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Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory – A Comprehensive Critical Review. Patricia MacCormack (Author), Ashgate Publishing · 2012

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Abstract

Patricia MacCormack's *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* is a fierce, poetic, and uncompromising intervention into contemporary posthumanist thought. Published in 2012 as part of Ashgate's growing catalog of critical and cultural theory, the book stands apart from more mainstream posthumanist works—such as those by Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, or Donna Haraway—by grounding its ethics firmly in the Continental philosophical tradition of Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Serres, Blanchot, and Irigaray, while largely sidelining the Anglo-American, liberal-humanist, and transhumanist strands of posthumanism. MacCormack writes with an intensity that mirrors her subject matter: the ecstatic, the monstrous, and the inhuman. This extended review provides a detailed chapter-by-chapter exposition, followed by a critical assessment of the book's contributions, limitations, and place within the broader posthumanist literature.

Key Words: Posthumanism; ethics; embodiment; queer theory; animal studies; Spinoza; Deleuze and Guattari; biopolitics; vitalism; voluntary human extinction.

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I. Introduction: A Radical Ethics of Withdrawal and Affirmation

The book's central thesis is radical and deliberately provocative. MacCormack argues that ethics, properly understood, cannot be founded on recognition, representation, or the extension of rights. Instead, posthuman ethics must embrace withdrawal, grace, and the affirmation of the incommensurable other—an other that includes modified bodies, animals, monsters, works of art, and ultimately the non-human as such. She insists that the posthuman is not what

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comes after the human but what has always already been excluded from the category of the human: the queer, the disabled, the animal, the monstrous, the ecstatic, the dead. The book is structured as a series of meditations on specific figures of posthuman embodiment, each chapter exploring a different site of ethical encounter.

II. Detailed Chapter Analysis

Chapter 1: Posthuman Ethics (Introduction)

The opening chapter sets the philosophical stage. MacCormack begins by framing posthuman theory as a radical questioning of what it means to be human, particularly at a moment when continental philosophy has systematically dismantled claims about human subjectivity. She argues that the ethical dimensions of posthuman thinking lie not in defining *what* the posthuman is, but in asking *how* posthuman theory operates—how it creates new, creative ways of understanding relations between lives. Central to her project is the body. Drawing on Foucault, she insists that "the body is the ground and the site of the event of the posthuman encounter." Rejecting Cartesian dualism, she turns to Spinoza's ethics, which posits an inseparability of mind and body, will and appetite. For Spinoza, every being is defined by its *conatus*—the effort to persevere in its being—and ethical relations are those that increase a being's power of acting and being affected. MacCormack rejects Levinas's ethics of the face, which she finds too dependent on recognition and the human, instead following Blanchot's notion of friendship as a passive, unconditional response that requires no knowledge of the other. The chapter concludes with a defense of "affirmative vitalism" over the necrophilosophy of deconstruction, positioning her project as one of joyous, creative affirmation rather than mournful critique.

Chapter 2: Great, Temporary Tattooed Skin

This chapter focuses on tattooed and modified bodies as sites of posthuman ethical encounter. MacCormack draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "body without organs" (BwO) to argue that tattooing can produce intensities that resist signification and disrupt normative readings of race, gender, and class. She is critical of sociological studies that treat tattooed subjects as objects of analysis, asking "why do we want to know why someone gets tattooed?" instead of respecting the silence of the modified body. Drawing on Lyotard's notion of the *dispositif*—the zero that refuses explanation—she suggests that modified bodies create a "libidinal band" between viewer and viewed, collapsing the distinction between inside and outside. MacCormack examines the gendering of tattoo placement and the racial politics of "modern primitivism," while celebrating the emergence of "sympathetic tattoos" that work with the body's

topography to create animal-becomings. The tattooed body, she concludes, is not a thing but an event—a "great, temporary skin" that connects all bodies in a Möbius strip of affect.

Chapter 3: Ecstasy

Chapter 3 explores ecstatic encounters with art as a model for posthuman ethics. MacCormack draws on Bataille's concept of "inner experience," where subject and object fuse in a state of non-knowledge, and on Rancière's distinction between representational and ethical regimes of art. She argues that art is not representational but affective; it produces a rupture in perception that catapults the subject into the outside. The chapter engages with Serres's notion of the "veil" that both conceals and reveals, and with Irigaray's fluid mechanics of desire. The encounter with art, MacCormack argues, is an encounter with the inhuman: a work of art is non-responsive, non-intentional, yet powerfully affective. The ethical dimension lies in the subject's willingness to be undone, to experience "ecstasy" as a form of joyful suffering. Blanchot's *The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me* provides a literary illustration of an ethics of "impersonal attention"—attention that is empty, light, and undemanding. Art, MacCormack concludes, teaches us to die without dying, to lose the self in the ecstatic encounter with the outside.

Chapter 4: Animalities: Ethics and Absolute Abolition

Perhaps the most controversial chapter, Chapter 4 confronts the question of non-human animals. MacCormack argues that even the most progressive animal rights discourse remains trapped within human frameworks. She draws on Lyotard's concept of the *differend*—a wrong that cannot be articulated within available genres of discourse—to argue that animals are the ultimate victims: they cannot testify to their own suffering, and any human who speaks for them necessarily appropriates their voice. MacCormack rejects both welfare approaches and rights-based approaches, citing Gary Francione's abolitionist position but pushing beyond it: "The only ethical relation with the non-human animal is non-relation." She draws on Serres's concept of "grace" as a withdrawal, a making-room, a dancing that leaves no trace. To think the animal is already to violate it. The ethical gesture, therefore, is to stop thinking about animals altogether—to withdraw human attention and allow non-human lives to exist in their incommensurability. The chapter engages critically with Derrida, Haraway, and Deleuze and Guattari. Against Haraway's celebration of companion species, MacCormack insists that any human-animal relationship is parasitic, not mutual. The only "natural contract" (Serres) is one of abandonment: we must leave animals alone. The chapter ends with a radical proposal: veganism not as a sacrifice but as a simple recognition that humans do not need animal products.

Chapter 5: The Wonder of Teras

Chapter 5 examines teratology—the study of monsters—as a resource for posthuman ethics. MacCormack notes that "teras" means both monster and wonder, capturing the ambivalent response of horror and admiration that monsters provoke. She traces the history of teratology from medical taxonomy to contemporary disability studies and queer theory, arguing that monsters have always been defined by what they lack (the norm) rather than by what they are. Drawing on Braidotti, Halberstam, and Weiss, MacCormack argues for a politics of "becoming-monster" that refuses assimilation into the category of the human. Monsters are not disabled people, not queer people, not racialized others—although all have been called monsters—but rather the excessive, the inassimilable, the immanent. She turns to fictional monsters (werewolves, vampires, Lovecraftian entities) as more powerful than "real" monsters because they cannot be captured by taxonomy. These creatures produce packs, swarms, and contagions—modes of collectivity that are not based on identity or recognition. Monsters, MacCormack argues, are not errors but nature's creative excess. A posthuman teratology, therefore, does not seek to include monsters within humanist frameworks but rather to affirm that we are all already monstrous. Love, she concludes, is the affective mode appropriate to monsters: a love that is not possessive but welcoming, not recognitive but ecstatic.

Chapter 6: Mystic Queer

Chapter 6 develops a queer ethics grounded in mysticism, drawing on Irigaray's figure of the angel and Spinoza's affective ontology. MacCormack critiques both identity politics and performativity models of queerness, arguing that they remain trapped within representational frameworks. Instead, she proposes a "mucosal queer" ethics based on Irigaray's notion of the mucous as the materiality of the between—the viscous, sticky, non-hierarchical space of relation. Spinoza's ethics provides the theoretical backbone: love is not love of an object but love of the idea of an external cause that affects us with joy. MacCormack then introduces the figure of the angel as a "sovereign" posthuman other—neither human nor divine, neither male nor female, neither living nor dead. The angel is messenger of the outside, the mediator between the sensible and the intelligible, the one who never stays in one place. Drawing on Irigaray's claim that "angels are mucous," MacCormack argues for a queer mysticism that abandons the search for a sexual object and instead opens onto the incommensurable. This is not a theistic mysticism but an atheistic one: the angel is a fiction, a heuristic, a way of thinking relation without capture. The mystic queer loves the angel not because the angel exists but because the angel opens the space of becoming—a love that is "impossible" and therefore truly ethical.

Chapter 7: Vitalist Ethics: An End to Necrophilosophy

Chapter 7 critiques what MacCormack calls "necrophilosophy"—the mournful, self-reflexive obsession with the death of the subject that she finds in certain strands of post-structuralism. Drawing on Benhabib's critique of the postmodern subject, she argues that necrophilosophy substitutes conceptual death for actual death, mourning the loss of the unified self while ignoring the real, physical deaths of marginalized subjects (women, animals, the disabled, the colonized). The chapter examines the legal and medical construction of death, arguing that the state's power to define death produces a "nation of the dead." Against this, MacCormack proposes a "vitalist ethics" grounded in the actual, suffering, dying body. She draws on Gatens and Lloyd's reading of Spinoza to argue that the wise person meditates not on death but on life—and that this meditation must include the possibility of human extinction. The chapter includes a discussion of activism, arguing that posthuman ethics requires embodied risk-taking: "We must stand up, go outside, and do something." She critiques both academic quietism and performative activism, insisting that real change requires the body to be put on the line.

Epilogue: After Life

The Epilogue takes up the most radical implication of MacCormack's argument: voluntary human extinction. She discusses the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) and the Church of Euthanasia as examples of activist groups that embrace human non-reproduction as an ethical goal. Drawing on Spinoza's meditation on life, she argues that the cessation of human reproduction is not a sacrifice but a gift—a giving of space to other forms of life. MacCormack is careful not to advocate for forced extinction; rather, she asks whether the ethical posthuman subject might choose not to reproduce as an expression of love for the non-human world. The book ends not with a conclusion but with a question: "What is love?"—suggesting that posthuman ethics is ultimately an inquiry into the nature of love beyond the human.

III. Critical Assessment

Strengths

Uncompromising Radicalism. MacCormack is willing to follow her arguments to their most extreme conclusions, even when those conclusions are uncomfortable or seemingly absurd. Her critique of animal rights discourse is genuinely challenging: if even the most well-intentioned human speech appropriates the animal's voice, then perhaps silence is the only ethical response.

Poetic, Performative Prose. MacCormack writes in short, aphoristic bursts, piling up intensifiers and refusing conventional argumentative clarity. This style will frustrate some readers but will delight others who appreciate the attempt to write philosophy *as* ecstasy rather than *about* ecstasy.

Resistance to Liberal Humanist Pieties. The book refuses the comfortable inclusion of difference under a "diversity" framework, insisting instead on the inassimilable excess of the monstrous, the animal, and the ecstatic.

Limitations

Too Swift a Rejection of Levinas and Derrida. While MacCormack is right to critique the anthropocentrism of Levinas's "face," her dismissal ignores the ways in which Levinas's work has been productively extended to non-human animals by thinkers like Derrida, Wolfe, and others.

Ungenerous Reading of Haraway. Her critique of Haraway's *When Species Meet* flattens the complexity of Haraway's position on companion species and possessive individualism.

Risk of Quietism. If the most ethical response to animal suffering is to stop thinking about animals, what do we do about the animals currently being tortured in factory farms? MacCormack's ethics seems better suited to aesthetic encounters than to political struggle.

Affirmation of Intensity Regardless of Source. There is a risk in Deleuzian vitalism of affirming all affective intensities, including those that are destructive or oppressive. MacCormack's prose tends to celebrate intensity as such.

Narrow Audience. The book presupposes a deep familiarity with Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Serres, Irigaray, and Blanchot—figures not always accessible to readers new to posthumanism.

Key Insights from the Book

1. The posthuman is not what comes after the human but what has always already been excluded from the category of the human: the queer, the disabled, the animal, the monstrous, the ecstatic, the dead.
2. Ethics cannot be founded on recognition, representation, or the extension of rights; it must embrace withdrawal, grace, and the affirmation of the incommensurable other.
3. "The only ethical relation with the non-human animal is non-relation"—to think the animal is already to violate it.
4. Tattooed and modified bodies create a "libidinal band" between viewer and viewed, collapsing the distinction between inside and

outside.

5. The encounter with art is an encounter with the inhuman; ethical art produces ecstatic collapse of the self.

6. Monsters are not errors but nature's creative excess; a posthuman teratology affirms that we are all already monstrous.

7. "Necrophilosophy" substitutes conceptual death for actual death, mourning the loss of the unified self while ignoring real, physical deaths of marginalized subjects.

8. Vitalist ethics requires embodied risk-taking: "We must stand up, go outside, and do something."

9. The angel (after Irigaray) is a "sovereign" posthuman other—neither human nor divine, neither male nor female, neither living nor dead.

10. Voluntary human extinction may be the most loving ethical gesture: making space for other forms of life by ceasing to make more humans.

IV. Significance and Final Verdict

Posthuman Ethics is a demanding, provocative, and often brilliant book. It pushes posthumanist thought beyond the comfortable liberal humanism that still haunts much of the literature, insisting that genuine posthuman ethics must risk the disappearance of the human subject—up to and including the disappearance of the human species. MacCormack's unflinching commitment to the inhuman, the monstrous, and the ecstatic opens new possibilities for thinking about ethics beyond recognition and rights.

The book will be essential reading for scholars working at the intersections of continental philosophy, queer theory, animal studies, disability studies, and body modification studies. It will also appeal to anyone interested in the more radical, speculative, and mystical dimensions of posthumanist thought. While not a practical guide to ethical action, it offers a powerful provocation: that the most ethical gesture might be to withdraw, to make room, to love without knowing, and to embrace the ecstatic dissolution of the self in the encounter with the other.

In the end, MacCormack's posthuman ethics is an ethics of love—not love as possession or recognition, but love as the affirmation of the incommensurable, the monstrous, and the inhuman. It is a love that is willing to let go, to disappear, to become imperceptible. Whether this is a love we can live is another question—but MacCormack has at least shown us what it might mean to try.

Final Verdict

Rating: ★★★★½ (4.5/5)

Essential for specialists in posthumanism, queer theory, and animal studies; challenging but rewarding for advanced readers; not recommended as an introduction to the field.

A fierce, poetic, and uncompromising intervention that refuses liberal humanist pieties and opens new possibilities for ethical thought beyond recognition and rights. While its radical withdrawal risks quietism, its unflinching affirmation of the monstrous, the ecstatic, and the inhuman makes it an indispensable contribution to contemporary posthumanist literature.

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