The Posthuman Condition and a Translational Agency That Leaks[1]

_____ Shabnam Naderi[2]& Gholamreza Tajvidi[3]

Abstract

The present conceptual paper seeks to investigate the notion of agency within the field of translation studies drawing on Barad's (2007) agential realism and Ferrando's (2019) classification of philosophical posthumanism. Diffractively reading insights through the two approaches, one from quantum physics and the other from philosophy, the paper gives an elaboration on translational agency. The traditional, i.e. Cartesian-Newtonian, understanding of matter considers humans as active, self-moving agents and matters as passive entities whose movements are tied up with external human forces. Within this frame of thought nonhuman beings are excluded from the discussions of agency. This humanist take on agency considers separateness as an inherent feature of the world's being. On the other hand, the posthuman take on agency levels criticism against the Cartesian 'cogito' and the ontological dualism it entails and lays the groundwork for an agency of 'becoming', rather than being, which places emphasis on a relational ontology and the mutual constitution of an entangled agency. A posthuman translational agency, in this respect, goes beyond acknowledging human-nonhuman relationship or assemblage to maintain that the material is no longer an exterior to the human and the human itself is no longer a closed, rigid notion. It is not about the differences, rather it is about how differences are made and remade; i.e. against the backdrop of a posthumanist and agential realist translation agency, inquiries into 'who' and 'what' are not in disjunction from inquiries into 'how'.

Keywords: Agential realism, Post-anthropocentrism, Post-dualism, Post-humanism, Translational agency

2. Ph. D. Candidate, Department of English Translation Studies, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran; email: shabnam.naderi70@gmail.com

3. Associate Professor, Department of English Translation Studies, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran; email: tjre301@gmail.com

Introduction

Agency was the fruit of the discussion functional approaches brought to the study of translation; an approach which marked a move away from linguistic typologies to cultural and social issues and placed emphasis on the role and function of translation in target societies, specifically, Justa Holz-Mänttäri's *translatorial action,* which viewed translation as a human interaction involving different actors. This recognition of the role of actors led to a contemplation on the key concept of agency in translation and different scholars conceptualized it differently, among whom one can refer to Bourdieu, Latour, Luhmann, Giddens, Kinnunen & Koskinen. A move towards transdisciplinary perspectives within translation studies broadened our horizons and paved the way for organizing translational knowledge through structural, diffractive (rather than reflective) links with neighboring or even remote fields of study. The present paper, being an excerpt of a doctoral dissertation on the links between posthumanism and translation, is an ideational and conceptual one for which a traditional approach to methodological considerations does not seem tenable. That is why it enfolds through a diffractive (derived from diffraction which is a physical phenomenon and a counterpoint for reflection) and emergent methodology according to which insights from translation, philosophy and physics are read through one another in an effort to produce an entangled account of agency. Diversity, heterogeneity and multiplicity are of the essence of this transdisciplinary diffractive methodology and the 'relational' nature of difference is called to attention. Philosophy has always lied at the heart of discussions on translation, but how about a field like quantum physics? A critical rethinking of the relationship between science, philosophy and translation presented here, offers the possibility of an entanglement that does justice to a transdisciplinary and diffractive study. This conjures up what the prominent philosopher of mind, Andy Clark[1] states,

> Everything leaks. There are no clear-cut level distinctions in nature. Neural software bleeds into neural firmware, neural firmware bleeds into neural hardware, psychology bleeds into biology and biology bleeds into physics. Body bleeds into mind and mind bleeds into world. Philosophy bleeds into science and science bleeds back.

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1. https://www.edge.org/response-detail/11133. In 2004 *The Edge* website invited philosophers and scientist to answer the following question: "what's your law?" the quote given here is Clark's answer to this question.

This statement serves as a proper point of departure for our discussion in this study. Now, considering such an entanglement how does one go about inquiring the notion of agency within translation studies? We will be addressing this question in what follows.

Humanist Understanding of Agency

Within the matrix of humanist thought, responsibility is considered to be the property of a willful subject. Humanists favor the separation of mind and body, giving primacy to the former and hence giving power to the thinking subject. In this ontological dualism, body, as matter, is relegated to an inferior status, devoid of agency. This dualistic thinking can extend to include further dualisms; Male/female, nature/culture, human/nonhuman, Natural sciences/ Humanities, etc. The Cartesian-Newtonian understanding of matter considers humans as active, self-moving agents and matters as passive entities whose movements are tied up with external human forces. Within this frame of thought nonhuman beings are excluded from the discussions of agency. This humanist take on agency considers separateness as an inherent feature of the world's being. In this sense, the liberal humanist subject is fully constituted before entering any inter/intra-action, i.e. its agency gets defined in its separation from other entities and as Karen Barad (2007) argues "it is the liberal humanist conception of the subject, not the agential realist one, that encourages the notion that responsibility begins and ends with a willful subject who is destined to reap the consequences of his actions" (p. 172). In a nutshell, the humanist, anthropocentric understanding of agency is associated with 'choice' and 'intentionality'. It might beg the question: 'what is wrong with this subjective human agency?' The answer is quite clear; such a humanist stance towards agency, as Jeffrey Scott Marchand states in *The Posthuman Glossary* (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018), turns the earth, the nature and the non-human world, in general, into a passive repository for human consumption.

Agency in translation follows a similar route; from Bourdieu's human-centered sociology to Latourian actor-network theory which ascribes agency to nonhumans as well as humans. Translation agency in its humanist tradition attributes agency to a fully constituted translator prior to the act of translation whose intentions are of primary importance. Although, Latour's actor-network theory seems to compensate for Bourdieu's excessive emphasis on human actors in his theory of agency, it still holds traces of a humanist tradition at its core. In what follows I consider translational agency placed within a posthumanist, Baradian sense that

moves beyond the traditional humanist understanding of the notion and contributes to the formation of an agency on the basis of a relational ontology. This relational agency "goes beyond acknowledging that humans work with the nonhuman, and within collectives of the human and nonhuman, to problematize the assumption of discrete ontological boundaries between the human and nonhuman" (Andrews & Duff, 2019, p. 124).

It is worthy of note that this study does not negate or invalidate the role played by the human subject, rather tries to give a better, more comprehensive understanding of the nature of that role. In fact, agency beyond a humanist tradition "is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity. Nor does it merely entail resignification or other specific kinds of moves within a social geometry of antihumanism" (Barad, 2007, p. 177).

Posthumanist, Agential Realist Understanding of Agency

Throughout the previous section a discussion on the Cartesian 'cogito' and the ontological dualism it entails (between mind and body) was initiated, pointing out to the primacy of human mind over body and the corresponding primacy of human as rational, free and agential over the matter as passive, inert and subject to causal forces. It is important to have a more-than-human approach to translational agency, one which is based on a relational, process ontology. The relational, process ontology and the understanding of human as an open notion that ensues is an underlying premise of the posthuman thought. In line with Andrews and Duff (2019), "a reconceptualization of the human from something that is complete and 'closed' to something that is incomplete and 'open'" is the main concern in the posthumanist thought; moreover, it is worthy of note that according to this reconceptualization, all things "should be understood as products of distributed, expansive processes involving associations and encounters between multiple living/biological and material/technological actors, as well as the excessive vital forces that exist within these actors and that emerge within their associations and encounters" (p. 124).

According to Ferrando (2019), "Different from Antihumanism, Posthumanism, although not recognizing any onto-epistemological primacy to the human, actually resumes the possibility for human agency in a deconstructive and relational form" (p. 52). This implies that "the phenomena produced are not the consequences of human will or intentionality or the effects of the operations of Culture, Language, or Power. Humans do not merely assemble different apparatuses

for satisfying particular knowledge projects; they themselves are part of the ongoing reconfiguring of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 171). In line with this ongoing reconfiguration, it is important to note that Karen Barad's (2007) notion of 'agential realism' is based on an ontology of 'becoming' rather than being, since it places emphasis on processes, changes and reconfigurations and it is non-reducible to components (negating the separateness present in the humanist tradition). As she asserts, in traditional humanist perspectives "intelligibility requires an intellective agent (that to which something is intelligible), and intellection is framed as a specifically human capacity. But in my agential realist account, intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation" (Barad, 2007, p. 149).

The human, based on this relational, process ontology, "turns into a network of energies, alliances, matter, and perspectives, relating to any other forms of existence, allied through different material outcomes, and possibly, in different quantum dimensions, in a radical onto-existential re-signification of being" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 181). In this sense, "Agency is not something that humans and even nonhumans have to varying degrees. And agency is not a binary proposition, either on or off" (Barad, 2007, p. 172); agency is no longer an attribute, rather it is a relationship that takes shape through world's constant 'intra-acting'. It is process-oriented and relational. This suggests that "separately determinate entities do not preexist their intra-action" (Barad, 2007, p. 175). As regards the neologism 'intra-action', Barad argues that it "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies"; that is, "in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (Barad, 2007, p. 33).

Agential realism is not about fixed, stable differences, rather it is concerned with "how differences are made and remade, stabilized and destabilized" (Barad & Kleinman, 2012, p. 77). Inquiries into "who" and "what" are not in disjunction from inquiries into "how"; besides asking what is the role of translation, what is the role of the translator, who is in charge, what is the role of culture, ecology, etc., one might, as well, ask how they are entangled and how they are differentiated. Of paramount importance is the fact that the differences are not prior to intra-actions, rather they are made and remade through 'agential cuts', as opposed to a Cartesian cut which assumes an ontological separability prior to relationships; to give a simpler account of the fact, "it is not that there are no separations or

differentiations, but that they only exist within relations" (Barad & Kleinman, 2012, p. 77). This means that differences are made, they are not preexisting; they are made and remade through agential cuts and an agential cut is a "temporary separation between entanglements. This happens because entities do not preexist their relationships. They arise only through the agential cut" (Bozalek & Fullagar, 2021, p. 30). Karen Barad also refers to the agential cut as "simultaneously cutting together/apart. This is because it is not an actual cut. The subject and object remain entangled" (Bozalek & Fullagar, 2021, p. 30).

This is what agential realism seeks to establish, an ontology of becoming that considers relationality as active and in a constant dynamism as opposed to a stable ontology of being; in fact, agential realism is itself an ontology.

Where Science and Humanities Meet; Quantum Physics and Its Contribution to the Posthumanist Understanding of Translational Agency

Natural sciences have for long been placed in opposition to Human sciences because the former have always been ascribed with objectivity and the latter with subjectivity. The separation of science and social presumes the binaries of objective/subjective, nature/culture, human/nonhuman, etc. while giving primacy to the first alternative over the second.

The two lines of enquiry have for long been trapped in a dualistic existence that implies inherent distinctions. Baradian (2007) philosophy-physics, however, has aptly brought the two lines of thought together and has offered a reconciliation of the two previously diverse and irreconcilable fields.

To set the scene and to find similar trajectories let's consider the relationship between Newtonian physics/Cartesian philosophy and Quantum physics/Posthuman philosophy; Newtonian physics rests on the premise that we are only a part of this world whereas Quantum physics believes that the world is what it is because we are part of it. Newtonian physics is based on the assumption that the world is deterministic whereas quantum physics considers the world as probabilistic. This, however, does not imply that the two are read against each other or one is dwarfed by the other; their relationship is one of diffraction. The same holds true for the Cartesian philosophy and the posthumanist philosophy; the Cartesian philosophy, with its representationalist epistemology, deems human mind (as opposed to body) as privileged and hence marks a distinction between objects and agencies of observation (i.e. subject/object, human/nonhuman divide); on the other

hand, a posthuamnist philosophy is geared towards the decentralization of human and its emergence through intra-actions with human and material beings.

Now, what philosophical implications does quantum physics bring to the discussion of agency? The fascination with quantum physics in this study is due to the challenges it poses to modernist, dualistic and reductionist frames of thought. One of the most famous dualities questioned by quantum physics is the wave-particle duality. As Barad (2007) explains,

> experimental evidence at the beginning of the twentieth century exhibited seemingly contradictory features-on the one hand, light seemed to behave like a wave, but under different experimental circumstances, light seemed to behave like a particle"; similar results were found for matter: "under one set of circumstances, electrons behave[ed] like particles, and under another they behave[ed] like waves. (p. 29)

Thomas Young's double-slit experiment is a clear effort made to show the 'entanglement of states' in quantum physics; the fact that light and matter can display characteristics of both waves and particles. The findings of this experiment speak against the binary of wave/particle and advocate the probabilistic and non-determinate nature of being. This probabilistic, non-dualist approach to being, invokes a relational agency that brings all agents together-apart; meaning that agents come to life through their relationships and their differences get made and remade through agential cuts within their intra-actions.

The hallmark of quantum physics is entanglement; this is precisely what an agential realist account of agency seeks to establish through a diffractive methodology. Barad (2007), with her diffractive methodology, has shown "how philosophical stances matter in the construction of scientific theories" and how the two fields (philosophy and science) are not separate (p. 124); but, this stance is quite far from simply 'bridging' the Humanities with Natural sciences, as she asserts. According to her, a diffractive methodology goes beyond this common mode of analysis and enables us to

> examine in detail important philosophical issues such as the conditions for the possibility of objectivity, the nature of measurement, the nature of nature and meaning making, the conditions for intelligibility, the nature of causality and identity, and the relationship between discursive practices and the material world. (p. 94)

This diffractive methodology is based on a relational ontology that is the basic principle in 'agential realism'. Baradian philosophy-physics alters our ontological and epistemological perspective on different translational concepts including, but not limited to, agency, discourse, subjectivity, space, time etc.

Posthuman Translational Agency

Baradian (2007) notions of agential realism, diffraction, intra-action and so forth call into question the categorical thinking and broaden the scope of knowledge production in different fields of study, from Feminism to Posthumanism, to Culture Studies, Environmental Studies and even Translation Studies as discussed herein.

The posthuman philosophy considers 'matter' as a discursive practice that needs to be understood in terms of intra-activity. Take the example of technology as a matter, as a discursive practice. Is it possible to ignore its material existence, its agency and its role in the translation industry? Consider Covid19 as another discursive practice and as a materiality which exerted a huge influence on the translation industry. It is worth mentioning that these material existences are not separated from the larger body or the larger discursive practices they come from. The discursive practice of Covid19 emerges in intra-action with the discourse of Wuhan, the discourse of environmental changes, the discourse of global warming, the discourse of power, the discourse of translation, the discourse of technology, and the list goes on. They all exist in an ever-changing flow of intra-action. This 'material agency' as well as the notion of 'intra-action' rather than interaction, are what posthumanism strives to add to the discussion of agency; the fact that there is no exteriority in debates on agency, all we have is interiority and intra-action.

The material and the discursive exist in a relationship of entanglement; one cannot be considered as separate from the other; "Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other" (Barad, 2007, p. 152). By way of comparison, a work of translation cannot be reduced to an author, a translator, a publishing company or even a society. Translations are discursive practices, are agents in constant intra-action in their becoming. Focusing on a relational process ontology, translations are not objects with inherent boundaries, rather they are material-discursive phenomena.

The question now might be the following: how does this posthuman approach to agency affect translation? Let's set the ball rolling by discussing the notion of 'meaning'. Meaning has always been attributed to a self, a reflective

consciousness, i.e. meaning has always been human and discursive, not material, not natural. It is important to note, here, that meaning is not just discursive, rather it is material-discursive (gender, race, sexuality, religion, nationality + techno-scientific, natural factors and other material beings). When we restrict meaning to the realm of discursive, we are restricting it to the realm of language, hence to the realm of human.

As Karen Barad (2007) claims, "Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every "thing" -even materiality-is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation" (Barad, 2007, p. 132). She has no intention of negating the role of language, in fact what she is trying to condemn is the representationalist view of language, the fact that language reflects reality and words and things are considered to be distinct, separate entities. This approach to language is a reworking and extending of theories that retain aspects of the humanist tradition. In discussing a posthuman translational agency one needs to move from a liberal human actor to the critical engagement of techno-scientific, natural and other material actors, not in a Latourian sense, but in a posthumanist, agential realist sense.

This posthuman, agential realist agency can get further elaborated in terms of Ferrando's (2019) definition of posthumanism: as a post-humanism, as a post-dualism, and as a post-anthropocentrism. While being different, the three overlap at some points and share similarities at the ontological and epistemological levels.

-**Agency as a post-humanism**: according to Ferrando (2019) "Post-humanism implies the understanding of the plurality of the human experience; the human is not recognized as one but as many, that is, human(s)—thus undermining the humanist tradition based on a generalized and universalized approach to the human" (p. 54); human as an **open notion** respectively accentuates an understanding of translator as an open notion; as an open notion, 'translator' is always "becoming", i.e. translator "**becomes**" rather than translator "**is**", as the sine qua non of this approach is underscored. What is inherent to the notion of "**becoming**" is its open and dynamic nature as opposed to "**being**" which implies closure and a rigid, non-changing quality. Human, in this sense is characterized as a verb not a noun, following what Donna Haraway states in *The Haraway Reader*: "Gender is a verb, not a noun" (Haraway, 2004, p. 328).

Following this route, one can speak of a post-translator or a translator- (the

Hyphen implies openness, continuity and multiplicity of possibilities); translator-activist/politician/text-producer/editor/environmentalist/influencer and so forth; this implies a move from "generalized universalism to situated perspectivism" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 185). Translators and non-human actants along with translators and other human actors enjoy a sort of **distributed, dynamic and temporally unstable agency**.

-**Agency as a post-dualism**: As a post-dualism, "Philosophical Posthumanism reveals a necessary move from individuality to relationality, marking the passage from "human animals" to embodied posthuman networks, performing as nomadic sites of potentialities and actualizations" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 186). It is of paramount importance to note here that, according to Ferrando (2019), "Posthumanism recognizes its own standpoints as post-dualistic, rather than non-dualistic" (p. 61); i.e. it is a **reconciliation of existence.**

Translation, according to this perspective, is not a process separate from technology, biology and ecology. Agency, by way of comparison, is no longer confined to the realm of translator, rather it goes further to include technology, ecology, biology, etc. in this sense, agency goes from individuality to **relationality** and it is no longer an attribute given to individuals or other actants prior to their intra-actions. Human-nonhuman binary is no longer valid, translator and matter are **not separate entities** or two ends of a cline prior to their intra-actions; they come to life through intra-actions.

Agency as a post-dualism is **against linearity**; it is not linear in that it is **temporally emergent**; the linear definition of translation in which an author produces an original text, then a translator produces a translated text has ceased to apply (i.e. the view of translation as an act originating from a human actor and ending with a human actor is obsolete); a whole host of other actors are engaged. This **Nonhierarchical** and **nonessentialist** approach to agency can be easily traced in the post-dualistic extension of posthumansim.

-**Agency as a post-anthropocentrism**: Post-anthropocentrism is based on the premise of "taking into consideration the existence of other species, their needs, their habits, and their co-evolution, in relation to our species and all the other species" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 152). In short, it "refers to decentering the human in relation to the nonhuman" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 54). Against this background, the nature and the non-human world is **no longer a passive repository** for human consumption, human's utmost authority has waned and agentic action needs to ensure

sustainability and a symbiotic relationship with technology and ecology; i.e. agency is ascribed to the ecological, the virtual, the matter as well as the human. In fact, post-anthropocentrism adds to the post-humanist, pluralistic 'human' voices "the nonhuman voices, or better, their silencing amid what is currently defined as the sixth mass extinction-the ongoing extinction of species caused, directly or indirectly, by human actions" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 103).

In this respect, translators and other human actors involved in an act of translation need to optimize their activities in line with this **reconciliation of existence**. The reason lies in the fact, the biological no longer remains at the level of biological, the technological no longer remains at the level of technological and the ecological no longer remains at the level of ecological. Take the production of Biofuel as an example beyond the scope of translation; it is directly derived from bacteria, plant material or algae; now, does the agency of the bacteria and plant material active in producing biofuel remain at the environmental/ecological level? The answer is quite clear, it definitely gets extended to the social, political, economic, etc. Therefore, the material is political and the political is material, the material is social and the social is material, the economic is material and the material is economic. Technology plays an important part in the formation of critical thoughts about nature and ecology and since "technological is a site of post-anthropocentric becoming", it is important to address technological considerations in a discussion on post-anthropocentrism (Braidotti, 2013, p. 94). Take Covid-19 as another example; we witnessed enormous changes in the social, political, environmental, educational and economic levels when Covid-19 hit the world in 2020. Rapid maturation of online activities highlighted the need to access technological devices like laptops, tablets, cellphones, etc., and where did the minerals in these devices come from? Yes, the environment, the planet. Or else, think of the economic turnover generated for tech giants like Amazon, Apple, Google, Microsoft and Facebook during the spread of Covid-19. As we can see a change at one level can affect many other levels and it is inevitable in today's world because we are all entangled. This entanglement constitutes Barad's (2007) agential realism which considers entities as together-apart, as not separate; the exterior is no longer the exterior, it is the **exterior-within**. Agency as a post-anthropocentrism in translation, then, recognizes all these lines of enquiry and the fact that translators, writers, publishers, editors, end-users and other human actors are not the only agents present in the act and industry of translation. They are all exteriorities-within.

Translators and other human actors are entangled with the material world through their intra-actions with objects, technologies, plants, animals, and the built and natural environment. Translation can help the environmental activism and can serve political, economic, and environmental agendas following the underlying premise of the agential-realist and post-anthropocentric agency discussed herein which considers environment and society, environment and political, environment and literature, and finally environment and economy as not separate.

Concluding Remarks

Posthumanism is an ongoing philosophy and the pieces to its puzzle come together in the fullness of time. What is for sure is the fact that "Matter and nature are taken not as passive but dynamic agentic processes" (Birlik, 2022, p. 67). In line with this agentic existence, Barad aptly states that "Matter is an active 'agent' in its ongoing materialization" (Barad, 2007, p. 151).

A posthuman translational agency, in this respect, goes beyond acknowledging human-nonhuman relationship or assemblage to maintain that the material is no longer an exterior to the human and the human itself is no longer a closed, rigid notion. It is not about the differences, rather it is about how differences are made and remade; i.e. against the backdrop of a posthumanist, agential realist, translational agency, inquiries into "who" and "what" are not in disjunction from inquiries into "how"; besides asking what is the role of translation, what is the role of the translator, who is in charge, what is the role of culture, ecology, etc., one might, as well, ask how they are entangled and how they are differentiated. Posthuman Agency in this sense is a flow, a series of actions not attributed to a single actor; it is not static, rather an ever-changing flow of actions circulating among material, non-material, human and non-human actants.

Here lies the difference between a posthuman, agential realist account of agency and what scholars like Latour, Pickerings or Olohan argued; Latour (2005), Pickering (1993), Olohan (2011) stick to a realist, separationist ontology which considers the world as outside and humans (mind) as inside. Barad's (2007) agential realism and the posthumanist philosophy, on the other hand, consider entities as together-apart, as not separate; the exterior is no longer the exterior, it is the exterior-within. In fact, ontological, epistemological and methodological differences remain between them; posthumanism, with its relational, process ontology and perspectivist epistemology, opens up transdisciplinary channels of

communication and calls for a collapse of centrality alongside the coming into existence of a fluid, non-fixed and non-linear understanding of agency.

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