Podcast Episode 8: Cyborgs

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Teaser

Hey everyone! Welcome to the new episode of the Life Extension Podcast – technology & magic, society & business. In this episode I will surprise you with some imaginations about the artificial figure of the cyborg. On the one hand the cyborg is what human bodies may become in a real sense based on technological progress. On the other hand the cyborg could be thought of as a symbolic projection of the two most important, presently developing worldviews in present modern societies. Future lines of friction within societies will be located between those worldviews. Listen to this carefully if you like to think about future society beyond your daily news feed.

Cyborg as a real figure

This new episode is about Cyborgs. In a narrow definition, cyborgs are humans with artificial body parts, namely all kind of prosthesis, to replace or enhance defective body parts. While replacing a missing body part largely remains a medical procedure to restore normal function, enhancement is designed to overcome perceived physical and mental limitations. Technologies like genetic engineering, nanotechnology, robotics, artificial intelligence, and neurotechnology are utilized with the aim to make us more than human. At present, a number of social sub-groups are already involved with such enhancements. Among them, chemical and genetic doping, bionic prostheses, and surgeries are used to improve athletic performance. The military is also involved developing exoskeletons, brain-computer interfaces, and genetic therapies to strengthen capabilities of soldiers. Transhumanist philosophers want to create the post-human society through upgrading human bodies. A lot of self-experimentation by artists and scientists is also going on in the form of provocative body modifications and attempting to gain new capabilities (note 1). And of course, businesses might develop various genetic therapies for lifestyle purposes, e.g. to enable consumers to eat as much as they want without getting fat. Such a procedure could block the absorption of sugar, upgrading the metabolic system which evolved based on a scarcity of resources (Manzocco 2019, ch 6). Of course, we might ask if all those enhancements are really improving the human condition and if they will really create sufficient value to become adopted at a large scale.

Nowadays the definition of prosthesis has been widened by social scientists to include phones, wearable technologies, and computers as mental and sensory prosthetics. These devices extend our capability to sense our environment, and our brain treats them as part of our bodies (Case et al 2014). The increasingly popular field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) is investigating in which way human society and culture is interacting with technology. There is the subfield of Cyborg anthropology, which is guided by the idea that humans create technology, but technology also influences humans – particularly when assuming that nowadays we are all part of technological networks (note 2).

The cyborg is a highly malleable figure with an impressive career. Within the horizon of my personal experience, it started as the Terminator, a fearful specimen, with whom, after getting to know his hidden sympathetic side, you may have been tempted to smoke a cigar (note 3). The traditional

frightening image of the cyborg originates in the old fear-inspiring space between the symbolic poles of nature and machine, as it has often been presented in literature, films, and games.

That cherished image of the cyborg has become dramatically enhanced, so to speak, by two contemporary fields of radical thought, creating and promoting quite opposite utopian visions of the human future. Comparing them provides sharp contrast when thinking about future society. One of these competing fields of thought is firmly embedded in transhumanism, exemplified by Ray Kurzweil, a futurist author and director of Google. The other one is rooted in feminist theory and an ecological critique of capitalism, exemplified by Donna Haraway.

Cyborg from transhumanist view

In the transhumanist view of Ray Kurzweil, the cyborg is the transitional state between human biological form and the immortal superhuman, whom he predicts to be entirely based on artificial intelligence and independent from the biological platform of evolution. Transhumanists aim to transcend human limitations by transforming the sub-optimal human body and mind through technological means. According to Kurzweil this transformation will happen one component at a time (Kurzweil 2005). It is crucial to see these components as artificial enhancements over their natural form, which by many transhumanists is seen as defective and unsuitable to a life in the technologically advanced future. The transhumanist cyborg was clearly born from the mindset of Silicone Valley type of capitalism and information technology. It is also grounded in the American culture of superheroes, those fantastic beings meant to save the world again and again from humanity's internal and external enemies. Furthermore, it also serves as role model for biohackers and their radical interpretation of an ideal of self-betterment. The transhumanist cyborg is the product of a rather functional view of science and technology, and it mainly seems to reflect personal fantasies of self-enhancement and an escapist desire to overcome the messiness of social life. But it is also the product of entrepreneurial courage and risk-taking. This is the individual technical-minded person, taking control over his own life in a radical way.

Cyborg from social science view

Compare this with the famous Cyborg Manifesto by Donna Haraway. She presents the Cyborg as a fictional figure in the politics of diversity. Her cyborg is described as immune to any judgements in the name of nature, because it is not natural. As such it transcends gender and morale. Not having an origin story of a pure beginning, it also does not carry the load of original innocence and its corresponding demand for redemption through a salvation scenario. Never having been whole, there is no need to strive for a higher unity either. It is as it is. In Haraway's feminist view the cyborg is the illegitimate child of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, but without "the drama of escalating domination of woman/nature". Haraway's cyborg is designed as a symbol of our modern times: the product of a fragmentation process, highly individualized, even an apocalyptic form of increasingly abstract individuation. It represents the ultimate self, untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. In Haraway's imagery, this post-modern cyborg perspective is meant to overcome a worldview, which centers on patriarchal capitalism, and a way of explaining ourselves and everything else in dualisms impregnated by traditional power relations (Haraway 1991).

Conclusion

The cyborg as a fictional figure serves to express fears and fantasies about technological artefacts, and their impact on human identity. The excitement about the cyborg is greatest at the ambiguous edge where human aspects of machines mix with machine aspects of humans.

The image of the cyborg is not real - it is mostly being used as a screen for human projections particularly by technical-minded individuals, in specific social and cultural contexts of technological disruptions. This is how we can understand different versions of cyborgs in literature, and now in transhumanism.

But the image of the cyborg is also real, mostly in surprised hindsight, when we notice how much we have already incorporated technology into our bodies and our daily lives, without having revolted much against how this has changed our humanness already.

The cyborg of Donna Haraway is quite different though. Although she claims that we are all cyborgs already due to our entanglement with technologies, her topic is not at all the strive for superintelligence and technological self-enhancement. She is a feminist, interested in diversity, and in relations between people, species, and the environment. While the transhumanist cyborg is the celebration of the individual entrepreneurial technologist escaping human chaos by becoming superhuman, Haraway's cyborg fully embraces the trouble of relations between humans and species, (note 4). In this sense Harraway's cyborg is the presentation of the individual as a collection of networks in contrast to our obsession with selfhood since Rene Descartes (Kunzru 1997).

In historical and social theory terms Haraway and the academic culture she stands for seem to be busy digging the grave for humanism, while Kurzweil and the transhumanists appear like humanists in overdrive. But strangely, both camps in their own interpretation are preparing the posthuman age.

For both fields of thought, the cyborg is the symbol of a great vision: for transhumanists to enhance humanity through technological means, to make themselves more intelligent, stronger, and longer-lived, to transcend human inadequacies and conflicts and conquer new space; for Donna Haraway to change the social world through a subtle shift in perspective, from human-centered to ecological thinking, allowing more diversity and equality involving all living and non-living subjects. Both visions have its challenges though. These incredibly advanced technologies of human enhancement are just not there yet. And nobody knows how society would adopt them. And this wonderful state of troubled diversity, wouldn't this become a very tiring state of human affairs, to handle all this mess without the help of conventions, higher-level abstractions, and at least a few mind-ordering dualisms?

Obviously, utopian visions may develop political relevance. There are those who warn of transhumanism as the world's most dangerous idea, as dividing humanity in the enhanced and unenhanced (Fukuyama 2009) or hiding a right-wing political worldview with an inclination for total control (Schnetker 2019). That may appear far-fetched at the present moment, although the transhumanist cyborg is almost certainly a capitalist and perhaps a sectarian figure. Some believe that the transhumanist cyborg could be tamed by democratic institutions (Hughes 2004). On the other hand, could Haraway's ecological and feminist cyborg not become a new role model for radical environmentalist groups of the political left, to

whom certain totalitarian instincts are not altogether alien either? Anyway, we live in polarizing times, where the cyborg is being used to reflect quite different, radical projections of future visions of society.

Notes

(1) E.g. Steve Mann (2001), Neil Harbisson (Cyborg Foundation), Joe Dekni (Zas 2018), Manel de Aguas (Zas 2019)
(2) www.cyborganthropology.com
(3) In fact the Terminator was given an ironic twist by his actor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Furthermore, Terminator is strictly speaking not a cyborg, but an android. But it was called a cyborg in the movie.
(4) See also Haraway (2016)

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