

Article

A Zhuangzian Tangle: Corroborating (Orientalism in?) Posthumanist Approaches to Subjectivities and Flourishings

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Abstract: Posthumanist critics such as Braidotti—informed by the antihumanisms of Foucault, Irigaray, and Deleuze—seek to respond to advanced capitalism by promoting what they take to be a radical transformation of what it means to be “human,” a way of conceiving being human that is thoroughly and consistently post-anthropocentric. Braidotti calls out advanced capitalism’s global economy as being inconsistently post-anthropocentric. In response, I first lay out ways through which posthumanists can find corroboration in Asian religious thought, such as in Zhuangzi and classical Chan (Zen) Buddhism. I simply put forth, basically side by side, posthumanist positions on subjectivity and flourishing and parallels in Zhuangzi and Chan. This may strike some as sophomoric, which is in part what I hope to illustrate: just how easy it is to find corroboration in these Asian religious resources. This leads to my second issue. Given such conveniently available resources, what might this tell us about limitations in posthumanist Humanities and posthumanist critical theory as developed so far? I seek to bring out both a possible covert form of Orientalism in posthumanism and a myopic methodology in excluding Religious Studies in general as paradigmatic of posthumanist Humanities.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; Posthumanism; Braidotti; Zen; Religious Studies; Orientalism

We face numerous global crises in the Anthropocene and the Posthuman predicament concerning how to respond to it—such as melting polar icecaps from global warming, populist xenophobic nationalism across the globe, inhumane exploitation of nonhuman animals, paradoxes of social media and alienated isolation, and more. Neoliberalism and advanced capitalism, as well as the metaphysics and ethics these presuppose, seem to promise solutions through not only the supposedly salvific invisible hands of the free market but also through the transformation of state power and society in accord with market models (see [Kotsko 2018](#), p. 5). Symbolized in pop culture icons like “Ron Swanson,” we are told that only if we privatize education, healthcare, park management, etc., can we hope to overcome our current bureaucratic failings. Through urging privatization, advanced capitalism produces “differences for the sake of commodification,” cultivating a “vampiric consumption” of goods that distorts cultural others like fusion cooking and world music ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 58), and capitalizes on biogenetic databanks like 23andMe ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 61).

Posthumanist critics such as Braidotti—informed by the antihumanisms of Foucault, Irigaray, Deleuze, and Derrida—seek to respond to this state of affairs by promoting what they take to be a radical transformation of our understanding of what it means to be “human,” a way of conceiving being human that is thoroughly and consistently post-anthropocentric. Braidotti calls out advanced capitalism’s global economy as being inconsistently post-anthropocentric. On the one hand, it is post-anthropocentric “in that it ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market . . . ” ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 63). On the other hand, however, it is not “post-humanistic” ([Braidotti 2013](#),

p. 65) and misrecognizes its assumed Humanism as structuring values, as can be detected in animal rights activists' species egalitarianism in response to the inhumane treatment of animals (see [Braidotti 2013](#), p. 79). Such efforts inadvertently confirm a binary human–animal hierarchy and deny animal specificity by making them emblems of trans-species or universal empathy. Such covert Humanism is, for Braidotti, one root cause of our inability to adequately respond to today's opportunities for change. What we supposedly need instead is a new "posthumanist postanthropocentrism" rooted in a vitalist materialism or interdependent monism that does not set up the human as a "transcendental <sic.>" value (p. 86). What we need, writes Braidotti, is "to devise a new vocabulary, with new figurations . . ." (85) that collapses the "nature/culture" divide and is embodied in "an ethics based on the primacy of the relation, of interdependence, which values nonhuman or a-personal Life" (p. 95).

In what follows, I describe two issues that are mutually informative. First, I lay out ways through which posthumanists can find corroboration in Asian religious thought, such as in Zhuangzi and classical Chan (Zen) Buddhism. I simply put forth, basically side by side, posthumanist positions on subjectivity and flourishing and parallels in Zhuangzi and Chan. This may strike some as sophomoric and naïve, which is in part what I hope to illustrate: just how easy it is to find corroboration in these Asian religious resources. I try to make both posthumanism and Asian philosophy accessible in this way. This leads to my second issue. Given such conveniently available resources, what might this tell us about limitations in posthumanist Humanities and posthumanist critical theory as developed so far? I seek to bring out both a covert form of Orientalism in posthumanism and a myopic methodology in excluding Religious Studies in general as paradigmatic of posthumanist Humanities. To put it succinctly, posthumanism includes a lot that is just Zhuangzi in entrenched Western terminology. Posthumanism also includes a lot that is just classical Chan in that terminology. The primary representatives of Western posthumanism so far, in light of the former two points, seem to suffer from orientalist tendencies. This could have been avoided through engagement with Religious Studies. Fortunately, some efforts are being made to rectify the inclusion of Asian thought, although it leaves out Religious Studies so far (see [Braidotti et al. 2018](#)).

On the one hand, if Religious Studies had a seat at the table in formulating posthumanist Humanities, how different would these discourses be? On the other hand, if Asian resources had been part of the conversation from its inception in antihumanisms, how different would critical posthumanism's discourses be? While these may seem to be substantively different questions, they are interdependent, where they mutually inform one another. They are two aspects of a complex but single phenomenon: the tendency to presuppose, before the conversation begins, who counts.

1. Asian Religious Thought Corroborates Posthumanism

1.1. On Subjectivity

We can isolate the first locus of corroboration on the topic of subjectivity. Posthumanists criticize anthropocentric conceptions of subjectivity. Wolfe, for example, urges that a genuinely posthumanist concept of subjectivity cannot give privilege to the human ([Wolfe 2010](#), p. 90). Posthumanists seek to destabilize rhetorical structures policing categorical separations and hierarchies between humans and nonhumans. For Wolfe, there is no unitary subject underlying experience because "we are always radically other . . . in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity" ([Wolfe 2010](#), p. 89). A posthumanist account of subjectivity dislodges it from "transcendental reason" and bases it in "the immanence of relations" ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 82). The "Human" is not an exceptional transcendent category ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 66). Posthumanism rejects individualism and any metaphysics that could ground it ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 49). Posthumanism, instead, involves the recognition "that none of us are actually distinct from each other" and this affects the way we treat each other because "to harm anything is to harm oneself" ([Pepperell 2003](#), p. 172). As Braidotti writes, "there is a direct connection between monism, the unity of all living matter and postanthropocentrism as a general

frame of reference for contemporary subjectivity” (Braidotti 2013, p. 57). The critical posthuman subject is relational, constituted in and by multiplicity, working across differences as well as internally differentiated, “but still grounded and accountable” (Braidotti 2013, p. 49). The subject is not an “it,” but a “relational process” (Braidotti 2013, p. 41). These are two sides of the same coin: the critique of the reified and isolated subject of experience and the replacement of this with a dynamic and emergent interdependence. Thus, subjectivity is not exclusively human; there are, in other words, nonhuman subjects.

As with most Continental poststructuralism and antihumanism, this seems patently Buddhist without knowing it. The doctrine of “anatman,” for example, challenges naivete about essential selfhood (see Harvey 2009, p. 269; Strong 2002, p. 97). This is extended to its radical limits through the notion of shunyata or the emptiness of all things as self-subsistent or independent things (see Nagarjuna 1995). Instead, the definitive characteristic of reality is pratitya-samutpada or interdependent emergence—where what we ignorantly take to be independently existing subjects and objects are really emergent features of a more fundamental and dynamic relationality (see Thich 2007). Matsumoto Shirō, a leading representative of “Critical Buddhism,” tirelessly asserts that dependent arising is the distinctively Buddhist insight and the measure of all authentic Buddhist thought (Matsumoto 1997, p. 166). My point here is merely that posthumanists can find allies in Buddhism as well as sophisticated ontologies of interdependence that have been given over two millennia of thought on which to ground posthumanist notions of subjectivity.

Additionally, there are interesting—perhaps more interesting insofar as “Buddhism” is in part a construction of nineteenth-century European philology (see Masuzawa 2005)—parallels in Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi criticizes Confucius and other social theorists of the time for promoting an anthropocentric conception of humanity (*ren*) that separates humanity from the rest of nature (see Fingarette 1972; Hecht 2003; Hershock 2005). When humans operate under the aegis of this notion, we alter our “inborn nature” (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 59), mutilating ourselves and other things to fit our egocentric ends (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 62). A tamer, for instance, destroys horses by “breaking” them. For Zhuangzi, however, it is not just that we *should not* give privilege to humans over nonhumans, but also that it is impossible for us to do so since it is mere hubris to believe we know what we are doing or what is good for ourselves or others (Zhuangzi 2009, pp. 17–21; see also Huang 2010; Nelson 2014). Consider Zhuangzi’s parable of Lady Li, “Lady Li was the daughter of a board guard at Ai. At the time when the state of Jin took her, she wept so much that her dress was drenched with tears. However, by the time she got to the palace, shared the square couch with the king, and ate meat, she started to regret that she ever cried” (Zhuangzi 2009, 2:103). Our efforts to understand are instrumental and expedient, and we compile trouble rather than alleviate it—we develop knowledge of rifles to keep safe from tigers, but then we end up shooting each other. There is no “transcendental” position of human subjectivity because this is just one more among other perspectives; there can be no absolute “right” because there is no “non-perspective” from which to view the whole (see Zhuangzi 2009, p. 103). Simply put, there is no Archimedean point by which humans can transcend their perspectives. By definition, one perspective is only such by virtue of limits exposed by alternative perspectives juxtaposed with it. For Zhuangzi, eels need damp places to live; monkeys prefer trees (Zhuangzi 2009, 2:91–93). Pride and envy corrupt our abilities to accept and affirm differences. Zhuangzi illustrates envy with the following: “The unipede envied the millipede, the millipede envied the snake, the snake envied the wind, the wind envied the eye, and the eye envied the mind . . . ” (p. 73). Each explains to the other that their abilities are nothing special but that they have no idea how they do what they do except that they follow the way or “Heavenly Impulse.” Humans take pride in our own form and preferences, but it is mere coincidence and circumstance (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 43). Thus, human perspectives are merely different but equal perspectives (see Huang 2010) in the unfolding cacophony of subjectivities. There is, ultimately, no essential self as human selves are construed in anthropocentric conceptions (see Loy 1996, p. 58). Moreover, an underlying energy, or *qi*, unfolds into an interdependent reality coordinated by yin and yang (see Yearley 1996, pp. 161–62). One of Zhuangzi’s many caricatures of

the dao is the “Great Clump,” a furnace of transformations of all that is—we will return to this below (see Zhuangzi 2009, pp. 43–46). In sum, contemporary Western posthumanists can find corroboration in Zhuangzi (and Buddhism) for the critique of anthropocentric notions of humanity and subjectivity.

1.2. On Flourishing

We can isolate the second point of corroboration on the topic of flourishing. Posthumanist approaches to flourishing rest on what Braidotti calls “the ethics of becoming” that includes a panhuman cosmopolitan and trans-species bond (Braidotti 2013, pp. 49–53). As Irigaray emphasizes, cultural symbols are mere idols if they do not support natural growth and becoming (Irigaray 2002, pp. 144–48). This is not a progression toward some transcendent state of perfection, but an ever-renewing blossoming. Anthropocentric concepts of “nature” and “culture” occlude this. Nature is usually treated as that which grows by itself, while culture is treated as where we make things (Irigaray 2002, pp. 112–25). Blossoming requires both making and letting be, a program that pursues thinking of our body as part of a “nature-culture” continuum and active opposition to the “spurious efficiency and ruthless opportunism of advanced capitalism” (Braidotti 2013, p. 92). The posthumanist approach “posits the ontological priority of difference and its self-transforming force,” particularly as this is rooted in a notion of the body as a “complex assemblage of virtualities” (Braidotti 2013, p. 99). Crucial for a posthuman ethics is awareness of the specific affected body that one happens to be, where one’s death is virtual, as a generative capacity facilitating transformation (Braidotti 2013, p. 138). Posthuman politics emphasizes “transversality,” or interconnection, with an ethics “based on the primacy of the relation, of interdependence, which values nonhuman or a-personal Life” (Braidotti 2013, p. 95). Braidotti uses the Greek term “zoe” to name that “dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself,” or, in other words, a “generative vitality” (Braidotti 2013, p. 60). Politically, this involves resistance against nationalism, xenophobia, and racism, which produce stagnant sedimentation (Braidotti 2013, p. 53). Strategically, it is not about the subversion of norms through developing and performing alternative identities, but through utter dislocations of identity by queering “standardized patterns of sexualized, racialized and naturalized interaction” (Braidotti 2013, p. 99). Postcolonial informed queer theory and queer phenomenology help destabilize any naïve or essentialist approaches to identity politics, binary hierarchies, and discursive practices themselves (see Ahmed 2006; Puar 2013). Braidotti welcomes such displacements of norms with glee (p. 75) and expresses admiration for critical efforts to experiment with language in such a way that it “shocks established habits” and “deliberately provokes imaginative and emotional reactions” (Braidotti 2013, p. 87). The posthuman subject of such ethics is marked by “interdependence with its environment through a structure of mutual flows . . . ” (Braidotti 2013, p. 139). What displaces the exploitative and necro-political pulls of advanced capitalism is the poetry and “potency of zoe” (Braidotti 2013, p. 141).

I want to note three parallels here in Zhuangzi. First, Zhuangzi develops a notion of the “consummate human being” or “sage” as acting in wu-wei, in comportment with the dao. Wu wei involves resisting exertion or contrived control, where we can be at ease in our following things through or following along with things (Wenzel 2003, p. 119). The dao is often represented as a river, inclusive of the natural tendencies of things (Slingerland 2004, p. 334). The consummate person is unfettered in the great work of “doing nothing”, in particular, in taking action without taking credit, in helping things grow without control (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 47). The consummate human being entrusts each individual thing to its own course, seeing all as fitting. When forced fitting is forgotten, there is a perfect fit (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 81). In such an ethic, one refrains from imposing artificial ideals on others, respecting others by letting them be (Huang 2010). Zhuangzi illustrates this with the masterful work of Cook Ding, a butcher who never sharpens a knife: “What I love is the Course . . . I depend on [Spontaneous] perforations and strike larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how they already are, playing them as they lay . . . ” (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 22). Second, Zhuangzi promotes a radical commitment to transformation. Zhuangzi illustrates this through a parable about a character named Ziyu falling ill: “Ziyu said [to his friend], ‘How great is the Creator of Things, making me all

tangled up like this!’ For his chin was tucked into his navel, his shoulders towered over the crown of his head, his ponytail pointed toward the sky, his five internal organs at the top of him, his thigh bones taking the place of his ribs, and his yin yang energies in chaos. But his mind was relaxed and unbothered . . . ‘Wow!’ he said. ‘The Creator of Things has really gone and tangled me up!’” (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 45). A friend asked him if he liked it, and Ziyu responds, “What is there to dislike? Perhaps he will transform my left arm into a rooster . . . Perhaps he will transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet . . . Perhaps he will transform my ass into wheels and my spirit into a horse . . . ” (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 45). What Ziyu symbolizes is a radical acceptance of any and all transformations. Third, Zhuangzi relishes playful creativity with words. As Zhuangzi asks, “Where can I find [one] who has forgotten words, so I can have a few words with [them]?” (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 114). Polemical debates are just the sound of wind, for Zhuangzi (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 20); whereas Zhuangzi’s own words are designed to bewilder (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 74). Zhuangzi does not promote nihilistic jibber jabber, but a mode of discourse structured by wu wei, a purposeless discourse like spontaneous dialogues (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 66). Numerous characters in the outer chapters of *The Zhuangzi* say things such as “Trying to understand Zhuangzi’s words is like a mosquito trying to carry a mountain on its back, or an inchworm trying to cross the sea” (p. 75). This brings us to the political payoff of Zhuangzi in challenging the ruthless profiteering of advanced capitalism. Zhuangzi advances a position of resistance to any and all forms of utilitarian value. Zhuangzi illustrates this with the ability of a knotted tree to survive a carpenter looking for the “perfect” tree (Zhuangzi 2009, p. 31). The carpenters perceive the knotted tree as worthless, whereas other trees face the trouble of axes and saws from being worth something. Zhuangzi affirms the usefulness of uselessness, something which neoliberal advanced capitalism cannot even conceive.

I have been deliberately emphasizing human-centered parables and imagery from Zhuangzi. This is because Zhuangzi, like posthumanists, challenges what “human” even means. However, consider this non-anthropocentric image that foregoes reference to humans. The character Prince Mou relays a story about a frog conversing with a sea turtle about its liberty and fulfillment in a well, with the frog inviting the turtle into its well to get the same fulfillment. As the turtle tried to enter, its foot got stuck in the opening, and shared with the frog the vastness and fulfillment it finds in the ocean (pp. 74–75).

Perhaps an even more radical affirmation of linguistic creativity is classical Chan encounter dialogues and the Zen ethic of adaptive responsiveness stemming from them (see Hershock 2005). These encounter episodes illustrate masters responding to student questions with counterquestions, dismissals, puns, and even strikes and blows. Awakening in this framework is not a transcendent subjective experience, but a cultivated state of interactive genius and spontaneous improvisation. The radical character of Chan should not be overlooked. Consider this sermon excerpt from the classical master, Linji: “Followers of the Way, if you want insight into dharma as it is, just don’t be taken in by the deluded views of others. Whatever you encounter, either within or without, slay it at once. On meeting a buddha slay the buddha, on meeting a patriarch slay the patriarch, on meeting an arhat slay the arhat, on meeting your parents slay your parents, on meeting your kinsman slay your kinsman, and you attain emancipation. By not cleaving to things, you freely pass through” (Linji 2009, 22/236). If you meet what you presuppose is “human,” slay it—this anthropocentric projection—at once. Given constraints, however, I will leave it at this brief mention and turn instead to note what appears to be covert orientalism and methodological narrowness in posthumanist theory as developed so far.

2. Critique of Covert Orientalism and Methodological Narrowness

The critique of orientalism is now methodologically definitive for Religious Studies. Thus, becoming more self-aware about areas of dismissal or caricature of the other is a benefit of the academic study of religion. I want to follow Almond’s critique of representations of Islam in postmodernists in suggesting that posthumanists, too—inasmuch as they appear to exclusively appeal

to poststructuralists—seem to be affected by orientalism (see [Almond 2007](#)). By turning to Zhuangzi, I am attempting to shift the conversation in such a way that it does not start or end with identifying the weaknesses of Western humanisms (see [Wenning 2014](#), p. 100). It is not that posthumanists mischaracterize Asian philosophical and religious resources, but rather posthumanists—in my reading of them so far—do not show explicit recognition of these resources *as corroborating resources*. As Wenning writes, “Rather than merely gesturing to another beginning, [Zhuangzi’s writing] embodies a different, nonessentializing way of conceiving of the human-nonhuman relationship” ([Wenning 2014](#), p. 100). Zhuangzi constitutes a “radical outside” that might help us see a complicity of posthumanism with humanism, where critical posthumanists reinscribe rather than overcome tendencies in Western humanism in an increasingly entrenched vocabulary (see [Wenning 2014](#), p. 101). Braidotti, for instance, appeals to Foucault’s process ontology (see [Braidotti 2013](#), p. 41) as well as to Deleuze and Guattari’s framework as allowing us to by-pass pitfalls of binary thinking (see [Braidotti 2013](#), p. 86). What about Buddhist process metaphysics (see [Ronkin 2009](#), p. 14)? What about Zhuangzi’s refusal to allow thought to be trapped by discriminative concepts like “this” and “that” (see [Zhuangzi 2009](#), p. 12; [Loy 1996](#), p. 56)? Is such absence in posthumanism merely objectionable marginalia, or does it reflect an unspoken center? Is the absence, as Almond writes, “an unarticulated privilege, the tacit and unintrusive reaffirmation of a very European vocabulary” ([Almond 2007](#), p. 202)? At this point, rather than be trigger-happy with accusations of orientalism, I merely want to encourage posthumanists (and poststructuralists) to seek out corroboration with Asian, Islamic, and Indigenous religious thought in further work. I think such corroboration is a clue to perhaps being on the right track. And I want my contribution to be a step in this direction.

The problem of orientalism is but one among the many benefits of engagement in the academic study of religions. A greater point of contention I have with posthumanism as developed so far is a remarkable absence of reference to Religious Studies as exemplary of posthumanist Humanities in higher education. Braidotti celebrates the proliferation of postanthropocentric and interdisciplinary Humanities such as with Animal Studies and Ecocriticism, but isolates Disability Studies ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 146), Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Humanitarian Management, Death Studies, and more ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 148) as exemplary prototypes of the necessarily experimental and innovative institutional responses to inhumane structures and disasters in today’s world. As Braidotti writes, “They provide themes and methods to handle the epistemic blast of such horrors and work through their consequence for the role of critical theory. They also fulfill a healing function in relation to the legacy of pain and hurt which [advanced capitalism entails] . . . They perpetuate and update the transformative impact of the Humanities in an inhumane context, but they do so by exploding the boundaries of classical Humanities disciplines” ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 148). My aim is not to deny the exemplary character of these and other interdisciplinary fields. It is merely to indicate that the absence of Religious Studies among them is lamentable for a couple of reasons.

First, it perpetuates institutional misrecognition of what Religious Studies can do and is—where some fellow academics seem to believe the field should not exist at all due to its purported covert evangelism (see [Masuzawa 2005](#)) or where some administrators believe it exists for the sake of producing Christian ministers (see [Dickman 2018](#)). What Pamela Sue Anderson has said of feminist philosophers applies here to posthumanists as well. Inasmuch as religions have proven to be sexist institutions, to engage them rather than reject them wholesale may make one susceptible to complicity with oppression. Western European feminists, especially of the first and second waves, generally display a suspicion of religion. As Anderson writes, “Feminists have not been able to imagine that either feminism or philosophy could exist in the subject area . . . of religion . . . there is the political commitment of feminism that appears to clash, if it is not inconsistent, with personal religious (or ‘private’) commitment . . . ” ([Anderson 1998](#), p. 191, Anderson’s emphasis). Engagement with religious traditions does not indicate a regression to a less enlightened and rational era, but instead a critique of “essentialism” within secularism (see [Braidotti 2013](#), p. 36).

Second, this missed opportunity occludes that Religious Studies was interdisciplinary before interdisciplinarity was cool; that Religious Studies critiqued Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism before doing so was cool. Thomas J.J. Altizer, for example, writes of Religious Studies, “Nothing is more significant about religious studies than its ending or intended ending of Eurocentrism, no other academic discipline is so universal in its scope, just as no other discipline seeks an equality between Eastern and Western worlds, and between archaic, ancient, and modern worlds” (Altizer 1994, p. 1015). As he further says, “If religious studies has truly accomplished anything, it has ended the [transcendent] or given, or manifest, or apparent grounds of religion, and ended them by way of a critical understanding of those grounds, an understanding which is manifestly nihilistic to those who are bound to such grounds . . . ” (Altizer 1994, p. 1016). I think that such a construal of Religious Studies can help us shed light on further corroboration and collaboration between the academic studies of religion and posthumanist Humanities, priming them for a coalitional interdisciplinary politic. Religious Studies is the fruitful locus of this multidisciplinary grafting because, as a critical field, it recognizes idolatry as idolatry, even if that idolatry is worded in entrenched Western vocabularies. That is, without the frameworks available in Religious Studies, posthumanists might misrecognize their inadvertent propping up of a new religion or metaphysics (see Bell 2009). I hope my contribution here has indicated two ways to graft or suture posthumanist criticism in the study of religion: on the one hand, seeing theoretical corroboration in Zhuangzi, and, on the other hand seeing the posthumanist exemplariness of Religious Studies.

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