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Book review: Mark Coeckelbergh's *Human Being @ Risk: Enhancement, Technology, and the Evaluation of Vulnerability Transformations*

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Many of this journal's readers will be aware of Mark Coeckelbergh's longstanding interest in the ethics and politics of enhancement technologies, not least through his contribution (2011) to our recent Minds and Machines special issue, co-edited by Linda MacDonald Glenn and myself.

In his new book from Springer, Coeckelbergh focuses on the political significance of emerging technologies that carry the promise of transforming human capacities, and particularly our vulnerability to such evils as disease, age-related decline, and death. He is, however, not engaged in straightforward advocacy for a transhumanist position – welcoming dramatic improvements to human capacities – or, if it comes to that, for a technoconservative one that rejects alterations to our "given" limits. Instead, he focuses on the concept of vulnerability and on the question of why we might wish to alter the vulnerabilities that we've inherited through the blind process of biological evolution.

Coeckelbergh argues that vulnerability (of one kind or another) is an inherent aspect of human life that could not be eliminated by any conceivable transformation of our capacities. It is, he suggests, not a question of using technological means to eliminate human vulnerabilities, or even reduce the balance of them, since any technological alterations of ourselves or our circumstances inevitably bring new problems and make us vulnerable in new ways. Rather, our choices must be more subtle. According to Coeckelbergh's approach, we have a limited ability to employ technology so as to change the *ways* in which we are vulnerable to circumstances and events. Although the new vulnerabilities that emerge when technology alters our circumstances are not entirely predictable, we have some ability to choose which existing vulnerabilities we might strive to eliminate or reduce, and which new kinds of vulnerability we are thereby likely to take on.

This does, of course, raise difficult questions about how to measure overall vulnerability. If there is an objective metric for this, then it seems as if overall vulnerability should be the kind of thing that we can, in fact, reduce through planning and action. And if *that* were so, why would we not want to take measures to reduce our overall vulnerability? After all, we and our predecessors have gone to great lengths to prevent, treat, and cure diseases, try to lower the probability of accidents (for example, on the road or from industrial machinery), and search for alternatives to war. All of these look like steps aimed at reducing various risks to human life and health, and correlatively at making us less vulnerable to certain kinds of harm-causing events. If such actions are futile in reducing overall human vulnerability, why bother engaging in them at all? Doesn't our conduct, in that event, suggest that we're deluded and that we're wasting our energies?

Such a radically pessimistic conclusion sounds like too much – too shocking, too demoralizing, too absurd and contrary to received wisdom – for us to accept. Yet, Coeckelbergh develops an impressive case that all our technological and social measures create new sources of vulnerability and that there is no uncontroversial way of measuring vulnerabilities against each other. There are, as the title of the book acknowledges, vulnerability transformations, but are there unambiguous vulnerability reductions?

Part of the problem, as is brought out frequently in *Humanity @ Risk*, is that our desires and expectations change as our powers change. Even if we obtain greater control over the natural world, we become vulnerable to disappointment if something, perhaps something unforeseen, goes wrong in the way we exert that control. At the same time, there seems to be no limit to how our desires can shift. As our current desires and needs are met, we may wish for "higher" kinds of pleasure or perhaps for competitive success in the new environments created by our technologies and social systems. As our environments and our own powers are transformed, we can find ourselves with new ways to fail in competition, and thus with new avenues to disappointment, frustration, and shame – not to mention new reasons to feel anxious about our efforts and our future prospects. Moreover, emergent technologies and systems tend to bring their own dangers to life and health. Taking all this into account, it can be problematic to claim that we are ever, all things considered, better off (as individuals, as societies, or as a species) than we were.

Though Coeckelbergh does not make the point in quite this way, our preferences adapt so that we tend to think of ourselves as fortunate when we compare ourselves with people from earlier generations. Some of the things that our predecessors had to put up with would now dismay, daunt, and appall us, though they were, perhaps, not important sources of anxiety at the time. Consider how you would cope with the various unsavory sanitation arrangements that even the aristocracy of Europe dealt with through the Middle Ages and deep into the modern era. Or rather, don't even try to imagine the experience in detail.

Moreover, changing human preferences give us new sources of anxiety that were not even on our ancestors' radar. In the end, it may be undecidable whether we are better off overall.

At times, Coeckelbergh appears to overreach and suggest that our vulnerability might even be increased by the "vulnerability strategies" that we adopt: "soon we discover new vulnerabilities, or, rather, we experience that our vulnerability has not diminished but is merely modified, transformed – if not increased" (81).

Can this be correct? Well, perhaps we could become more vulnerable, on balance, to some specific kind of harmful event or phenomenon (perhaps a particular disease?). We might even find out that we are worse off, overall, in our level of vulnerability *when judged by our own standards*; if that can be the case, however, why couldn't we sometimes be better off when judged by those same standards?

If we think, therefore, that vulnerability can be measured objectively to the extent of intelligibly saying that it has increased in an overall sense, then why can't we take steps to *reduce* it overall? Coeckelbergh would seemingly do better to stick to his more usual position that we cannot uncontroversially measure net gain or loss in the extent to which we are vulnerable, since we are vulnerable to such a vast range of harms, offenses, frustrated desires, and so on, with no clear procedure for weighing them against each other. Thus, two reasonable people might disagree about whether some innovation has reduced overall human vulnerability (or the vulnerability of a specific individual or group affected by the innovation) or increased it. There will be no objectively binding answer as to who is correct, since two reasonable people can place different weights on different kinds of harms, frustrations, disappointments, etc., as well as differing in such things as aversion to risk. If that's so, whether or not we consider ourselves better off might be a matter, in part, of which vulnerabilities we prefer to put up with if needed. There is no metric that could be employed by a neutral observer.

Even this conclusion may seem like a difficult to one to accept when we think of objectively measurable increases in, say, human life expectancy. Still, it is unclear how we could measure increasing or decreasing vulnerability, taken overall, without assuming at least some values that might be rejected or contested by an outside observer who knows the same facts about the situation but works with a different value system.

In that case, Coeckelbergh seems to be correct that we can measure our vulnerability to harms, frustrations, disappointments, and the rest only by using standards that are informed by our actual, current preferences. If

so, transhumanists, technoconservatives, and others who care deeply about the human future need to have rich conversations about the likely effects of technological and social innovations, and about what we really want from them – assuming, of course, that there is enough common ground to justify using such a slippery word as "we."

This approach may itself seem frustrating: it would be nice if we (that word again, and not for the last time!) could see clearly what really amounts to an improvement of the human condition and what amounts to the opposite. It would be nice if we could measure this in some way that could be applied objectively: that is, in such a way that the same results would be reached by all rational and sufficiently well-informed beings, irrespective of their particular desires or values. But this seems to be impossible.

It may be possible to imagine situations so bad that they contain nothing that any being remotely like any of us could possibly find anything attractive or redeeming (compare Harris 2010, 38–41). However, we're faced with more subtle questions than that. Once we start thinking of desirable kinds of future societies there seems to be enormous scope for differing and deeply contestable ways to measure their goodness or badness. This more general insight subsumes Coeckelbergh's point about trying to measure the overall extent to which future citizens would experience vulnerability or be at risk.

Thus, Coeckelbergh drives home an important point for our debates about the human future. I personally found it unhelpful at times when his argument relied heavily on concepts borrowed from continental philosophers who've been concerned with more general issues about the human condition. For anyone who is not well-grounded in this body of literature, some of the discussion will seem more like a barrier than an aid to understanding. Further, the essential argument that I've sketched, and which Coeckelbergh elaborates in much more detail, just doesn't seem to need this scaffolding.

Nonetheless, many readers probably will, in fact, find the comparisons with Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas, and so on helpful as they orient themselves to the direction of Coeckelbergh's argument in *Humanity @ Risk*. Where you start from and what you find familiar will influence how you experience this aspect of the book. I can only suggest to readers who find it alienating that they show patience. The core arguments do not depend on any particular familiarity with Heidegger (who is most often referred to and discussed) or other thinkers from the continental tradition of philosophy.

Be warned, Coeckelbergh is not concerned to identify the likely consequences of particular technologies, although he makes clear that he is thinking mainly of information technology and genetic technology in their various forms and guises. His book is not, for example, an analysis of the utilitarian implications of performance enhancing drugs, reproductive cloning, mind uploading, or advanced developments in the science of machine intelligence. Coeckelbergh's task is to ask deeper questions about what sorts of consequences we want (or perhaps, in some sense, should want) in the first place. Along the way, there are some fine moments in his book, such as a thoughtful discussion of the internal politics developing in cyberspace and a perceptive reading of Michel Houellebecq's transhumanist (or is it really?) novel, *The Possibility of an Island* (2005).

Human Being @ Risk identifies important choices that we must debate as we imagine and (to a limited extent) plan the future of humanity. It raises issues that are fundamental to ongoing thinking about how to better the human condiction. On that basis, I hope to see widespread discussion of its central arguments and what their implications might be for the human future. There is much here to discuss.

Note

Unless otherwise specified, all page references in the text are to Coeckelberg (2013).

References

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