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## Guest Editors' Introduction

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# Guest Editors' Introduction

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In this special issue of the CJBS, we present papers on the topic of Buddhism in relation to transhumanism and posthumanism. Given the pervasive influence and adoption of the transhumanist paradigm in the sciences, as well as the influence of posthumanist thinking in areas like social justice in recent years, we have sought out authors who critically engage these contemporary schools of thought from Buddhist perspectives. Defining transhumanism and posthumanism is notoriously difficult as these terms are claimed by writers, thinkers, and organizations in different ways. The philosopher Rosi Braidotti defines posthuman theory as "a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as 'anthropocene', the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, the philosopher Max More and the strategic designer Natasha Vita-More state that "Transhumanism is a class of philosophies that seeks the continued evolution of human life beyond its current human form as a result of science and technology guided by life-promoting principles and values."<sup>2</sup> Although these definitions are deeply rooted in the Western tradition of philosophy, Braidotti seeks to overcome the endemic limitations and problems of this philosophical tradition, whereas More and Vita-More take a more conservative stance, arguing that transhumanism is best understood as

a continuation of the modernist project of the European Enlightenment.

However, both definitions are alike in espousing moral and ethical aspirations, which provide a clear space for dialogue with Buddhist forms of thought and practice. The articles in this issue engage a range of key issues, such as technology, human nature, personal identity and agency, non-self (*anātman*), consciousness (*vijñāna*), theories of liberation (*mokṣa*), dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), and mindfulness (*satī*). These essays challenge Buddhist thought and practice as it continues into the 21st century CE, but without losing sight of the over two and half millennia of Buddhist traditions and transformations.

Our first entry is Francesco Tormen's article, in which he draws comparisons between Buddhism and posthumanism and transhumanism. Regarding the former, Tormen argues for the compatibility between Buddhism and posthumanism, especially regarding their anti-essentialism and anti-anthropocentrism. In terms of the latter, he demonstrates Buddhism's openness to human enhancement and then identifies utilitarianism as an ethical common ground between Buddhism and transhumanism. For Tormen, Buddhist insights into the root causes of suffering can steer transhumanism toward a form of, what he calls, "deep or cognitive utilitarianism." As he writes, "one of the main contributions Buddhism could make to transhumanism [is that,] from a common utilitarian ethical basis, [it] deepen[s] our understanding of the root causes of happiness and suffering by directing human enhancement toward increasing phenomenological understanding of the nature of experience; this is because, at least from the Buddhist perspective, true liberation from suffering (as well as the authentic form of happiness) depends fundamentally on this kind of knowledge (although other more contingent purposes may be pursued as intermediate steps, or means toward that end)." In a similar vein, Tormen suggests that Buddhism can likewise contribute to the transhumanist project through its insights into the nature of

consciousness, which could subsequently prove useful to philosophical analysis and neurophenomenological research.

Ryan Brady's article follows Tormen's contribution, and proceeds in a similar vein. Brady rightly states that because of advances in the sciences human life has transformed rapidly. Developments in science and technology have improved human lives in a myriad of ways and have led to individuals theorizing that technology could be used to end human suffering by altering and improving humanity itself. He identifies these individuals as belonging to the school of thought called "transhumanism," which argues that technology can be used to bring about a radical transformation of humanity in both the technological and moral domains. Although the transhumanist emphasizes the importance of technology, many transhumanist goals are shared by other philosophical and religious systems. Indeed, Buddhist philosophers share many of the same goals as transhumanists, although both traditions of thought attempt to solve the problem of human suffering through distinct but converging means. Brady writes: "If such a [moral] foundation can be built with these technologies for those who want them, then human enhancement technologies may be viewed as another tool or method to assist an individual with following the Buddha's teachings or *dharma*. If these technologies can be used for promoting compassion and virtues, then they could certainly be used alongside traditional Buddhist practices." Drawing upon Theravada Buddhist philosophy, Brady's essay suggests that Buddhists and transhumanists have much to gain by combining their distinct solutions to the problem of human suffering, one that incorporates both technological and spiritual advancements.

The third entry is Colin H. Simonds' article. Simonds explores the possibility and implications of expanding the Tibetan Buddhist definition of sentient being to phenomena outside of the traditional Buddhist realms of rebirth. Taking the traditional Buddhist view of sentience as a basis, he then describes some of the ways that contemporary scientists and philosophers have extended sentience to

plants, microorganisms, and artificial intelligences such as LaMDA. Simonds argues "that to accurately reflect and appropriately respond to the posthuman considerations we face today, Buddhism may rightly be compelled to adapt and include plants and single-celled organisms into its conception of sentient beings." In defence of this claim, Simonds invokes precedents in the Tibetan tradition that have ascribed sentience to plants, bacteria, and so forth. Finally, the implications of this broader understanding of sentience on the cosmological, soteriological, and ethical strands of Tibetan Buddhism are considered as potential methods for contemporary Buddhists to engage an increasingly posthuman world.

Lastly, Joel Magnuson's essay delves into the dialectical interplay of agency and structure which he argues is a key part of Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics (SEBE). The dialectic of SEBE has been present in economic discourse over the last several decades, as he claims particularly in heterodox approaches that view economics from historical and sociological perspectives. This article contributes to this discourse with a novel integration of pragmatism, institutional economics, process metaphysics, and Buddhism. Magnuson's presentation is based on two main arguments: (a) that both agent and structure are emergent phenomena, and (b) that agency itself is best understood through the lens of George H. Mead's conception of the "social self." For Mead, the social self consists of the "subjective I" and the "objective me." Together, these two ideas are combined into a single framework of "agent, structure, I, and me" (ASIM). Accordingly, "in a posthuman turn of mind, one implication of this model is that it breaks away from the Cartesian duality that fundamentally separates agency and structure as either social atomism or social collectivism." Magnuson draws out some of the implications of the social self for ethics as well as Buddhist economics.

We invite you to delve into the thought-provoking and evocative scholarship of our various contributors to this special issue of the *CJBS*. Enjoy!

In *metta*,

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<sup>1</sup> Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman* (USA: Polity Press, 2013), 5.

<sup>2</sup> More, Max and N. Vita-More, eds., *The Transhumanist Reader* (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 1.