



Contra Cyborgs

Roger Smith

With new reproductive and bioengineering technologies, information science and neuroscience, there is excited talk of the *transhuman*. For the purpose of argument here, I will suppose that there are no technological barriers and will be, sooner rather than later, robot substitutes for humans, cyborgs (humans with machine parts, tools built into the body) and possibilities for the complete, or near complete, replacement/substitution of mental functions by electronic or chemical techniques. Numerous commentators think such technologies are already ‘in progress’, and they may well be right. Why do I object? Why are my feelings so negative about all this? Why am I alienated by the ways of life which have these technologies at the centre? If the technological changes are in fact coming, why not embrace them?

It’s my reading of a *London Review of Books* review, by Steven Shapin, of a book by Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, which prompts the questions. The book sounds crass, a titillating read by an author set on selling lots of copies rather than arguing well, and the review convinced me that here at least was one book I needn’t read. The argument is familiar: Man has become God – he can make himself anything, through neuroscience, bio-engineering, etc. The book cites one computer scientist: ‘if I can be 200 with a body of silicon, I’ll take it.’

I find no emotional appeal in the whole prospect. Why not? I think my emotions are informed by *reasons*. In order to be polemical, I simplify a lot; and, vice versa, in order to simplify, I become polemical. What reasons are there? Here’s a Decalogue.

The first two points clear away confusions, the following eight make objections. For brevity, I refer to proponents of the new technologies simply as ‘the proponents.’

1) Proponents tend to dismiss critics (like me) as conservative defenders of a realist Judeo-Islamic-Christian/humanist essentialist position rendered empirically wrong by science. There is, they say, no substantial principle, no substantial soul, which makes a person a person and differentiates a human entity from other entities. A parallel statement dismisses belief that it is the capacity for rationality which defines human uniqueness. The former argument is rhetorically easier for the proponents, for it is rehearsed in well entrenched positions about the conflict of science with religion. The latter argument causes proponents more trouble, because they deploy reason in making the claim and in maintaining that technology has the wonderful capacity to apply reason. In response, many essentialist realists about ‘the human’ would say that profound traditional cultures committed to realist conceptions of the soul and of reason have made civilisations, including scientific civilisations, possible. But my claim now is the more precise one, necessary for the points to follow: though such views do inform criticism of the direction of new technology, they are *not* essential to that criticism. Such views are not here the basis of my own criticisms.

2) The objection to new technologies is not based on ignorance of the new technologies of neuroscience, etc. However ignorant I am, this is not to the point. Nobody knows exactly what new technologies will make possible, but objections to them are not dependent on any particular development in fact occurring. I am willing to agree that there is in principle no limit. There *may be* a new species of transhuman evolving from technological innovations now underway.

3) The social process of creating new forms of human/transhuman existence is a process of creating a new way of living, and the discourse going with it, that does not have and cannot have a moral dimension. A moral dimension comes from culture, from history and from reason. (There are religious and secular versions of the grounds of morality, but I'm not debating these.) The current process of re-making what is human by technological means takes out that dimension, because it takes out the kind of subject that can be the subject of moral discourse. As a matter of social fact, moral discourse is indeed being pushed to the margins in ways of life which support the technological innovations. For philosophical understanding, the world of electronic and chemical relations is a world where the notion of moral relations makes no sense, and if humans are in such relations they cannot meaningfully articulate morality. Of course, proponents say, we will build moral rules into our technology. There is no evidence that this has ever happened with technology and no existing institution that could impose such rules. More deeply, morality is not a set of rules but a way of living founded in religion or history. The transhuman will come to be in a world in which morality has no meaning. Indeed, some proponents welcome this prospect precisely for that reason: the transhuman will be free of all nonsense talk about morality and of suffering caused by morality.

4) The new technology is driven by capital investment, and capital investment is for financial gain, if mediated through social, medical and military goals. The form of the human made by this investment will be a form closer to the interests of the investment than the rather irrational and perverse human forms now available. The new technology is not 'neutral' but a means of making what is human into commercial products that serve interests, commercial and political. I think few people now believe that 'demand' results in products; rather the financial drive to production creates 'demand'. This is highly visible with new technologies.

5) Just as capital is not shared but extremely unequally distributed, the new technology is and will be not shared and will be extremely unequally distributed. The new technology is a major social process for the consolidation of capital in a small elite. At a minimum, access to the new technologies will further concentrate wealth and social division. If there is a silicon body and life till 200, it will not be available in the South Sudan. At a maximum, as Harari's book, it is reported, speculates, the new elite will be formed by computer intelligences, and they will rule over a mass of human subjects who find they are not needed because the new transhumans are more capable. Harari predicts a new religion and a new politics in which the idea of freely-acting individuals has simply died out.

6) The new technologies do nothing to address, let alone provide solutions for, ‘the problems’ that we consider to be problems and which the media currently talk about all the time – climate change, terrorism, refugees, atomic weapons, poverty, war, social breakdown, drugs, immigration. Our needs and our failures to satisfy them are political. New technology deals with *none* of this. It could, I suppose, be said, though, that eliminating human beings would eliminate the problems.

7) What are the new technologies *for*? What will be *better* about cyborgs/new species in terms of what we recognise as ‘good’, *e.g.* joy, fulfilment, love, beauty, sensuousness, warm relations, truth, imagination, humour, freedom. I am certainly emotionally biased about this, since I get pain not pleasure from gadgets. In my daily dreams, I want, say, the feel of a velvet dress, and I do not want, say, a navigator watch. Of course, proponents always hold out the prospect of one large ‘good’ in public advocacy and in lobbying those who hold the purse-strings: medicine. There are always concrete, specific examples which no one will deny, like prosthetic hands. New technologies, it is promised, will slow ageing and deal with senility, loss of bodily and mental functions, genetic disorders and so on. They may or may not. It is not known – and the experience of huge investment in order to map the human genome suggests there is room for scepticism about what the medical benefits will actually be, and for whom. The new technologies do not address the common complaints – back-ache, depression, malnutrition, malaria, alcoholism, stress, heart problems, cancer. And even the new technologies have ‘illnesses’, that is, malfunctions, breakdowns, hackers, trolls. And this leads to –

8) Death. In the human world, death marks an absolute boundary against which to contrast life. Take death away and there is no life. For there to be meaning in a statement about existence, there must be difference. Death is the constituting difference for life. Living forever, a human/machine might feel life is fun, while memory of not-fun lasts, but gradually there would be no contrast and no feeling at all... Of course, a human/machine could learn to say it feels good, but it might learn to say that about torturing kittens or sucking sweets, it would make no difference.

9) The reflexive argument, or the argument from ‘looping’ (in Ian Hacking’s expression). What a person believes (or has knowledge of) has consequences for how he or she acts, the sort of person he or she is to others. Reciprocally, how he or she acts affects what he or she believes (or knows). Our technologies are bound up in a cycle of human relations. The more we believe we are machines the more we become machines, the more we become machines the more we live as machines. However, I like a way of life in which I do not understand myself as a machine, and lots of other people implicitly agree when they say things like ‘I like’, ‘we are free to’, ‘aren’t we close’, ‘Ugh!’, ‘the point is’, ‘I hate’. It is *these forms of life* which I object to losing. If I am in constant electronic contact with others, I lose a form of life in which I have the freedom of contemplative relations. The proponents are in the business of imposing their way of life.

10) The new machines/species will, like contemporary humans, have the ability to recreate themselves. We cannot know and cannot control in advance what form the recreation will take. The new 'beings' might well do many things other forms of being, for whatever reasons, do not like or suffer from. They might take special pleasure in wiping out the humans who had created them, like Stalin wiped out the old Bolsheviks.

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