



BOOK REVIEW:

*Posthuman Bliss? The Failed Promise of
Transhumanism*

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Levin, Susan B. *Posthuman Bliss? The Failed Promise of Transhumanism*.
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From at least as early as classical and ancient myth, the idea of transcending the limits of the human body has been an innate desire since seemingly forever, and is now often epitomised by the discourses of transhumanism. The proponents of transhumanism, by building upon the grandiloquent task of becoming a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, have crafted a moral and social contract to better themselves by going beyond the confines of the “merely” human. This idea of transcending human limitations as matching the will of gods, though, comes with certain weaknesses. With an eye-catching title containing a question mark, Susan B. Levin joins an interdisciplinary debate on the project of radical human enhancement. In *Posthuman Bliss? The Failed Promise of Transhumanism*, Levin not only put the “bliss” of enhancement in question but vigorously argues against radical bioenhancement. She attends to the paradox inherent in the transhumanists’ philosophical positions, which she proposes are based upon “questionable and outdated claims” (3) while judging their scientific rationale as nothing but “seductive fantasy” (2).

Her primary targets include some of the more prominent theories of transhumanism – Libertarian Transhumanism, Democratic Transhumanism, Extropianism, Singularitarianism – all sharing a common goal of initiating human enhancement through science and technology. The Utilitarian transhumanist David Pearce, for instance, proposes in *The Hedonistic Imperative* (1995) that human suffering can be eradicated through genetic engineering. Along the same lines as Pearce come transhumanists like Max

More and Anders Sandberg, who recommend “morphological freedom” and advocate for radical alterations in the human body through technological means like surgery, biotechnology, or uploading. Against such radical endorsement of bioenhancement, Levin extracts ideas from moral philosophy, taking an Aristotelian concern for human flourishing as centred on virtue ethics, and using that philosophical position to complicate current transhumanist scholarship. In addition, any SF scholars interested in literary or film studies should find Levin’s book immensely useful. For example, SF films and novels often deal with transhumanist themes, and they often venture into virtue ethics by constantly posing the question, “Who we are as people, and what should the role of science and technology be?” Such questions are indeed the crux of Levin’s book, even if she approaches the subject primarily from the standpoint of moral philosophy rather than literary or film criticism.

In the first two chapters, “Assessing Transhumanist Advocacy of Cognitive Bioenhancement” and “Why We Should Reject Transhumanists’ Entire Lens on Mind and Brain”, Levin presents the philosophical estimations made by transhumanists to support their causes, and in the process she lays bare the weaknesses she sees within those ideas. Chapter 1 commences with the two different modules of essentialist claims of transhumanism. One claim wishes to minimise alteration in order to preserve the fabric of what it considers essential about human nature; the other essentialist claim ranks reason above everything else, so that enhancing reason becomes the core transhumanist task. Levin begins by meticulously dealing with the arguments of scholars who invoke the “fundamental” nature of humans to be preserved. Such propositions are often besought in the form of “Factor X” or the “giftedness” that human nature is, disturbing that which threatens human “dignity”. The reliance on preserving human nature while altering it – moderately or not – becomes insupportable in her view. Furthermore, she argues that transhumanists fail to provide adequate reasons for what elements of being human we should save. Since human nature has always been about evolution, the problem in choosing which aspects of human nature to save leaves only the second kind of essentialism – rationalist essentialism – on the table.

These rational essentialists, according to Levin, aspire to “unbound self-creation, whose origin is reason” (17). Rationality becomes the crux against fending off the negative traits of the “affects” to be drained out of human nature. Emotions such as anger are considered such a negative trait; humans should be freed of anger to reach their highest potential, which transhumanists claim is achievable by reason alone. As Levin says, not only “does the impetus to self-creation originate in reason, but reason is what gives it content and direction throughout” (19). To counteract such rational fanaticism, Levin raises the example of children with ADHD symptomology who display huge potentials of creativity, and by highlighting this example the cause of human development. For Levin, the human mind works in mysterious ways, and linking human development to rationality alone falls back to humanism simply.

Levin extends the philosophical debate in Chapter 2, which elucidates how transhumanists often mistake rationality with cognition as if their goal is to turn humans into mere data-feeding machines. Theories such as “Basic Emotion” or “Dual Process” compartmentalise emotions from cognition and suggest that we can develop a non-emotive and “pure” rationality. Instead Levin, borrowing ideas from Klaus Shere and Aristotle, proposes that emotions

are actually key to human rationality. The critical difference between human and non-human actors is in the former's ability to check involuntary emotions as well as to turn the so-called negative emotions into positives for social causes, such as turning anger into a way to promote justice. Humans thus turn their potential into actuality through the mean or psychic balance of cognition and emotions.

The third chapter, "Evaluating the Debate Thus Far Over Moral Bioenhancement", explores ongoing scientific inquiries that, in turn, affect sociological patterns. According to Levin, transhumanists consider bioenhancement an urgent necessity given planetary degradation in the anthropogenic era. Such bioenhancement therefore becomes a moral responsibility for humans to rise above their selfish needs and think of collective goodness. Altruism and a sense of justice should thus become a guiding force for the implementation and regulation of bioenhancement. And, certainly, there are examples of certain drugs that influence human behavior for the better. Transhumanists often enjoy bringing up oxytocin and serotonin as examples. A similar kind of behavioral screening can be done by genetic testing, and this can help assess the behavioral patterns a person might adopt. However, Levin maintains that such measures ignore the unpredictability of human nature itself. Oxytocin and serotonin also have negative side effects, and the success of genetic testing is highly questionable. Such for-or-against opinions on moral bioenhancement raise the classic theme of *akrasia* debated by scholars for ages, where people must not only act in a morally right way, but also be morally motivated as well. This argument extends into debates about "internalism and externalism", where the right motivation is always considered to be encouraged internally in a person (122). Yet the moment such right motivation is externally induced, it can remove a person from the psychic struggle inherent to internalisation.

Levin raises the utilitarian-versus-deontological debate in two chapters, "Utilitarian Commitments of Transhumanists and Their Sociopolitical Implications" and "Creating a Higher Breed: Transhumanism and the Prophecy of Anglo-American Eugenics". She contrasts the rights of an individual – something at the core of any liberal democracy – against the transhumanist proposal of binding the same individual by doing away with individual rights for the greater good. Given the current pandemic, such debates have a great deal of currency today. To avert future crises like the pandemic, however, transhumanists assert over that we replace Darwinian evolution with pure rationality so that all and sundry could be aligned in unison for the betterment of society. Yet with such eugenic proposals, says Levin, transhumanists are playing more with metaphors *about* science than with the actual science they wish to privilege.

The sixth chapter, "Transhumanists' Informational View of Being and Knowledge", argues explicitly that transhumanists tend to confuse metaphors with reality itself. Science has always used metaphors to explain its core ideas to lay people, but Levin argues that transhumanists grant precedence to the metaphors about human progression over the actual science. Levin then provides an array of historical surveys leading to the development of biotechnology, assessing the causes that compare the human brain with machinery, a comparison that prioritises information over intelligence. Transhumanists imagine the future into alternate versions, where choosing the

best option could lead to utopia. Even if the future remains only in possibilities, though, Levin suggests that transhumanists overlook the unpredictability of human-made decisions. In the concluding chapter, “Living Virtuously as a Regulative Model”, Levin provides what she believes could be the best-case model for human development. It is not by any external imposition that humans can progress, but rather – as the title of the chapter suggests – by inculcating virtue as the root of human flourishing. Rather than seeking radical enhancement, development should come organically; we should expose children to virtue ethics, a practice whereby the teleological ends are what matter most to human life.

The book’s conclusion makes substantial arguments about boosting human nature to develop itself without any coerced or external measure. Ironically, however, Levin herself seems to drift into similar zones of metaphor, which had been one of her main complaints against the transhumanists. Levin proposes to improve the human situation “not least because there is no viable alternative” (232). To answer the same, she turns towards Greek philosophical ethics, which seek to identify “what living well for human beings involves”, and suggests *eudaimonia* or flourishing as the final end for humans (234). Here, she descends into similar viewpoints to those of the first kind of transhumanist essentialists against whom she argued in Chapter One. To instill virtue ethics, early education must “help motivate children toward civic concern” (251). Unfortunately, the encouragement of virtue ethics may be locally restricted to specific regions where debates, discussions, and disagreements will foster flourishing, and this often entails the freedom of speech prized by liberal democracies. Even though Levin firmly believes in her proposition of inculcating virtues from early education, her solution – if successful – will yield results generations ahead, and that too when the best-case scenario prevails (i.e. liberal democracy, according to Levin) in cultivating virtuous values. My objection comes from two facts: (1) Levin’s solution is confined to liberal democratic cultures, and (2) Levin overlooks the reality that (Western) cultural values may legitimately differ from those found in regions such as Asia, Africa, or the Arabian world, and that imposing a generalised notion of virtue ethics onto the other cultures shall expose humans to socio-political exercises that may engender friction.

Unfortunately, Levin does not explain how such scenarios could be prevented. Despite her adroitly crafted (yet preachy) conclusion, however, she raises compelling issues against the seductions of radical bioenhancement, although on a practical level reading *Posthuman Bliss?* requires an almost “posthuman” effort from the reader, as every second line is replete with quotes and citations that hinder the pace of the arguments. Still, once one gets past the many quotes and difficult syntax, Levin’s book should benefit academic scholars in philosophy and literary criticism in SF alike.

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