm, emphasizing individual freedom, self-responsibility, and the search for an ethic of authenticity. However, this inward turn also leads to a "malaise of modernity," characterized by a loss of a sense of community as the self becomes problematic for itself. The buffered self operates within a "social imaginary" that prioritizes instrumental rationality rather than referring to divine commands, creating a self-sufficient, internally-oriented subject that posthumanism eventually seeks to decentre.

### **The Biological Turn: Evolution and the Animal-Human Frontier**

The nineteenth century introduced a radical destabilization of the rational subject through the development of the biological sciences. Before the Darwinian revolution, biological thought was often grounded in essentialism, which held that every natural kind possessed a single, intrinsic power that determined its membership and characteristic features. With the rise of evolutionary biology, this was challenged by a historical and relational model of species. In this new paradigm, species are identified not by a hidden, unchanging essence, but by their place in a genealogical nexus; humans are defined as a group descended from a specific set of ancestors approximately half a million years ago.

This historical turn threatened the metaphysical foundation of human uniqueness by situating *Homo sapiens* within a continuum of biological variation and change. Darwin noted that "man with all his noble qualities... still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin," effectively bridging the gap between the rational person and the biological animal. This revealed the inherent instability of the modern human category as it attempted to reconcile its animal origins with its rational ambitions. The tension between the biological organism and the psychological "person" became a central problem for later philosophy, as thinkers struggled to define where the animal ends and the human begins.

### **Philosophical Anthropology: The Human as an Excentric and Deficient Being**

In the early twentieth century, the tradition of Philosophical Anthropology emerged to address the increasingly problematic nature of human existence. Max Scheler, in *Man's Place in Nature* (1928), recognized that humans had become a mystery to themselves, possessing vast scientific knowledge but no unified image of their essence. Scheler argued that the human person is always more than the sum of humankind's biology, defined by the capacity for "spirit" (*Geist*) and the ability to take an intentional stance toward the world. For Scheler, humans are "world-open," capable of sublimating their biological drives to pursue higher values and transcendental objects.

Helmuth Plessner further refined this by proposing the concept of "eccentric positionality." While plants are open to their environment and animals are centered within a sphere of action, humans exhibit eccentricity: the ability to project themselves beyond their immediate center of experience and look over their own shoulder. This recursive self-awareness means that humans are "naturally artificial beings," cursed to constantly reinvent themselves through culture because they lack a fixed biological blueprint. Arnold Gehlen extended this by describing the human as a "deficient

being" (*Mängelwesen*) from a morphological standpoint. Lacking specialized adaptations for survival, humans use cognitive abilities to create tools and social institutions that stabilize their existence through a strategy of "relief" (*Entlastung*). These thinkers viewed the human as a being that is inherently exteriorized through its engagement with matter.

### **Existentialism and the Crisis of Humanism: Sartre vs. Heidegger**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the concept of the human was further interrogated by existentialism, which sought to ground identity in radical freedom rather than biological essence. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that for human beings, "existence precedes essence." Sartre claimed that man "first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards." Because there is no God to have a prior conception of human nature, man is "nothing else but that which he makes of himself," possessing a freedom of will that reaches beyond even the Kantian concept of autonomy.

Martin Heidegger responded with a devastating critique in his *Letter on Humanism* (1946). Heidegger argued that the essence of humanism is itself a part of metaphysics, which takes for granted the idea of the human as an *animal rationale*, a body plus a soul or reason. He rejected the Sartrean focus on the human actor and consciousness, resituating the human as *Dasein* ("Being-there"), the place where Being is revealed in the world. He famously stated that "Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell," suggesting that human identity is a matter of dwelling within a larger ontological structure rather than the sovereign choice of an autonomous ego. This critique served as a crucial foundation for post-structuralism and contemporary posthumanism, which similarly seek to decenter the human subject.

### **Structuralism and the Deconstruction of the Unified Subject**

The mid-twentieth century saw the rise of anti-humanism as a dominant theoretical force. Anti-humanism rejected the idea of a universal "human nature," viewing these concepts as historically relative or ideological. Instead of seeing individuals as the origin points of social life, anti-humanists like Louis Althusser argued that individuals are the "supports" or "effects" of social relations. Althusser's concept of "interpellation" described how individuals are "hailed" into identity by ideological apparatuses schools, churches, families into predefined social scripts.

Michel Foucault provided the most famous articulation of this turn in *The Order of Things*. Foucault argued that "Man" is a recent cultural arrangement born of the Enlightenment rather than a timeless truth. He asserted that truth is not discovered through reason but "formatted" through discursive formations systems of language and institutional authority that define what can be said. He famously prophesied that "man" might soon "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea," if the current arrangements of knowledge were to disappear. By the 1960s, the "sovereign subject" of the Enlightenment had been systematically dismantled into a fragmented site of linguistic and psychological processes.

### **The Cybernetic Bridge and the Tragic Limit of the Human**

While continental philosophy was deconstructing the human subject, a parallel revolution in cybernetics was occurring. In 1948, Norbert Wiener coined the term "cybernetics" to describe the study of communication and control in both living organisms and machines. Wiener's "information feedback loop" suggested that the functioning of humans and machines depended on the same self-regulating processes, effectively collapsing the ontological barrier between the organic and the mechanical. This cybernetic turn facilitated the "erasure of embodiment," where all that mattered was the formal generation and manipulation of informational patterns. N. Catherine Hayles notes that this shifted the definition of the human from a biological presence to a symbolic performance, viewing the biological body as an "accident of history" rather than an inevitability.

In contrast to this digital disembodiment, a tradition of "tragic humanism" sought to preserve a sense of human dignity while acknowledging the profound limitations of reason and the vulnerability of the human condition. Martha Nussbaum explored the problem of "moral luck" the fact that many constituents of a well-lived life are vulnerable to factors outside of a person's control. Nussbaum argued that suffering and emotional responses are essential to a correct understanding of our situation as human beings, challenging the ideal of the self-sufficient rational agent by affirming that a "good human life" is necessarily precarious. The transition from a pre-problematic intuition of human unity to the fragmented status of the human in the twentieth century reflects a widening gap between our ideals and our realities. Posthumanism emerges from these ruins, recognizing that we never were utterly different from the animals or machines we sought to master.

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