

Recensioni

Mark Coeckelbergh, *Human Being @ Risk: Enhancement, Technology, and the Evaluation of Vulnerability Transformations*, Springer, Dordrecht 2013, pp. XIV-218, £ 90.

The book by Mark Coeckelbergh analyzes the problem of human enhancement through the development of an anthropology of vulnerability, so providing a new perspective on the debate between transhumanists and bio-conservatives.

The debate though is neither exclusively philosophical nor technological; indeed, it is of interest for the legal discourse on bioethics. Moreover, regulation does play a central role in the shaping of technology, and norms may influence (both positively and negatively) the development of specific applications, as either the consequence of an aware and coherently-adopted policy decision – which would be desirable – or of the operation of existing standards and criteria.

Human enhancement, intended as a radically new way to modify human condition through science and technology, raises novel questions, triggering a legal – and legal-philosophical – debate that surely builds upon both the technological and philosophical analysis, and yet is in part autonomous from it. The former most often tackles issues that are of interest in the short-to-medium run: when the legislator is called to intervene or a court to decide it is because the issue is experienced in society, at least in some form. Moreover, on a theoretical level legal analysis moves within narrower and more defined boundaries: constitutional principles in particular are deemed unchangeable – unless revolutionary upsurges take place. Interpretation does play a central role in determining the way a concept is applied, allowing its evolution and adaptation over time, yet the burden of proof rests with those who suggest that the given criteria ought to be understood otherwise.

Therefore, since Coeckelbergh's theory is defined – by the author himself – as a *prolegomenon* to the conceptualization of a method for the management of risk and vulnerability, it is of interest to assess whether it may (bene)fit the bioethical debate on the emergence of new technologies in society.

One of the fundamental ideas the book develops is that the interaction with the environment persistently shapes what human beings are, and technology proves to be a powerful source of change. This process can merely be observed, certainly not stopped, eventually influenced, thus not rejected *per se* as altering an otherwise persistent human nature.¹

Vulnerability is a consequence of this very interaction (*being-at-risk* as a subject-object relation), and because of its existential dimension may not be reduced to an all-encompassing, and thus comprehensive, classification. Vulnerability instead influences, and thus defines, what human beings are in a given moment in time, and by doing so is itself transformed in a way which cannot be objectively measured.

Even technology cannot systematically reduce or eliminate this intrinsic condition of human existence other than through a de-worlding process, by replacing individuals with isolated monads. Rather, technological development may transform us, causing new vulnerabilities to emerge, which today cannot be anticipated. Borrowing Bostrom's metaphor, the dragon may be killed² but other monsters, eventually even more dangerous and scary, may come forth and claim its place. Actively managing the choices, which lead to the emergence of new forms of vulnerability, ought to be the purpose of all political action.

In the second part of the book Coeckelbergh moves on to elaborate a normative anthropology of vulnerability. Ethics is intended as a tool to assess different vulnerability strategies, and concerns the way we should respond. This, though, should not (mis)lead us to conclude that all change may be controlled. On the one hand it is not ours to know what the future will look like, and such epistemic gaps may only be filled through “moral stretch exercises”, involving the use of imagination. On the other hand the refusal of a dualistic and external approach – whereby technology is purely a tool – forces us to acknowledge that the very values we judge our vulnerability upon will be modified by the emergence of new technologies.

The advantage of a similar approach is identified in the possibility to split more radical metaphysical questions in more limited vulnerability assessment issues with respect to a single technology. The criteria pursuant

¹ J. Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003.

² N. Bostrom, «The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant», *Journal of Medical Ethics*, n. 31 (2005), 5, p. 273.

to which such an evaluation process ought to be carried out are though not identified. Coeckelbergh leaves the floor open to discussion, implying that even metaphysical, religious as well as rational values may be taken into consideration since separating the ones from the others is plainly unfeasible.

Information technology is then taken into account to show that on the one hand, despite the apparent de-worlding obtained through disembodiment, it does not eliminate all vulnerabilities as transhumanists often claim. On the other hand, Internet may not be deemed a purely external – and wild – environment to be tamed in order to protect human values, as they appear to be. Indeed, we are already deeply interwoven with the global network, in a way that does not allow us to trace a clear line between an inner and outer sphere. The undesirable effects observed may thus be better tackled through cultural changes rather than cogent rules, since the given – negative – epiphany (*e.g.*: hate speech) may depend less upon the technical instrument than on its social dimension. It is not perfectly clear in Coeckelbergh's construction, whether an idea of liberty of the ancients³ is being recovered and emphasized.

Politics is therefore understood as a – possible – anti-vulnerability strategy that shall go beyond the mere application of existing principles to future technological developments, and human enhancement as raising two distinct and to some extent opposite issues. On the one hand, it may be deemed a tool for compensating the inequalities drawn through a natural lottery: intelligence, beauty and social skills unevenly distributed render some individuals less vulnerable and more successful than others. On the other hand, absent political intervention, it may increase the discrepancies between “haves and have-nots”, for only some will be economically capable of enhancing themselves.

Redistribution of genes – to tackle the former – is not a viable answer though, since it is impossible to assess what the consequences of human enhancement will actually be, and how social inequalities will be affected depends on social factors too; moreover, one may not be obliged to modify oneself genetically. Yet the conclusion that genetic enhancement is not the key to solving the issue of an uneven distribution of skills, despite persuasive, is limited. Indeed, the research would have benefitted from the analysis of other enhancement techniques (*e.g.*: robotics), to see if – and eventually under which conditions – different conclusions may be drawn.

According to Coeckelbergh the debate should address the way enhancement technologies affect human vulnerability, more than technologies

³ B. Constant, *La libertà degli antichi paragonata a quella dei moderni* Liberilibri, Macerata 2001.

as such. To this end a capability approach is considered,⁴ which is though also criticized as often grounded on an instrumental – and thus dualistic – view on technology.

Although, an intrinsic limit of the approach as described is that capabilities themselves are to be identified through values which need to be defined, and thus the problem is merely transferred and not solved.

Summing up, we may conclude that the painstaking analysis conducted by Coeckelbergh presents a rather persuasive depiction of the relationship of man and technology; even more it provides a possible common ground for a legal and political discourse to take place between transhumanists and bioconservatives. By framing the issue in terms of assessment of vulnerability modifications it truly simplifies an otherwise unmanageable – in a legal perspective – debate on human nature, and allows identifying more specific questions to be addressed when new technologies emerge.

The effective criticism to the idea that enhancement will erase all vulnerabilities is then essential to the correct understanding of the problem in terms of choice – even if not fully controllable – between possible future statuses of the world.

At the same, time for concrete answers to be provided, and the positive or negative impact of a specific technology on human vulnerabilities to be assessed, some values – and/or capabilities – ought to be identified and defined. Probably that went beyond the purposes of Coeckelbergh's research, and yet represents the most difficult aspect of a political debate, which cannot be entirely addressed through “moral stretch exercises”.

A legal analysis may though fill this gap through its own hetero-determined principles and values, exerting that osmotic pressure that renders the legal system – at least to some extent – more resistant to changes deriving from the emergence of technology than *vice-versa*.

(Andrea Bertolini)

⁴ M. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA/London 2011.

Bianca Maria Pirani, *Oltre la pelle. Il confine tra corpi e tecnologie negli spazi delle nuove «mobilità»*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2012, pp. 240, € 28.

«Esplorare l'arcaico è la chiave per inventare il nuovo» (Exploring the archaic is the key to create the new). This is the opening catchphrase of the book (whose title can be translated as *Beyond the skin. The boundary between bodies and technologies across the new spaces of «mobility»*).

In this book, Bianca Maria Pirani, researcher at “La Sapienza” University in Rome, conducts a wide and careful consideration about the relationship between human body and technology along the path of human evolution, starting from prehistory and the first technology of pebble culture until modernity.

The author starts considering tool production and cultural expression during prehistory. By looking forward along human history and technology production, she wonders about the role of memory, time and natural rhythm, about the concept of body, and near-body space.

This book first aim is to understand *genus Homo* evolution: Pirani questions about the effective steps allowing human differentiation from animals, and how men could go “beyond their skin” to develop technology, from the roughest and simplest artifacts until the most complex products. A further consideration arises from this reflection, about the role and the effects that novel technologies had during our evolution and how they are now embodying human life.

The close relationship between man and technology is investigated along the history of human evolution. «L'uomo è inseparabile dai suoi strumenti» (p. 32). (Men cannot be separated from their tools). This statement is valid both for *Homo Habilis* and for *Homo Sapiens*, as well as for modern man. Because of this close connection between instrument/tool and man, the author remarks that we can find longtime coincidence between human evolution and tool making. Technology is therefore fundamental in human life. At the same time, technology influences man inside and outside his skin. «Al pari degli altri animali, egli abita il proprio mondo sensoriale ed esercita le proprie attività attraverso gli eventi contingenti del territorio. Ciò che lo distingue è l'invenzione dello strumento quale espressione differenziale dei geni di sviluppo. Entro tale quadro *in progress*, la tecnica funziona quale *misura della transazione* tra ritmicità della materia vivente, compreso il corpo umano, e le variabili materiali specificanti *hic et nunc* il contesto. Lo strumento è infatti il ponte sinergico tra la sequenzialità biologica e il sincronismo adattivo operato dall'esecuzione tecnica» (p. 54). (As well as other animals, he – the man – lives in his sensory world and plays his activities across contin-