

Posthumanist impulses for Theme-Centred Interaction

Posthumanistische Impulse für die Themenzentrierte Interaktion

Felix Oberst

The author compares the view of humanity in Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI) according to Ruth Cohn with the approaches of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, which are usually considered to be post-humanist. This philosophy opposes the Enlightenment's rigid, intellectual view of humanity and develops new, inclusive ideas of what it means to be human. Braidotti and Haraway emphasize the changeability and interconnectedness between humans, technology, and other species. Both perspectives – TCI and critical posthumanism – reject the image of an isolated, autonomous individual and suggest dynamic, relationship-oriented views of humanity. At the same time, they differ as to whether humans are regarded holistically or based on context. Finally, he shows how posthumanist ideas can broaden our perspective on TCI's Four-Factor Model. This relational model, a diagram of TCI's view of humanity, is predestined to systematically represent 'more-than-human' actors as well, i.e. animals, as well as technological and ecological references.

Conceptions of the human are an integral part of all psychosocial theories and approaches. Whoever claims to know how human coexistence functions and ought to succeed simultaneously reveals, implicitly or explicitly, a specific conception of the human. Beyond this commonality, differences arise in how these conceptions are oriented. Therefore it is important to ask who these concepts are about and whom they address. Often left outside the field of view are unintended others, excluded groups, or other species. Humanist conceptions of the human are criticized for neglecting these blind spots, despite — or precisely because of — their claim to represent the human universally and holistically. This calls into question, in turn, some basic principles of Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI).

In this article I therefore examine which perspectives and impulses posthumanist approaches can offer TCI. I outline these contours by highlighting parallels and differences between Cohn's vision of the human and posthumanist conceptions.

Beyond the mainstream: Ruth Cohn's conception of the human

Driven from the horrors of the Nazi era and propelled by the hope for a more humane coexistence, Ruth Cohn developed TCI. Through her "Workshop Institute for Living-Learning" she brought Black and white people together to discuss political issues. Although Cohn made significant contributions to Humanistic Psychology, she remained largely neglected in academic scholarship compared with Perls, Rogers, and Watzlawick. Her questions and responses about a more humane togetherness remain highly topical today (Johach, 2009; John and Ostertag, 2020; Ostertag, 2024).

Responsible Relatedness: Cohn's humanistic vision

What moves me most about TCI is how Cohn writes about people: I see no other representative of Humanistic Psychology with so heartfelt and yet so decisive a conception of the human as Cohn's. When I first read her texts I was repeatedly surprised by how visionary and refreshingly

unconventional they are. When she describes the human as a bio-psychological unity, it becomes clear that she does not separate head and heart the way many Western theories have. §1§ Feelings, thoughts, and the bodily are equally important to Cohn and deeply intertwined. Perhaps she could see this differently from her male colleagues because, as a woman, she experienced being reduced to her body and thus became especially aware of her corporeality. Cohn understands humans as relational beings fundamentally connected to other living beings and things. Here too she thinks alleged opposites together: humans are autonomous and interdependent at once.

Cohn therefore criticizes Enlightenment humanism, which placed the human – as a reason-guided ideal in place of God – at the center of its new world order. This traces back to thinkers such as Descartes and Kant, who held that what chiefly characterizes humans is that they think and act according to reason. Cohn rejected this anthropocentrism. Such a one-dimensional view is also ethically and humanely inadequate. If we regard humans merely as thinking beings according to "I think, therefore I am" and judge action solely by reason, we forget what this is really about: namely sorrow, joy, and anger — feelings, in short. For that reason Cohn (1984, p. 443) described Humanistic Psychology as "the expression of a contemporary revolt against the one-sidedness of Enlightenment values".

Cohn developed TCI as a form of resistance against National Socialism. For her, "never again" meant that individuals should say "no" to violence and "yes" to life. This reminds me of Stanislav Petrov. In 1983, the Soviet lieutenant colonel decided not to report the launch of US nuclear missiles, which had been indicated by the warning system, to his superiors. The alarm later proved to be a false warning, and Petrov's responsible individual decision averted a nuclear war.

But we cannot simply demand that people act responsibly if this is not also fostered – that would overload and overwhelm us. We are all born into a world of relational webs and develop within that network as partly autonomous beings. Cohn does not expect people to be already fully responsible; she regards the process toward responsibility as decisive. For Cohn, the humane springs from shared co-responsibility in the becoming of the living world (Ostertag, 2024). We therefore need a society that supports autonomy, in which feelings count as much as thoughts, and in which individuals are as important as the common cause. TCI, for me, is grounded in this idea. In this respect Cohn distinguished herself from Rogers and Perls, who overemphasised individual autonomy while neglecting our social embeddedness (Cohn, 1975/2013; Farau & Cohn, 1984; Johach, 2009). For Cohn, individual self-realization presupposes an enabling togetherness in which both difference and connectedness are accepted (Bayer & Ostertag, 2025; Johach, 2012). Human development occurs within these dynamic boundaries, not outside them in a vacuum. How people develop within their limits; how and what they become remains an open, non-teleological process.

Cohn therefore conceives of humans as partially powerful relational beings – parts of a living world who develop together with all other parts (Cohn, 1975/2013). This contains a life-affirming and encouraging stance: to do what is possible within our limited power, with reverence and connection to everything and everyone (Cohn & Brühlmann-Jecklin, 2010).

After us, humanity: posthumanist conceptions beyond the Enlightenment

Another philosophical movement that fascinates me and opens many new questions is posthumanism. I therefore want to share my perspective on posthumanism here and present it to TCI as a conversational partner.

Michel Foucault's text "The Order of Things" (1966/2023) is often seen as a catalyst for posthumanist thought. There he analyzes that the concept of the subject was not always as we commonly understand the 'modern' humans – namely as universal and autonomous. Instead, Foucault shows that this conception of the human was discursively formed by historical

relations of power and knowledge and is not universally consistent. Depending on who or what rules over us at a given time – be it a church or a government – we would likely answer the questions "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" differently (Braidotti, 2016).

The Enlightenment conceptually lifted humans out of nature (as already indicated above by Cohn). However, this made it necessary to invent distinctions between the so-called 'natural' and the 'human'. 'Nature' functioned as a constructed boundary between the civilised subject and nature (Braidotti, 2016; Braidotti, 2019). Foucault, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise that being a subject now meant being 'master' of one's 'inner nature'. The academic, rational, white man, the citizen of recognised states, thus became the universal representative of humanity (Braidotti, 2016, 2019). The feminine, emotional, wild and natural thus became 'the other' (Fink, 2021). This centrality of men served to legitimise male domination and the colonisation of 'the other' (Bonner, 2018; Bourdieu, 2013). As a result, Western science neglected all voices between and outside the male norm, such as women*, people of colour, children, queer and Indigenous people (von Redecker 2022; Mangler et al., 2024).

§2§ Many different posthumanist authors, drawing on these insights, set out to tell new narratives about what humans are and might become. The term posthumanism is a collective and discursive term for approaches that can be roughly divided into two types: technological and critical posthumanism.

Replacing or enhancing: technological posthumanism vs. transhumanism

Technological posthumanism anticipates a future replacement of humans, for example by so-called artificial intelligence or extraterrestrials. The term 'posthuman' here points to whatever might come after humans as a world-shaping force (Block and Dickel, 2020). In my opinion, this post-humanist variant can easily be confused with an ideology – namely, transhumanism. Transhumanism, in turn, aims to optimise individuals through technology. Biological bodies are insufficient ballast here, which the future post-human will have overcome. The prefix 'trans-' promises a transition to a new (selected) stage of evolution. The human would no longer stand out as the thinking and rational animal, but as the immortal one. However, the issues of how a society of immortal entities would function fairly and who would receive such 'enhancements' are largely ignored (Braidotti, 2016; Loh, 2019; Mertlitsch, 2016).

Since TCI is incompatible with either boundless fantasies of optimisation nor the replacement of humans, I do not consider these tendencies as constructive impulses for TCI.

Fluidly composed: the approaches of Braidotti and Haraway

I find the approaches of critical posthumanism far more interesting. Two of the best-known representatives of this variety are Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway. They critically interrogate traditional conceptions of the human and propose new, inclusive concepts. The term 'posthuman' opens up an exploration of the forms that humanity can take. This takes into account the complex interrelationships between humans, other life forms and things. This yields a diverse spectrum of perspectives, including ecological and feminist critiques of existing inequality and the social and ethical implications of such relations (Braidotti, 2016).

Rosi Braidotti is particularly concerned with overcoming the Enlightenment's dualistic either/or thinking. Following Foucault, she therefore challenges binary categories such as man/woman and human/animal. With the nomadic figure, the feminist thinker offers a conception of the human that undermines those power constructions and identity ascriptions. The nomadic human represents a fluid subject that is constantly reshaping itself through movement and becoming. What and how humans become is created in and through their relationships with diverse others and otherness. As a counter-movement to the patriarchal subject, Braidotti thus advances a concept that takes human corporeality seriously. Because, from a feminist

perspective, being and becoming human is inseparable from the experience of one's own body (Braidotti, 2016; Braidotti, 2019; Mertlitsch, 2016).

Donna Haraway describes humans as hybrid, relationally composed beings. She provocatively calls humans cyborgs because humans have always developed with the help of technologies and other organisms. Humanity thus occurs as a responsible co-becoming with and within the living, material world (Block and Dickel, 2020). This is evident in the human-dog relationship. Both humans and dogs are partners who influence each other in a co-evolutionary and co-constructive way. As mutual companions, the species are connected by their significant otherness. In other words: the fact that humans are unfinished beings enables and requires such relations (Haraway, 2003). Haraway therefore considers humans to be ecologically networked. §3§ Humans are nodes within a living network (Mertlitsch, 2016; Trinkaus, 2017). In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway (2016) stresses that questions of humanity, kinship, and responsibility repeatedly demand new negotiations.

From Haraway's and Braidotti's perspectives, the subject no longer emerges solely from an internal process of autonomy but is also constituted by situated embeddedness in external relations (Braidotti, 2016; Mertlitsch, 2016). We are fluid and composite embodiments of the mutual connections in which we live (Folkers and Hoppe, 2018). This idea broadens my understanding of the plurality of ways humans can be conceived.

Sisters in spirit: on the proximity and distance between Cohn, Haraway and Braidotti

For me, TCI shows several parallels with Braidotti and Haraway. Cohn conceives the subject as a dynamically open system that is continuously changing in relation to others and other things (von Seckendorff, 2022). This recalls the posthuman notion of the subject as an embedded body, understood as incarnate, affective, and relational in the process of becoming (Braidotti, 2016). This understanding opposes "the idea of a subject as *homoclausus*, who sovereignly and individually realises goals based on its own values" (Hoppe, 2021a, p. 2). In TCI humans are also thought of in relational terms. The idea that we are connected and dependent is, according to Cohn "a truly human consolation and sometimes even a real joy" (1984, p. 429 f. emphasis in original). TCI regards people both as participants and as participated – as responders and responded to. We are implicated in what influences us; at the same time the world acts back upon us. As Cohn writes (1984, p. 436):

"Other people and situations osmose into us just as they flow out of me. [...] We can neither isolate ourselves from the air nor from plants, animals, or people if we want to realise ourselves. The individual person is transpersonally connected with humanity."

Cohn, Braidotti and Haraway use the term human/humanity as an embedding concept within complex material and discursive processes of constitution.. Building on this, I find Bayer and Ostertag inspirational: they see TCI as an opportunity to reshape identity and community without defining them through dichotomy. This is because the coupling of relatedness and autonomy in TCI "carries the potential to establish modern forms of relatedness that do not get caught in the pitfalls of tribalistic communal thinking" (Bayer and Ostertag, 2019, p. 144). Klein (2016) likewise names differentiation within groups as a guiding aim of TCI. §4§ For her, what matters is a climate in which differences are possible and desirable. According to Haraway, this requires respect for the significant otherness of other living beings. Or, in the words of Ostertag and Bayer (2022, p. 72): "What is needed is a restrained attentiveness that elicits the other and allows them to have their say."

The authors also seem to converge on some ethical and practical implications. Close to the inclusive idea of responsible co-becoming and Haraway's premise of staying with the trouble, Ostertag reads TCI as a phenomenological theory and practice of understanding. She interprets TCI's humanistic vision as a negotiated process about "the question of which vision of being-

human and which design of the world people develop toward in their educational processes" (Ostertag, 2022b, p. 44). For her, the necessity of understanding is grounded in the fact that humans are interdependent. We are therefore called upon to "take responsibility in concrete situations, or in other words: to give a personal 'answer'" (Ostertag, 2015, p. 285). Cohn strives neither for a radical break nor for an uncritical affirmation of the given. She attempts to build something new from what exists. Our answers are therefore always interim results in a ongoing process of change. Similarly, Haraway carries out a socio-critical revision of existing conditions by partly affirming and partly negating them (Hoppe, 2021b).

However, the authors would likely disagree on at least one issue. While Cohn argues holistically, emphasising "all-connectedness" (Cohn, 1975/2013, p. 120) (Johach, 2009), Haraway foregrounds the particular differences among the parts of the world. That is, whereas Cohn claims everything is connected to everything, Haraway holds that everything is connected to something (Block and Dickel, 2020; Folkers and Hoppe, 2018). The latter perspective seems empirically researchable to me, while the former appears rather speculative. Cohn also does not finally break with Enlightenment values. Autonomy remains essential for her – albeit in a changed connotation: "For when we speak of decision-making, courage and autonomy, we are talking about human values. Even with the smallest amount of freedom to make decisions, there is still the possibility of exerting influence" (Farau and Cohn, 1984, p. 431, emphasis in original). By contrast, I still find it somewhat unclear how posthumanist theories account for creativity, agency, and social change.

However, the authors are similar in their playful and narrative approach. Knowledge production is involved and situated in worldly relations, not from a supposedly neutral, independent standpoint. Their deliberately open and sometimes ambivalent concepts make the scientific approach demanding. I can well understand the criticism that differing interpretations can easily cause misunderstandings (Ebrahim, 2020). I believe the challenge lies in reading each of the theories as "intertwined" within themselves (Hoppe, 2021b, p. 16). This makes it all the more important, in my view, to further ground TCI scientifically (Ostertag, 2022a).

Post-Cohn: more-than-human dimensions of TCI

In summary, TCI is based on an open, flexible yet decisive conception of the human, in which people emerge from specific, reciprocal relations. In my opinion, this understanding of humans as co-responsible, partly powerful, relational beings makes TCI receptive to posthumanist impulses. Cohn, however, treats humans in a universal holistic manner, whereas posthumanisms often take a more particularist approach. For me, the difference concerns whether to regard humans holistically or contextually. TCI thus moves between classical humanist and posthumanist thought.

Comparing these approaches also broadens my view of which more-than-human dimensions the four-factor model can encompass: for example, the I-We relation could include other species, It and Globe could incorporate references to technology and ecology; and the I could accommodate fluid or hybrid identity concepts. Innovative in this regard is the model's triadic structure: relations are always at least oriented toward a third element, such as a shared task (Ostertag, 2024). In this way TCI could systematically enrich discourses on human interdependence (Oberst, 2024).

Call-Outs

§1§ Feelings, thoughts and physicality are equally important to Cohn

§2§ New narratives about what people are and can become

§3§ People are nodes in a living network

§4§ A climate in which differences are possible and desired

References

Bayer, M., Ostertag, M. (2019). Themenzentrierte Interaktion und Gesellschaft: Soziologische Analysen und Reflexionen. *Soziale Arbeit*, 4, 137–145.

Bayer, M., Ostertag, M. (2025). Soziologische Perspektiven in der TZI. In Spielmann, J., Röckemann, A. (Hrsg.), *Handbuch Themenzentrierte Interaktion (TZI)* (S. 273–278). 4. Auflage. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Block, K., Dickel, S. (2020). Jenseits der Autonomie: Die De/Problematisierung des Subjekts in Zeiten der Digitalisierung. *BEHEMOTH A Journal on Civilisation*, 1, 109–131.

Bonner, M. (2018). On Striated Wilderness and Prospect Pacing: Rural Open World Games as Liminal Spaces of the Man-Nature Dichotomy. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2018 Conference: The Game is the Message*. Turin: DiGRA.

Bourdieu, P. (2013). *Die männliche Herrschaft*. 2. Auflage. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Braidotti, R. (2016). Jenseits des Menschen: Posthumanismus. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 37/38, 33–38.

Braidotti, R. (2019). What is necessary is a radical transformation, following the bases of feminism, anti-racism and anti-fascism. CCCB LAB. <https://lab.cccb.org/en/rosi-braidotti-what-is-necessary-is-a-radical-transformation-following-the-bases-of-feminism-anti-racism-and-anti-fascism/> (Zugriff am 14.03.2025).

Cohn, R. C. (1975/2013). *Von der Psychoanalyse zur themenzentrierten Interaktion: Von der Behandlung einzelner zu einer Pädagogik für alle*. 17. Auflage. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Cohn, R. C., Brühlmann-Jecklin, E. (Hrsg.). (2010). *Das Mögliche tun: Ruth C. Cohn: Gespräche und Begegnungen*. Zürich: Zytglogge.

Ebrahim, R. (2020). *Im Diskurs mit dem Qur'an: Ein Handlungskonzept zum themenzentrierten Arbeiten anhand der Offenbarungsanlässe*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Elias, N., Scotson, J. L., (Schröter, M., Hrsg. und Übers.) (1990). *Etablierte und Außenseiter*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Farau, A., Cohn, R. C. (1984). *Gelebte Geschichte der Psychotherapie: Zwei Perspektiven*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Fink, D. (2021). *Cyborg werden: Möglichkeitshorizonte in feministischen Theorien und Science Fictions*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Foucault, M. (1966/2023). *Die Ordnung der Dinge*. 27. Auflage. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Folkers, A., Hoppe, K. (2018). Von der Modernisierung zur Ökologisierung. Werden und Biopolitik bei Deleuze/Guattari und Haraway. In Delitz, H., Nungesser, F., Seyfert, R. (Hrsg.), *Soziologien des Lebens: Überschreitung – Differenzierung – Kritik* (S. 137–164). Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

- Haraway, D. J. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Amherst, MA: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hoppe, K. (2021a). Abhängigkeit und Unverfügbarkeit: Drei Thesen zu einer Soziologie der Dependenz. In *Gesellschaft unter Spannung. Verhandlungen des 40. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie 2020*, 40, 1–4.
- Hoppe, K. (2021b). *Die Kraft der Revision: Epistemologie, Politik und Ethik bei Donna Haraway*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag.
- Ivanova, A. (2018). Wer analysiert wen und zu welchem Zweck oder Ist der Freudianismus ein Humanismus? Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Kritischen Theorie der Gesellschaft. In Gostmann, P., Merz-Benz, P.-U. (Hrsg.), *Humanismus und Soziologie* (S. 117–159). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Johach, H. (2009). *Von Freud zur humanistischen Psychologie: Therapeutisch-biographische Profile*. Stuttgart: Transcript.
- Johach, H. (2012). Individualismus und soziale Verantwortung – Kontroverse Tendenzen in der Humanistischen Psychologie. In Straub, J. (Hrsg.), *Der sich selbst verwirklichende Mensch: Über den Humanismus der Humanistischen Psychologie* (S. 85–119). Stuttgart: Transcript.
- John, D., Ostertag, M. (2020). Themenzentrierte Interaktion und positive Psychologie im Dialog – Eine Perspektivenerweiterung. *Soziale Arbeit*, 1, 22–29.
- Klein, I. (2016). Leiten auf Differenzierung hin. Ein Beitrag zum Thema Gruppenphasen. *Themenzentrierte Interaktion*, 2, 44–55.
- Loh, J. (2019). *Trans- und Posthumanismus zur Einführung* (2., überarbeitete Aufl.). Frankfurt a. M.: Junius.
- Mangler, M., Carstensen, R., Kogelboom, E., Leßmann, S. (2024). *Das große Gynbuch: Selbstbewusst für den eigenen Körper entscheiden: Sex, Zyklus, Wechseljahre aus weiblicher Sicht neu verstehen: Krankheiten erkennen und therapieren*. Berlin: Insel.
- Mertlitsch, K. (2016). *Sisters – Cyborgs – Drags: Das Denken in Begriffspersonen der Gender Studies*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Oberst, F. (2024). Beziehungsweise: Resonanz als Erweiterung der Themenzentrierten Interaktion. *Themenzentrierte Interaktion*, 2, 185–194.
- Ostertag, M. (2015). Themenzentrierte Interaktion und Bildungstheorie. *Soziale Arbeit*, 8, 282–286.
- Ostertag, M. (2022a). Bildungstheoretische Zugänge zur Themenzentrierten Interaktion. Eine Pädagogik der Verständigung. In Ostertag, M., Bayer, M. (Hrsg.), *Themenzentrierte Interaktion (TZI) im Gespräch: Gesellschaft mitgestalten* (S. 41–58). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Ostertag, M. (2022b). Themenzentrierte Interaktion als Theorie und Praxis der Verständigung. Mit Hoffnung leben in einer konfliktreichen Welt. In Ostertag, M., Bayer, M. (Hrsg.), *Themenzentrierte Interaktion (TZI) im Gespräch: Gesellschaft mitgestalten* (S. 15–40). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Ostertag, M. (2024). Pädagogische Perspektiven der Themenzentrierten Interaktion (TZI). EEO Enzyklopädie Erziehungswissenschaften Online, 0504, 1–18.

Ostertag, M., Bayer, M. (2022). Resonanzräume gestalten mit Themenzentrierter Interaktion. Reflexionen zur Verbindung der Ansätze von Ruth C. Cohn und Hartmut Rosa. In Ostertag, M., Bayer, M. (Hrsg.), Themenzentrierte Interaktion (TZI) im Gespräch: Gesellschaft mitgestalten (S. 59–80). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Trinkaus, S. (2017). »Into the Chthulucene« – Wissen, Fiktion und Sorge nach dem Menschen. In Ingrisch, D., Mangelsdorf, M., Dressel, G. (Hrsg.), Wissenskulturen im Dialog: Experimentalräume zwischen Wissenschaft und Kunst. Tagungstrilogie „Wissenskulturen im Dialog“, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

von Redecker, E. (2022). Philosophie und Klimakrise – Ohne Feminismus keine Rettung der Welt. Aus der Sendung Sein und Streit (S. Miller) [Interview]. <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/philosophie-klimakrise-feminismus-rettung-der-welt-100.html> (Zugriff am 14.03.2025).

von Seckendorff, I. (2022). »Ich sehe was, was Du nicht siehst!« – Was ein antidiskriminierender Sprachgebrauch mit der Themenzentrierten Interaktion zu tun hat. In Ostertag, M., Bayer, M. (Hrsg.), Themenzentrierte Interaktion (TZI) im Gespräch: Gesellschaft mitgestalten (S. 133–152). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Vita

Felix Oberst, BA Social Work, MA Applied Educational Sciences
felix.oberst@posteo.de