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Book Review

An Aristotelian Resistance Against Transhumanism

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Abstract: *Posthuman Bliss? The Failed Promise of Transhumanism* by Susan B. Levin presents a well-informed and structured critique to transhumanism. Not only transhumanist ethical and sociopolitical applications are challenged: the theoretical assumptions and implications of transhumanism are made explicit and put into discussion, thereby confronting transhumanism as a worldview of its own, from metaphysics, to epistemology, to philosophy of mind, down to ethics and politics. This worldview is then constantly put to the test of Levin's own Aristotelian essentialist framework, which sees the human being as a holistic whole and our role in the world as the complex process of attaining human flourishing. First, I will spend a few words to frame the general aim of the book and to delineate the main contents of the seven chapters. After that, I will deal critically with four interesting focal points, where further research may be prompted or the standpoint of the author may be challenged: the attribution of (rational) essentialism to transhumanism, the definition of well-being underlying transhumanist positions, the apparent tension between the sociopolitical implications of transhumanism and its cultivation of radical personal autonomy, the critical evaluation of Levin's American-centered adaptation of her Aristotelian virtue-ethics approach.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Aristotelianism, Essentialism, Bioenhancement

1. Introduction

Transhumanism is mainly known as a highly normative project, seeking to use our latest technology to overcome the natural limits of human beings. This includes extending our lifespan, eliminating disabilities or genetic conditions, and enhancing our cognitive and physical abilities. In *Posthuman Bliss? The Failed Promise of Transhumanism*, Susan B. Levin goes far beyond that. Her book presents an accurate reconstruction, and critique, of the theoretical assumptions and implications of the transhumanist tenets – with the explicit aim of advancing the most lethal objections toward a radical rejection of transhumanism as a whole. This well-informed and thorough rejection of the view lets us appreciate transhumanism as a worldview, even more than a set of normative proposals on where to put our technological efforts.

Levin's alternative to the transhumanist worldview is the development of an Aristotelian account of the mind, human beings, and our role in the world. This confrontation is led from the core theoretical, anthropological assumptions of transhumanism to the moral and political implications, to the overall metaphysical depiction of reality underlying the works of tens of prominent transhumanist authors. Their thought is specifically challenged in close dialogue with various fields, including neuroscience, psychology, evolutionary biology, molecular biology, and genetics. Let us briefly present the outline of the book before diving into a few of the themes developed in her work.

2. Contents

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Chapter 1 first and foremost presents the transhumanist framework, which, according to the author, is a form of 'rational essentialism': 'unbounded self-creation, whose origin is reason' (17) is the paramount human trait and value. As a consequence, non-rational faculties and affects are 'simply dismissed as *ir*rational' (23). This justifies the twofold transhumanist ambition of enhancing human cognition while suppressing negative or non-functional (harmful, anti-social) affects. The last bit of the chapter is devoted to an accurate survey and critique of the applications of psychostimulants as cognitive enhancers and mood-controllers, especially as applied to non-pathological case studies to better the *normal* functioning of the human mind.

Chapter 2 traces and discuss in more depth the roots of the transhumanist 'view of the mind as composed of discrete faculties that could be manipulated neurobiologically' (42). The sources of this understanding of the mind are to be found in the 'basic emotions' (Griffiths 1997, Izard 2007) and 'dual-process' (Greene et al. 2004, Haidt 2012) theories; Levin contrasts these approaches with the 'appraisal theory' (Scherer 2009) of the mind, whose main takeaway is an account of our mental faculties as complex phenomena that cannot be absolutely distinguished a priori between 'positive' and 'negative'. This alternative is presented as fundamentally compatible with an Aristotelian reading of the mind, especially as an objection to the transhumanist project to suppress negative affects to reduce humanity to cognition, in that 'Aristotle's concern in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not the sheer subordination, let alone extirpation, of our capabilities besides reason proper but attaining balance among them – crucially including harmony of aims' (70).

Chapter 3 and 4 discuss the ethical tenets of transhumanism. Chapter 3, in particular, addresses the concept of moral bioenhancement, i.e. our alleged moral duty to use our technology to reprogram humanity in order to foster the moral features needed to avoid imminent global disasters due to human society: weapons of mass destruction, climate change, and wars (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Such moral features are identified as 'altruism', a 'sense of justice', 'sympathy', and 'benevolence'. Chapter 4 goes deeper than that and labels the meta-ethical implications of transhumanism as utilitarian: on the ethical side, moral bioenhancement is regarded as the moral duty to enhance one's cognitive abilities to avoid the moral disruption that is bringing humanity close to mass extinction; on the political side, transhumanism is associated with technocratic and authoritarian views, in that people should be coerced to be more functional, altruist, and mindful versions of themselves to guarantee the well-being and autonomy of all.

Chapter 5 is a brief confrontation between the transhumanist project and the eugenic theories born at the beginning of the 20th century. While transhumanists explicitly reject any parallel with Nazi eugenics as they focus on the importance of pursuing bioenhancement as an expression of personal freedom and autonomy (rather than on Darwinian or racial bases), the author observes that these very reasons align them with Anglo-American eugenics (Muller 1984, Huxley 1936). Points of contact include a strive toward 'the scientific management of human evolution' (Allen 1986: 264), the celebration of intelligence and prosociality as the true features of human beings, or the suppression of emotions 'that they view as individually and socially destructive' (180).

Chapter 6 tackles the ultimate outlook on what reality is and how we get to know it according to the transhumanist worldview. Transhumanists essentially assume an 'informational ontology and epistemology' (214) promoting the 'equation of the real and knowable with information' (191). Essentially, this view supports the transhumanist anthropology and is an extension of the trend initiated by the rise of informatics in the 1940s/1950s up to the fields of neurology (McCulloch and Pitts 1943), cybernetics (Von Neumann 1951, Wiener 1961), and molecular biology (Watson and Crick 1953). Starting from there', science presumed 'the context-independent rightness of an informational

ontology and epistemology – versus its being the product of a certain historical and cultural setting' (214). Zooming out, the author attributes to transhumanism a naïve version of scientific realism, which bizarrely contrasts with many transhumanists' sympathy for Kantian positions (Bostrom 2003).

Finally, chapter 7 advances a coda where Levin develops an Aristotelian worldview to offer a viable alternative to the transhumanist metaphysics, philosophy of mind, ethics, and politics thus critiqued. The result is a virtue-ethics based approach that proposes a holistic vision of human nature and mind, human flourishing as the paramount value for human life, and American-style liberal democracy as the right political system to bring forth such worldview.

3. Rational Essentialism

One of the first and most important points made by Levin throughout the book is the identification of transhumanism with a version of essentialism, namely 'rational essentialism'. The claim is that, while most transhumanists justify their ambitions to reprogram human nature through technological manipulation by refusing an essentialist anthropology, they in fact implicitly support such an essentialist reading. In particular, as mentioned, humans are defined by their cognitive capacities and to cultivate one's human flourishing is to realize more fully one's essential reason. Correspondingly, they formulate 'a comparative subordination of other mental faculties' (17): emotions, especially negative and anti-social ones like anger or grief, are binarily judged as contingent features of human nature and potentially detrimental to its realization.

Later in the book, Levin performs a similar move when attributing utilitarianism (and forms of technocratic authoritarianism) to transhumanism despite what some proponents argue. However, this later attribution appears different than the more controversial identification of transhumanism as an essentialist doctrine. In this first move, Levin does show how transhumanism may be described as an essentialist doctrine, but does not actually – or does not this so clearly as in her later move – insist on the theoretical reasons why we should see that transhumanism *implies* an underlying essentialist anthropology. Is this a feature of the way the majority of its proponent happen to justify transhumanism, or is this a theoretical necessity of the transhumanist doctrine? Which is to ask: may we really rule out the possibility that transhumanists may support a non-essentialist framework?

This question appears cogent as we notice that the author herself, at times, seems to object to transhumanist positions, from the vantage point of her (essentialist) Aristotelian view, as she was objecting to constructivist positions. If Levin's proposed alternative to transhumanism is an Aristotelian kind of worldview, it is not conceptually necessary to demonstrate the superiority of her view by pointing to the internal inconsistency of transhumanists that refute essentialism while allegedly being rational essentialists. And that transhumanism may be a constructivist, not essentialist, account of the human and its role in the world feels natural. In sum, despite Levin's initial claim that transhumanism is a covert essentialist position, what I see in the remainder of the book is the clash between her essentialist Aristotelian position against non-essentialist, possibly constructivist, transhumanist positions. For instance, Levin attributes to transhumanism the claim that the strengthening of our 'core moral dispositions […] could occur via neurobiological and genetic manipulation' (91), thereby conceding that the transhumanist believes in the constructivist possibility to change what is true about moral facts and statements by intervening on and redefining our own human nature.

4. Transhumanist Well-Being

In chapter 4, one of the core inconsistencies attributed to transhumanism is the inability to offer a clear notion of well-being. As Levin argues, transhumanism is covertly a utilitarian doctrine as they ground their normative indications on the maximization of individual well-being. However, transhumanists seemingly conjugate a 'substantial' notion of well-being, as something which can be maximized and distributed through personal and institutional actions, while at the same time supporting a 'formal' notion of well-being. The moral duty of bioenhancement and the legitimacy to coerce people to make use of bioenhancement techniques are not viewed as detrimental to personal autonomy, as if autonomy had to be sacrificed instrumentally to maximize well-being: moral bioenhancement would actually 'enrich' personal autonomy by extending our capabilities beyond our contingent natural limits (Savulescu 2013). Now, this tension between these two senses of well-being rightly pushes Levin to lament a lack of clarity in the definition of well-being.

This being said, Levin herself casually mentions a passage from Harris that could be used as a viable notion of well-being. He claims that we have a moral duty to treat disabilities as they were pathological conditions, because we ultimately ought to eliminate those 'condition[s] that someone has a strong rational preference not to be in' (Harris 2010: 91). Even though this is a broad proviso to extrapolate a workable definition of well-being from, I think that Levin should pay more attention to this proposition, because it offers a pathway for transhumanism in general to define what is the core ethical value, they want to defend in moral bioenhancement. Namely, moral bioenhancement is a duty because we should strive to eliminate those conditions that are rationally undesirable, and individual well-being may be effectively measured in terms of how rationally desirable individual living conditions (physical or cognitive capacities, for example) are – whatever way we want to assess and measure this desirability.

5. The Politics of Transhumanism

In her brief and yet very interesting treatment of the sociopolitical implications of transhumanism, Levin argues that transhumanism invariably supports a technocratic and authoritarian political philosophy. Resorting to socialism or to sheer authoritarianism would swiftly enact the social changes needed to transition humanity toward a kinder, more altruistic global community. In spite of this, as she points out, the majority of transhumanists insist on the fact that their project precisely strives for the empowerment of personal autonomy through the abolition of human natural limits. These would move from a 'robust respect for freedom' (Savulescu 2013: 43) and hence support the implementation of their normative positions not in socialist or technocratic authoritarian regimes, but in a pledge toward 'a *global*(*ly* responsible) liberalism' (Persson and Savulescu 2012: 102).

Throughout chapters 4 and 5, Levin makes the case that the latter category of transhumanists is misguided about their real sociopolitical implications and that it is a plain theoretical incoherence not to recognize the inherent socialist and authoritarian political agendas of transhumanism. As Ezrahi (1995) reportedly observes, 'scientific authoritarianism and a democratic milieu cannot coexist because in the latter, science and technology, while important, are but a subset of competing priorities' (187).

My opinion is that we should not attribute this incoherence to the relation between 'liberal' or 'libertarian' transhumanists and their transhumanist positions: the incoherence is between their implicitly authoritarian stance and their liberal parlance. Even outside the debate over the political philosophy of transhumanism, most authoritarians or socialists formally defend a (often distorted) notion of freedom as their paramount ethical and political value. This is how, for instance, Marxist revolutionaries presented the resort to

authoritarian and coercive means to transition to the communist utopia as a move to defend our ultimate freedom; rarely personal freedom is explicitly devalued as instrumental to achieve other political values or regarded as contingent. For instance, Marx declares that 'only within the community has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; hence personal freedom becomes possible only within the community' (Marx 1975: 78), or that 'in place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and classes antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx 1976: 50) – while, at the same time, announcing that the superior community of the communist utopia must be taken by the revolutionary *force* of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (Marx 1989, Lenin 1999). And, indeed, 'a revolution is the most authoritarian thing there is' (Engels 1978: 733).

6. Aristotle in the Age of the American Dream

Finally, one last mention should go to the last chapter. Here, Levin outlines an Aristotelian framework to understand the human individual and his role in the world and society from the standpoint of a virtue-ethics approach. The result is a vision of virtue ethics centered around the cultivation of the human being as a holistic whole, with the foundational goal of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) as a process of perfectioning and integration of nature rather than control and subjugation of it. This view of human life directed to the good life through careful planning of all the aspects of one's existence bring to a (generally) liberal conception of political institutions: laws and coercion cannot substitute the role of human activity and what humans can do with their freedom. Human flourishing needs liberal democracy, and, at the same time, liberal democracy needs human flourishing.

Levin's alternative worldview is reportedly 'rooted in Aristotle but adapted to America today' (233). This adaptation of the Aristotelian philosophy is needed to heal the fact that 'Aristotle's vision of ho could be fully virtuous was much too narrow, covering only adult, male citizens' (241). From then on, a good portion of the last chapter is centered around the thought of key popular figures of American history, such as Martin Luther King, and to a focus on pedagogy and how we should present the American culture in primary education to maintain the American liberal climate of cultivation of one's character and flourishing throughout life.

However, it should be noted that this effort to adapt the Aristotelian mindset with the current American spirit and the American history and politics may not tell much to the non-American reader. More importantly, these passages feel misplaced and may mitigate the role of the chapter as a way to build a strong conceptual alternative to the theoretical implications of transhumanism – despite the promising content of this virtue-ethics approach per se. Generally speaking, this last chapter feels more oriented to the casual intellectual reader, whereas the rest of the book is indeed tailored for the academic philosopher. This is the one chapter that I, as a researcher, might decide to skip after reading such a well-informed and structured book.

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