

12. Negotiating Humanism and Posthumanism in Matt Haig's *The Humans*¹**Cihan YAZGI²**

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Abstract

This study examines Matt Haig's *The Humans* as a fictional response to the posthumanist critique of human exceptionalism and an attempt to reconcile it with improved humanism. The story in the novel is narrated by an unnamed alien-narrator whose mission is to stop the advancement of human species, whom he initially views as flawed, destructive, and in need of containment. However, through firsthand experiences of empathy, individual expression, and relational connection, the alien-narrator undergoes a transformation that prompts his willing conversion into a human being. The paper argues that while *The Humans* explores, through the alien-narrator's experiences, human follies and acknowledges key posthumanist critiques, such as anthropocentrism and speciesism, it ultimately reaffirms the unique virtues of humanism—individuality, affective depth, and love. Therefore, rather than endorsing a posthuman worldview, the narrative frames its critiques of humanism as tools to refine rather than replace humanism, which ultimately presents a neo-Romantic, liberal humanism centred on virtues of art, love, and personal growth. By contrasting the utopian posthuman society of the alien's home planet Vonnadoria with the imperfections of Earth, the novel suggests that although humanity has to improve in certain aspects, what they need to pursue is virtue-centred human flourishing, not the total self-effacement that radical posthumanism may advocate. Through this lens, Haig's work envisions a balanced approach in which humanism, tempered by posthumanist awareness, continues to provide a foundation for ethical improvement and personal fulfilment.

Keywords: Matt Haig, *The Humans*, humanism, anthropocentrism, posthumanism

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Matt Haig'in *İnsanlar* adlı eserinde Hümeranizm ve Posthümeranizm arasındaki müzakere³

Öz

Bu çalışma, Matt Haig'in *İnsanlar* adlı eserini, insanmerkezciliğe yönelik posthümeranist eleştiriyi kurgusal bir yanıt ve bu eleştiriyi gelişmiş bir hümanizmle uzlaştırma girişimi olarak inceler. Romandaki hikâye; başlangıçta insan türünü kusurlu, yıkıcı ve kontrol altına alınması gereken bir tür olarak görerek onların bilimsel-teknik ilerleyişini durdurma misyonu ile Dünya'ya gelen isimsiz bir uzaylı-anlatıcı tarafından anlatılır. Ancak bu uzaylı-anlatıcı empati, bireysel özgürlükler ve insan ilişkilerini ilk elden deneyimledikten sonra, kendi isteğiyle insana dönüşmeye karar verişyle son bulan bir süreçten geçer. *İnsanlar* romanı, uzaylı-anlatıcının insan türü ile olan bu tanışma ve kaynaşma süreci üzerinden insan türünün hatalarının altını çiziyor ve posthümeranistlerce eleştirilen insanmerkezcilik ve türçülük problemlerini kabul ediyor olsa da nihai olarak insanlığın birey, duygusal derinlik ve sevgi gibi benzersiz erdemlerinin önemini vurgulamakta ve savunmaktadır. Bu nedenle anlatı, posthümeranist bir dünya görüşünü ve posthümeranist dönüşümü tamamen desteklemek yerine, posthümeranizmin getirdiği eleştirileri sadece hümanizmi daha işler hale getirmek ve onu rafine etmek için araçlar olarak kullanmayı önerir ve nihayetinde sanatı, sevgiyi, empatiyi ve bireysel gelişimi hedefleyen neo-Romantik, liberal bir hümanizm sunar. Roman, uzaylı-anlatıcının gezegeni Vonnadonia'nın ütöpik posthümeran toplumu ile Dünya'nın kusurlarını karşılaştırır, ancak vardığı sonuç sadece insanlığın belirli yönlerden gelişmesi gerektiğinin kabulüdür. Yani insanlık sadece erdem merkezli bir insan gelişimini hedeflemelidir, radikal post-hümeranizmin savunduğu tam bir kendini yok etmeyi değil. Böylece Haig'in *İnsanlar* eseri, posthümeranist farkındalıkla yumuşatılan hümanizmin insanlığın gelişimi için tercih edilebilecek en doğru ve dengeli yaklaşım olduğunu öngörür.

Anahtar kelimeler: Matt Haig, *İnsanlar*, hümanizm, insanmerkezcilik, posthümeranizm

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1. Introduction

Writing in 2010 when the Google search engine was still a relatively 'fascinating' technology, Cary Wolfe opens his book *What is Posthumanism*—a key text in posthumanities—by discussing the results of his Google search for the terms *humanism* and *posthumanism*, an act he considers to be a 'posthumanist gesture' (p. xi). Surprisingly, after more than a decade, the results of Wolfe's search have not yet changed in the latter term's favour. In Wolfe's search back in 2010, humanism had "3,840,000 hits" while "posthumanism' yield[ed] a mere 60,200", which led Wolfe to judge that "[a]pparently humanism is alive and well, despite reports of its demise" (p. xi). While this paper is being written in 2024, humanism generates 23,200,000 hits on Google, whereas posthumanism has only 857,000 results. Although posthumanism has obviously trended more than humanism ever since, the former is still far behind the latter in terms of dominating the discourse. Then, humanism, if one is to follow Wolfe's evaluation, still holds the centre while posthumanism is still trying to get there, and Matt Haig's novel *The Humans*, published not long after Wolfe's book, seems to prove Wolfe's point that humans were still preoccupied with their humanness more than a *posthuman* alternative. Nevertheless, as will be argued below, Haig's novel still engages with posthumanist claims and makes room, in its otherwise devoted defence of the *human* against *posthuman* and *transhuman* alternatives, for a posthumanist criticism of contemporary humanity and human societies. In this sense, *The Humans* can be interpreted as an attempt to contain posthumanist thinking within the frames of humanist thinking, that is, to use some of posthumanist awareness to improve as a species but avoid taking it too far to threaten the centrality of humans neither in ontological nor in ethical terms.

2. Theoretical background

Posthumanism can be understood as both a departure from and a reaction against humanism; hence, a definition of posthumanism needs to start with a definition of humanism. Simply put and according to various established dictionaries, humanism can be briefly described as a philosophy, a Western belief system, an ideology or a doctrine that has evolved over centuries, shaping and reshaping our understanding of what it means to be human, where we are coming from, and where we are headed. Its most common trait may be its "central emphasis on the human realm" (Grudin, 2024, para. 1): it considers humankind to be the measure, source, meaning, and telos of everything else. There have of course been different humanisms with different frameworks throughout history, but it is common practice to start its genealogy with ancient Greek humanism until, passing through Renaissance *humanismus* and Enlightenment scientific rationality, it reaches the contemporary secular and human-rights oriented attitudes.

It should be noted at this point that although Haig defends and praises being human, his position is sentimental and does not exactly align with a clearly defined philosophy of the human, which might be explained by the elusiveness of the term humanism. Tony Davies (1997) begins the introductory chapter of his book *Humanism* by saying, as might be expected from any attempt to define such a term with very broad wings, that "[h]umanism is a word with a very complex history and an unusually wide range of possible meanings and contexts" (p. 2), and he concludes the same chapter with the resolution that his book will not so much provide 'meanings,' 'definitions' or 'suggestions' as lay out the difficulties of doing so (pp. 5-6). Like Davies above, Stephen Law also accepts the difficulties and complexities attached to the meanings and definitions of humanism (2011, p. 6). These statements help understand the absence of a clear humanist argument in *The Humans*. Rather than working toward a clear philosophical humanist argument, Haig, without alignment to a specific historical or philosophical humanist

programme, subscribes to an intuitive neo-Romantic liberal conception of being human in order to inform the alien-narrator of the story and to push him to switch sides at the end of the narrative. After all, as Haig's punchline summary of his narrative "a look at the weird and often frightening beauty of being human" (2014, p. 293) indicates, he is more interested in what it feels to be human rather than what it means. Even more importantly, he is interested in what it feels to be an upper-middle class white Anglo-Saxon male with all his privileges.

This indicates the complicity of *The Humans* with the inherent anthropocentrism of Western humanism, which posthumanists seek to fiercely criticise. The traces of Western humanism go back to the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Protagoras's dictum—as it is quoted by Plato in his *Theaetetus*—that "a man is the measure of all things: of those which are, that they are, and of those which are not, that they are not" (2014, p. 17), which puts both humankind and the individual subject at the centre of not only epistemological but also of ethical, political and other similar concerns (Bonazzi, 2023, sec. 2; Gillespie, 1910, p. 492 & *passim*). Usually shortened to 'man is the measure of all things' and referred to as *homo mensura*, Protagoras's dictum thus informs many of the values, principles, and tenets of later humanisms and creates fertile ground for the later development of human exceptionalism and of an anthropocentric view of everything else. In its turn, anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism can be defined in a broad sense as the belief that humans are unique in the universe; they are fundamentally different from and superior to other species and entities as very graphically conceptualised by the infamous Great Chain of Being in its development from Plato and Plotinus, through medieval theology, to Arthur C. Lovejoy (Bunnin & Yu, 2004, p. 289; Lovejoy, 2001, *passim*). It locates humankind closer to the league of celestial beings and the One (or Gods) in a spectrum ranging from the God at the top to inanimate entities at the bottom.

It goes without saying that such speciesism and hierarchical views have been critiqued for promoting and justifying the exploitation of nature and other species, especially during what is now called the Anthropocene. Both the humanities and the positive sciences now admit more than ever that the anthropocentric arguments and values that have been foundational and instrumental in developing hierarchies and ethical frameworks that prioritize human comfort, benefit, enjoyment, and welfare are simply "prejudices and assumptions," and that "humanism is [...] its own dogma" (Wolfe, 2010, p. xiv). Interestingly, although this exceptionalism finds its roots in antiquity as discussed above, it also begins to be questioned and challenged at the same time. As Giulia Maria Chesi very well outlines, humanism's discontinuities emerge along with it since many classical authors such as "Pindar [...] Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides [did] not necessarily share this human-centred view of the world. Indeed, the Greek tragic discourse [was] not interested in assigning intrinsic value to human beings alone but rather in challenging the centrality of the human" (2022, p. 57). Poststructuralist and postmodernist thought become the culmination of challenges against humanism and of its discontinuities. This is best exemplified in Michel Foucault's frequently quoted conclusion in his *The Order of Things* in 1966 which states that "[a]s the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (2005, p. 422). Posthumanism appears at this point to generate the discourse to discuss the meaning and manner of such a possible end of the human, humanity and humanism.

At this point, it might be necessary to mention transhumanism, another philosophical position that seeks to address the end of the human in the twentieth century. Interestingly, Wolfe does not mention any search for the term *transhumanism* in his book mentioned above, but in 2024, this third term gets 2,400,000 hits on Google and proves to have a larger presence in today's discourse than posthumanism.

Posthumanism challenges not only humanism but also transhumanism since transhumanism does not aim to decentre the human as posthumanism does but aspires to recentre the human in an age of advanced techno-science and digitalisation. Therefore, while posthumanism embraces Foucault's 'end' as the end of anthropocentrism, transhumanism would consider it to be merely the end of the organic human being but the dawn of the enhanced human. Julian Huxley coined the term in the 1950s to discuss humanity's "future direction of evolution on this earth" in the age of techno-science (1957, p. 14). According to Huxley, the future of humanity is a transhumanist one, and it will witness "man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature" (p. 17). Evidently, Huxley's programme is an anthropocentric one which seeks to strengthen the human centre not question it.

This is where a philosophical posthumanism distinguishes itself from transhumanism and a transhumanist posthumanism. Cary Wolfe explains the distinction briefly by stating that "posthumanism is the opposite of transhumanism, and in this light, transhumanism should be seen as an intensification of humanism" (2010, p. xv). While transhumanism imagines a human-centered world, albeit in a technologically enhanced stage, posthumanism seeks to decentre the human. While transhumanism seeks to transcend human limits to create *superhumans*, posthumanism aspires to transcend the human itself to rethink and reimagine a post-anthropocentric universe. While the former reinforces traditional Western humanism, the latter rejects its primary tenet of *homo mensura* and rejects its human exceptionalism and speciesist hierarchies. Hence, unlike transhumanist posthumanism, philosophical posthumanism marks a conceptual change in which the human is no longer perceived as a privileged super-category but is reformulated as one of the elements of a broader ecology of human and nonhuman actors.

Like transhumanism, posthumanism is also a twentieth-century term coined by Ihab Hassan in his essay "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" in 1977, two decades after Huxley's transhumanism. In his influential essay, Hassan declares that

[w]e need first to understand that the human form—including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. (p. 843)

Similar to Huxley, Hassan predicts a radical change in humankind's essential values and roles, as well as the physical conditions they live in, and he similarly considers this to be an inevitable destiny. However, Hassan's essay differs from Huxley's in that he signals the end of traditional Western narratives of humanism with a postmodernist poststructuralist urgency. As Ranisch and Sorgner discuss in 2014, posthumanities encompasses a wide range of postmodern issues and debates that appertain to a crisis of traditional Western humanism, and it "is associated with postmodern and continental philosophy, science and technology studies, cultural studies, literary theory and criticism, poststructuralism, feminism, critical theory and postcolonial studies" (p. 14). This locates posthumanism in origins very different from those of transhumanism even though some sources tend to incorrectly use them interchangeably. Yet, while transhumanism extends humanism, posthumanism is best understood as "a new mode of thought that *comes after* the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism" (Wolfe, 2010, p. xvi; *emphasis added*).

Francesca Ferrando's following words in her 2013 essay that lays out key differences and relations between posthumanism and transhumanism are very revealing in this respect and also serve as a clear

definition of posthumanities:

They share a common perception of the human as a non-fixed and mutable condition, but they generally do not share the same roots and perspectives. Moreover, within the transhumanist debate, the concept of posthumanism itself is interpreted in a specific transhumanist way, which causes further confusion in the general understanding of the posthuman: for some transhumanists, human beings may eventually transform themselves so radically as to become posthuman, a condition expected to follow the current transhuman era. Such a take on the posthuman should not be confused with the post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic approach of (philosophical, cultural, and critical) posthumanism. (p. 27)

Ferrando's brief account compliments both Hassan and Ranisch and Sorgner by once again highlighting that although both philosophies address a noticeable change in the conceptualisations of the human, they arrive at different conclusions. Ferrando also very carefully distinguishes between a transhumanist posthumanism, which not only enhances the human being but also intensifies human exceptionalism, and a philosophical posthumanism which finds its roots in postmodernist and poststructuralist thought that addresses the crisis in humanism which, as Neil Badmington (2000) observes, "is happening *everywhere* [...] [as] the reign of Man is simultaneously being called into question by literature, politics, cinema, anthropology, feminism, and technology" (p. 9). In all the aspects of Western culture and society, posthumanism directly targets the problem of a deep-rooted anthropocentrism and speciesism (Rockoff, 2014, p. 253; Wolfe, 2010, p. xix). Everywhere in postmodernity, man is losing its hierarchical power as Katherine Hayles, another important figure in posthumanist studies, explains by saying "[n]o longer is human will [*sic.*] seen as the source from which emanates the mastery necessary to dominate and control the environment" (1999, p. 290).

Finally, it must be clarified that posthumanism is, as Hayles makes clear elsewhere, not "an apocalyptic break with the past" and with the human (2003, p. 134); it is "still about humans and humanities but only in so far as these are placed within a larger, ecological, picture" (Herbrechter, 2018, p. 96). It critiques the boundaries between human, animal, and machine (Braidotti, 2013, p. 79) in order to endorse a more inclusive and interconnected understanding of existence, to overcome dualisms and to embrace hybridity while highlighting the potential for new forms of identity and social relations in a post-anthropocentric posthuman future. Eventually, it seeks to push humanity to abandon the center and its 'unfounded' privileges.

3. *The Humans*

The story of the novel is narrated by an unnamed alien-narrator from the fictional planet Vonnadoria, which apparently hosts one of the most advanced species in the universe. The narrator depicts life on Vonnadoria as if it is the ultimate utopia: "No one dies. There's no pain. Everything is beautiful. The only religion is mathematics. [...] There is no hatred. [...] There is no clear line between biology and technology" (*The Humans*, 2013, p. 269⁴). This description indicates that this advanced species has met both posthumanist and transhumanist ideals. However, strengthened by the fact that the alien-narrator refuses to return to Vonnadoria at the end of the novel, *The Humans* seeks to mitigate the appeal of this posthumanist or transhumanist utopia to its human readers when the alien-narrator concludes his description above by adding that "[t]here are no families. There are the hosts – they give instructions – and there is everyone else. [...] There are no fathers and sons. [...] And everything is violet. [...] It's dull. It's the dullest life you can imagine" (p. 269). The posthuman society, purged of its hatred, pain, ugliness,

⁴ All subsequent quotes from the novel are made from this edition and only the page numbers will be given henceforth to improve readability.

religious zealotry, and dualisms, might shine as the 'city upon a hill' or a 'beacon of hope' as it does to Gulliver in the novel who holds his breath and thinks that "[i]t sounds awesome" (p. 269) while the alien-narrator is describing Vonnadoria to him with these words, but to the alien who has experienced both the human and the posthuman worlds, it represents the disappointment of a distasteful, joyless existence that lacks colour, love, belonging, individual liberties, and subjective will.

Unknowingly, then, the alien-narrator becomes the saviour of humanity when he actually comes to Earth "to destroy evidence of the breakthrough Professor Martin had made" regarding the Riemann Hypothesis (p. 5) that was going to put humanity on the fast track of evolution. At one point in the story, the narrator questions his 'accomplishment'—the only moment in the whole novel when Haig includes a shred of remorse over the 'wrong' done to humanity by the Vonnadorians—, and he says that "[humans'] mathematics had thus far let them down. They had yet to do the big stuff. The synchronisation of brains. The creation of free-thinking computers. Automation technology. Inter-galactic travel. [...] I realised I was stopping all these opportunities. I had killed their future" (p. 152). Yet, the overall conclusion of the narrative indicates that he has actually saved humanity from themselves, their posthuman aspirations, and from a future that they do not yet know that they need to avoid. The alien-narrator is aware of the fact that humanity can still evolve into more advanced beings so as to live more comfortable lives, and he is aware of the difficulties they need to endure every day at this moment of their evolutionary journey. Yet, he comforts Gulliver and hence his human readers by pointing out that "[h]ere, you have pain, and loss, that's the price. But the rewards can be wonderful" (p. 269).

After all, the alien-narrator states that he has written this book to prove both to the Vonnadorians and the humans that "there actually is a meaning to human life [and] life on Earth is something not just to fear and ridicule but also cherish" (p. x). His book is not about the comforts and achievements of his advanced posthuman society but a praise written "about how to become a human" (p. 3). It is not the story of how a Vonnadorian saves the universe by hindering humanity's evolution and goes back to his own posthuman utopia. It is the story of a posthuman being learning the "weird and often frightening beauty of being human" (p. 293) and about his final decision to become one. It is the story of a 'nobody,' in the sense of a lack of individuality, subjectivity, will, or liberty in his previous world where "everything is seamless. Minds, bodies, technologies all come together" (p. 108), becoming 'somebody' after "defeat[ing] them [the plurality of his identity], [to] become a me and not a we" (p. 192), that is, becoming a human individual. In the following quote, the alien-narrator explains the fulfilment he finds in human life in more detail:

I was a wasn't, that was the problem. I was lying in bed with a human woman [...], and thinking of her strange but fascinating skin, and the way she had cared for me. No one in the universe cared for me. (You didn't did you?) We had technology to care for us now, and we didn't need emotions. We were alone. We worked together for our preservation but emotionally we needed no one. We just needed the purity of mathematical truth. (pp. 127-28)

This marks the preference in the narrative for a consciousness-centred, a subject-centred, and, if one is to follow the discussions regarding *homo mensura* above, in the last analysis a human-centred existence over a decentred existence alternative. The subject-centred society means keeping one's selfhood intact through the other's externality vis-à-vis a posthuman society—like that of Vonnadoria—where the difference between the self and the other is effaced, and it means that the appeasement of the subjectivity of the human individual is held above everything else. Hence, it is a rejection of the goal of self-effacement that posthumanism sets for humanity out of "the fear that if the boundaries are breached at

all, there will be nothing to stop the self's complete dissolution" as Katherine Hayles's summary of 'the fear of the posthuman' indicates (1999, p. 290). And finally, it is the story of a posthuman being who thought he knew 'beauty' but discovered that mathematical purity does not make beauty, but contradictions do. For instance, he is able to appreciate the beauty of sunsets only after becoming human as he says: "Sunsets were beautiful here. I became quite hypnotised by them. In the past they had meant nothing to me. After all, a sunset was nothing really but the slowing down of light. [...] But since becoming human I was just transfixed by the colours. Red, orange, pink" (p. 282); the colours he did not know existed. He adds that "as with a sunset, to be human was to be in-between things; a day, bursting with desperate colour as it headed irreversibly towards night" (p. 282). These contradictory forces in human lives, along with all the other "[a]ccidents, imperfections, placed inside a pretty pattern. Asymmetry. The defiance of mathematics" (p. 100) are what make true beauty and its joyful consumption possible.

All in all, the entire narrative becomes an attempt to contain posthumanist criticism within the confines of an anthropocentric humanism, and although it registers the necessity for *some* posthumanist thinking to become ethically better people, the narrative tries to demonstrate that humanity is better off without a wholesale dedication to posthumanist self-effacement. Similar to the conclusions Bartlett and Byers arrive at in their analysis of the blockbuster film *The Matrix*, *The Humans* "places posthuman subjects at the centre of its action and flirts with a theoretical postmodernism only to reject the posthumanist configuration of subjectivity in favour of resurrecting a neo-Romantic version of the liberal-humanist subject" and "to preserve, as 'natural,' the organic human's dominant outside position" (2003, p. 30). In other words, it features a posthuman being and his posthuman society to the extent of making them the mouthpieces of the posthumanist thought that targets human society as a fundamentally malevolent organisation and as the cause of the crises that are known with the category name of the Anthropocene. Then, by way of bringing both the posthuman subject and his society to their knees—by having the former willingly transform into a human being and by indicating the destructiveness of the latter as will be discussed below—, the narrative rejects the necessity of a posthuman evolution and reasserts the centrality of the human subject.

Needless to say, the narrative does not reject the problems that the posthumanists draw attention to, the problems that humanity has caused or would cause in the future; *The Humans* is of course not an ode to human destructiveness, nor is Haig an American transcendentalist who would only see pure goodness as the final cause of all human actions. The alien-narrator does not refrain from observing human malevolence and vice, but he makes sure to discuss them without necessarily asking humans to give up on their assumed dominance over the rest of their world. In doing so, the narrative pacifies the self-effacing posthumanist agenda with what Susan Levin calls "a virtue-centred approach to human flourishing" (2021, p. 232). Levin rejects transhumanist/posthumanist pessimism and defeatism and rejects giving priority to creating postanthropocentric posthumans. She states that "it is our human situation that we must concentrate on bettering" and continues to add that the evolution of humanity can only come from "our dedicated efforts to narrow the gap between reflectively affirmed human ideals and their worldly manifestations. Beyond the fact that this is the only kind of project that we, as human beings, can sign on to, it reflects a commitment to human capacities and the intrinsic worth of human flourishing" (2021, p. 232). This watering-down of posthuman philosophy agrees with posthumanist criticism only to the extent to which humanity may benefit from it, retaining a commitment to human exceptionality and worth.

Therefore, in parallel with Levin's position, *The Humans* seeks to use posthumanist criticism to help the

human individual and humanity flourish, not to decentre them from their dominant positions. For instance, the alien-narrator comes to Earth having been taught that humans are monsters and that “[h]umans are arrogant. Humans are greedy. They care about nothing but money and fame” (p. 106), which represents a posthumanist criticism of human societies and of Western humanisms. He is advised by the hosts that “[he] must never look at an individual and fail to see their relation to the crimes of the whole. Every smiling human face hides the terrors they are all capable of, and are all responsible for, however indirectly” (p. 46). The alien-narrator himself reports human monstrosities as follows:

As well as religion, human history is full of depressing things like colonisation, disease, racism, sexism, homophobia, class snobbery, environmental destruction, slavery, totalitarianism, military dictatorships, inventions of things which they have no idea how to handle (the atomic bomb, the Internet, the semi-colon), the victimisation of clever people, the worshipping of idiotic people, boredom, despair, periodic collapses, and catastrophes within the psychic landscape. (p. 77)

Yet, he goes on to excuse all of these by saying, first, that humans are merely “scared” creatures who seek to protect themselves and to feel reassurance through “mastery” over their environment and others (p. 130), and, second, that humans still “don’t understand themselves” or “their true selves” (p. 130). Both of these explanations are part of the alien-narrator’s attempts to promote understanding towards humans and the vice they might be argued to have caused at personal, social, environmental, and global levels. Earlier in the novel, the Vonnadorian hosts who direct the alien-narrator’s actions on Earth remind him of their evaluation of humanity, giving lip service to the posthuman critique of anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene:

The humans are an arrogant species, defined by violence and greed. They have taken their home planet, the only one they currently have access to, and placed it on the road to destruction. They have created a world of divisions and categories and have continually failed to see the similarities between themselves. They have developed technology at a rate too fast for human psychology to keep up with, and yet they still pursue advancement for advancement’s sake, and for the pursuit of the money and fame they all crave so much. (p. 46; emphasis original)

The alien-narrator meets several people, like Professor Martin himself, who perfectly fit this disturbing description. However, he also meets and learns about other people like Martin’s colleague and friend Professor Ari or his wife Isobel, who do not fit this description at all and who defy the hosts’ sweeping categorisation of all human beings as inherently evil. By offering true friendship, love and care to the alien-narrator (who is disguised in the shape of Professor Martin), these two characters seem to offer a corrective to the hosts’ totalising pessimistic and defeatist evaluation of humans. The alien-narrator also learns about a young Russian mathematician whose life offers another corrective. The young mathematician solves an important problem and is offered wealth and prizes but

he had turned it down, and the million dollars that had gone with it. ‘I’m not interested in money or fame,’ he had said. ‘I don’t want to be on display like an animal in a zoo. I’m not a hero of mathematics.’ This was not the only prize he had been offered. There had been others. [...] All of them he had turned down, choosing instead to live a life of poverty and unemployment, caring for his elderly mother. *Humans are arrogant. Humans are greedy. They care about nothing but money and fame. They do not appreciate mathematics for its own sake, but for what it can get them.* I logged out. (p. 106; emphasis original)

With such revelations of experiencing human life firsthand, the alien-narrator begins rejecting such totalising and pessimistic views of humanity, the only conclusion of which is that humans need to step aside as they can only cause destruction. Although the alien-narrator tries to keep for some time to Vonnadorian teachings regarding humans: “I had to keep believing everything I had been told. That this was a species of ugliness and violence, beyond redemption” (p. 100), he then realises, in the face of these

correctives, that nothing is perfect, even the seemingly perfect world of Vonnadonia as discussed above. Hence, no reductive conclusion can claim to be the final evaluation of an entire species. As he learns “more about the humans,” he becomes more convinced that “[t]hey are more complicated than [the Vonnadorians] first thought. They are sometimes violent, but more often care about each other. There is more goodness in them than anything else” (p. 139).

At this point, the narrative also proposes another, a more subtle corrective to this view by suggesting that humans are not the only species that could be accused of destruction. It should be noted that the Vonnadorian hosts sent the alien-narrator to Earth to destroy evidence “that lived not only in computers but in *living human beings*” (p. 5; *emphasis added*). Finding an excuse in the confidence of their mathematical calculations done from many light-years afar, the Vonnadorians decided to destroy knowledge, humans, and humanity’s future options because they concluded that an advanced human race would be harmful to the universe. The sense with which the narrative wants readers to derive from this incident is that such unshakeable confidence in one’s righteousness in the way one seeks to decide for and shape the lives of other species is absolutist, whatever the excuse might be. It is clear that Haig’s liberal humanism is informing the narrative at this point because it is not only absolutist but also anti-liberal. However, without bringing philosophy or political theory into the text, Haig is able to dismiss such absolutist confidence within the confines of narrative movement when the Vonnadorians’s decision to proceed with the killing mission casts doubt on the truthfulness or virtue of their assumed mathematical purity. They continue to insist that the alien-narrator has to kill Isobel and Gulliver in spite of the narrator’s confident explanations that they do not know anything about the Riemann Hypothesis (p. 194), hence there is no reason that “Isobel and Gulliver should be harmed” (p. 177). Yet, the hosts insist on their being killed, and they send another Vonnadorian to kill them after the alien-narrator breaks contact with the hosts in defiance. Therefore, after the alien-narrator frighteningly notices “how close violence is to the civilised surface of a human being” (p. 191), he also notices when has to save himself and his new family from the unforgiving Vonnadorian killer sent by the hosts that the same applies to the civilised surface of a Vonnadorian being. In a similar manner, the alien-narrator’s thoughts on human will to subjugate other life forms axiomatically apply to the Vonnadorians themselves:

[Humans] have lost themselves but not their ambitions. Do not think that they would not leave this place if they had the chance. They’re beginning to realise life is out there, that we or beings like us, are out there, and they won’t just stop at that. They will want to explore, and as their mathematical understanding expands, then they will eventually be able to do so. They will find us, eventually, and when they do, they will not want to be friends, even if they think – as they always do – that their own ends are perfectly benevolent. They will find a reason to destroy or subjugate other life forms. (p. 249)

In this reading, advanced posthuman Vonnadorians are also obviously looking for and finding reasons to destroy or subjugate other life forms in the name of mathematical purity and logic and in the name of protecting the peace in the universe. The fact that they take it upon themselves to confidently make such judgments and follow upon their evaluations with destructive action hints at their Vonnadorian-centrism, not so much different from anthropocentrism. The entire reading undermines the Vonnadorian claim to objectivity and undermines their supposed rights to protect the universe and to subjugate and shape other life forms in the ways they see fit for that purpose.

It can also be argued here that *The Humans* hence indicates that centrism is an unavoidable trait for even the most advanced species. The universe in the narrative is made up of competing forces that seek to take one another under control and dominate the rest to keep themselves at the centre of this universe. When that is the case, the self-effacing philosophy of posthumanism would mean letting go of

humanity's claims to that dominant centre and letting that centre be filled by other species. As the game theorists would explain, what may follow such self-effacement is an acquiescence to other species' dominance who might seek to subjugate humanity, like what the Vonnadorians are trying to do, and who will announce that their "ends are perfectly benevolent" (p. 249).

In the end, the alternative that *The Humans* proposes is a human-centred criticism of humanity, one that registers the value of posthumanist criticism but contains it within the borders of neo-Romantic liberal Western humanism. According to this position, the humanity definitely needs to improve, but this does not necessarily require a transition to a decentred posthuman reorganisation of the human societies. Haig lays out his virtue-centred approach to human flourishing in the chapter entitled "Advice for a human" (pp. 271-77). It is a list of 97 pieces of advice written by the alien-narrator for Gulliver in the hopes of helping him become a better version of himself and become a happier and a more fulfilled human individual. It is not possible to address all of the items on the list within the scope of this paper, but it can be said that what the list offers is a sort of conventional wisdom: the solution to most of the problems humanity is either facing or causing can be found in the human "ability to love" (p. 271). In different and recurring items on the list, the narrative suggests that their technology will not help humanity to become better versions of themselves. This also indicates one of the reasons why the alien-narrator quits the Vonnadorian posthuman hive-mind to become human, in the sense mentioned above that the Vonnadorians are still destructive and Vonnadorian-centric despite all their advanced science and technology. As a true neo-Romantic, liberal humanist, Haig ultimately offers "art [a]nd love" (p. 276) as the true sources for betterment and happiness, which only exists in the human world. Through art and love, humans need to learn to be true to themselves and face the truth (p. 87), otherwise they will be forever "thwarted" (p. 185) and the Earth will be a "planet of things wrapped inside things. Food inside wrappers. Bodies inside clothes. Contempt inside smiles. Everything [is] hidden away" (p. 13). Humans need to stop "turn[ing] on themselves, ostracis[ing] their own kind" (p. 22) and be more empathetic, "[b]e nice to other people" (p. 271), "[a]ccept different shapes" (p. 273), and remember that "caring is what makes [them] human. Care more, become more human" (p. 275). And finally, humans need to learn to take their "violent will" (p. 248) under control in order to avoid being "a monster that feasts on its own hands" (p. 249). That is to say, "their ability to shape the path of other species, to change their fundamental nature" (p. 102) and their ability to "dominate the world, and 'civilise' it" (p. 248) are "the remarkable thing about humans" (p. 102) so long as they learn to use this power in a wiser way in order not to threaten their own well-being.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that Matt Haig's *The Humans* engages with the posthuman ideals but ultimately reaffirms a reformed yet intentional humanism. Haig's alien-narrator, who initially embodies posthumanist detachment and contempt toward human flaws, undergoes a journey that sees him transitioning from a posthuman agent of surveillance and correction to a deeply integrated human advocate. Through the alien-narrator's transition from a detached posthuman agent of surveillance and correction to an advocate of human exceptionality, Haig negotiates with posthumanist critique, acknowledging its insights into human follies and eventually re-contains it in a recognition of the value of human-centric virtues, particularly love and individuality. At first, Haig's alien-narrator perceives humanity as fundamentally selfish and prone to violence, capable of causing immense harm to themselves and to the universe if they are allowed to advance. This mirrors the posthumanist critique of humanity as inherently flawed by anthropocentrism, self-interest, and disregard for ecological and interspecies ethics. Yet, the narrative does not stop with this critique; instead, by allowing the alien to

experience human life intimately, the narrative offers an alternative view that foregrounds humanity's redeeming qualities. Hence, the novel does not only emphasise humanism's enduring relevance but also dismisses a wholesale acceptance of posthumanist self-effacement that could undermine these virtues and compromise human well-being against the threats of being dominated by other species. This suggests that the solution to humanity's problems does not lie in abandoning humanism altogether but rather in refining it to encompass a more ethical and responsible understanding of being human.

Haig also uses the posthuman Vonnadorian society to illustrate the potential dangers of a posthuman evolution. The alien-narrator's society, though advanced, is devoid of familial bonds, personal identity, love, or any other emotional depth. In addition to stripping life of the very experiences that make it worth living, the Vonnadorian posthuman society still retains destructive tendencies, aspirations to subjugate other life forms, and a Vonnadorian-centrism despite its advanced stage. In this sense, a posthuman evolution does not guarantee solutions to the problems that posthumanists have identified. The novel then suggests that rather than seeking to transcend humanity through posthumanist self-effacement, humans should adopt a more virtue-centred approach and focus on cultivating virtues like empathy, creativity, and love. In this way, *The Humans* reimagines humanism as a flexible, evolving philosophy that can address modern challenges without abandoning its core values. Similarly, while the alien-narrator's initial mission to prevent humanity from advancing too quickly is based on a posthumanist distrust of human agency, his choice to abandon this mission in favour of joining humanity reflects a belief in human potential and the capacity for self-improvement.

In sum, *The Humans* advocates a form humanised posthumanism which accepts the need for ethical evolution but suggests that this ethical evolution should not entail a complete rejection of human-centred values. Haig's vision of humanism is thus one that is open to evolution and critique, yet firmly rooted in the belief that human life, with all its flaws and complexities, holds an intrinsic value that transcends the limitations of any single philosophical framework.

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