Humanism and the Mediated Self

On Tamar Sharon's *Human Nature in an Age of Biotechnology*

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Just to avoid any misunderstandings: this is an excellent book, beautifully written, thoroughly researched, and a very timely contribution to the debate. In short, it is a book that everyone interested in posthumanism and the philosophical issues raised by modern biotechnologies should read. But since this is not a review, I will refrain from highlighting the many virtues of the book, and instead, in the spirit of scholarly discourse, plunge right into the critique of a few of its assumptions.

Of the four different strands of posthumanism she so helpfully distinguishes, Sharon is far more critical of *liberal* and *dystopic* posthumanism (roughly: Transhumanism and Bioconservatism) than of *radical* and *methodological* posthumanism. Although the latter are also ultimately rejected in favour of Sharon's very own *mediated* posthumanism, they at least point in the right direction by seeking and exploring an alternative to the humanist paradigm that underlies the former. In her view, both liberal posthumanism and dystopic posthumanism are "grounded in the humanist narrative of the human as an autonomous, unique and fixed entity that is separate from its environment in a distinct way" (3). Since this narrative does not do justice to the "intricate enmeshing" (4) of human subjectivity and the mediating nature of technologies, it needs to be replaced by an alternative, decidedly non-humanist theoretical framework if we want to properly understand what it means to be human. Although Sharon acknowledges that there is a variety of different forms of humanism, she believes that posthumanism is mainly concerned with one particular account, namely that which "upholds the subject as a free, autonomous, self-contained being with clear boundaries that is detached from the empirical world", and "always assumes a rigid separation of human and 'the rest'" (42). She further holds that it is this account "that dystopic posthumanism is fearful of losing" and that "liberal posthumanism attempts to extend". (42)

This all seems pretty clear and certainly serves the purpose of putting both liberal and dystopic posthumanism, which are usually regarded as diametrically opposed ideologies, into the same category: we are told that whatever their differences are, those differences are less important than the humanist assumptions they share, because it is these assumptions that render them both untenable. However, although there is certainly some truth in this characterisation, I seriously doubt *both* that liberal and dystopic posthumanism are as humanist (in the sense given above) as Sharon claims they are, *and* that the alternatives, but especially mediated posthumanism, are as anti-humanist or posthumanist as she believes. I would, in fact, be very much surprised if any of those whom Sharon sees as adhering to either of those two allegedly humanist persuasions assented to the rather bizarre and clearly implausible claim that the subject is a "unique and fixed entity", a "free, autonomous, self-contained being with clear boundaries that is detached from the empirical world". If that is what a humanist believes, then it might prove very difficult to find one, at least in our times.

And if that is what a posthumanist denies (and if that denial is what defines them *as* posthumanism), then it will be very difficult to find anyone living in the 21ˢᵗ century who is *not* a posthumanist.

Let us start with liberal posthumanism and have a closer look at its alleged humanist assumptions. A liberal posthumanist would typically be someone who believes that individual autonomy is a very important good, perhaps even the highest good, perhaps even the only (intrinsic) good. Accordingly, whatever increases individual autonomy is good and ought to be sought and supported, and whatever diminishes or in any way limits or compromises individual autonomy is bad and ought to be avoided and fought. Human enhancement technologies promise to increase individual autonomy and therefore deserve our support. This I take to be the essence of liberal posthumanism. If you don't think that individual autonomy is particularly important, that there are other things that might be more important, or that people should not be given access to enhancement technologies to improve themselves and actively work on their own self-creation, then you are not a liberal posthumanist. However, what a liberal posthumanist does *not* have to believe is that the subject already *is* autonomous. It is precisely because the liberal posthumanist is keenly aware that we are *not* autonomous, *not* self-contained, and *not* separated from our environment, at least not sufficiently so, that he sets his hopes on enhancement technologies, the soon-to-be-expected fusion of human and machine, and ultimately the complete digitalization of our existence and identity. Autonomy, for the liberal posthumanist, is a value, not a fact. It may well be a *humanist* value, but upholding it does not betray any erroneous assumptions about the nature of the human subject.

Perhaps more importantly, the autonomy that is sought by the liberal posthumanist does not require a commitment to any kind of fixed, unchanging essence. Usually, liberal posthumanists are quite relaxed about personal identity issues raised by their opponents. Will it matter if the posthuman that we eventually transform into is so different from us that it would be difficult to regard us both as the same person? Not really, says the liberal posthumanist. If radical enhancement turns us into something radically different, so be it. Change is good, radical change even better. Will it matter if the self that exists after I have managed to upload my mind to a computer is not really *me*, but only in all relevant respects *like* me? Not really, says the liberal posthumanist. A copy of me is as good as me. What if, after the singularity, we do not merge with machines, but are actually being replaced by them? Fine, says the liberal posthumanist. We are not partial, and more than happy to regard machines as our legitimate heirs. What if, after we have managed to radically extend our life spans, we are required to periodically restart our lives (and forget our previous ones) to avoid getting bored with ourselves and prevent mental ageing? No problem. The main thing is that we are free to live any life we fancy, and that we are indeed free to *be* anyone we want to be. Far from clinging to a fixed self, the liberal posthumanist is hell-bent to get rid of it. All determination is a limitation, and all limitations are bad. What Sharon says about radical (and that is, genuinely *post-humanist*) posthumanism, namely that it shrinks from the "terror of fixed and unified identity" and that it claims "the right to difference, variation and metamorphosis" (151), one could just as well say about liberal posthumanism. Moreover, if

in our effort to overcome that fixed self we will eventually merge with everyone else and become part of a group mind, or even merge with a thoroughly spiritualised universe, so that any real separation between ourselves and our environment, between self and other, is effectively suspended, then this is just as it should be, because as long as there is an other (which necessarily limits our existence) we cannot be truly autonomous and free. So, in sum, I don't think that, on closer inspection, it is true at all that "liberal posthumanism retains an account of supplemental prostheticity of encounters with technology all the same: some initial, unified self remains intact and essentially unpenetrated by new technologies" (98). In fact, most liberal posthumanists I know cannot wait to be thoroughly penetrated by new technologies, body and mind.

What about dystopic posthumanism then? Are dystopic posthumanists "fearful of losing" the autonomous, fixed subject and the "rigid separation of human and 'the rest'"? It wouldn't appear so. On the whole, dystopic posthumanists tend to emphasise human connectedness and the temporal, changing character of our existence. They emphasise our embeddedness in certain human contexts, the existential vulnerability that we *share* with other living creatures, and the various dependencies that not only make up our lives, but also make those lives good. For the dystopic posthumanist, autonomy may still be *a* value, but it is certainly not the *highest* value. There are other things that are more important, none of which require belief in a fixed subject or a rigid separation between the human subject and all other things in the world. This is simply not the point. There is certainly a fear that an all too enthusiastic embracement of new technologies may lead to the loss of certain valuable dimensions of human life, but a fixed, autonomous self is not one of them.

It is in fact unlikely that any serious thinker would want to deny any of the tenets characterising *mediated* posthumanism, i.e. the kind of posthumanism that Sharon herself advocates: that technology *can* have "positive and enriching effects" (8), that it is transformative, but not deterministic, that we are agents, but things are too (after a fashion), that subjectivity is being shaped by our interactions with the world, that technology is not necessarily dehumanising and objectifying (though who would doubt that it *can* be?), and that it does not alienate us from what we are, our true essence (but perhaps from a certain way of living that some of us may find worth holding on to). Technologies certainly are "constitutive of human existence" (84), just as all the other things that make up our environment and are part of the experience of living: other humans, other living beings, and the land that we inhabit. No man is an island. Everything we encounter is constitutive of our existence. I am not convinced that technology is special in that respect, that technology is *more* part of us than other, non-technological stuff. And wouldn't that be a very essentialist assumption to make anyway - that we cannot be human without technology, that this is what *defines* us as humans? Moreover, when it is claimed that "technology is a specifically human relationship" (108) then this also betrays a curiously *humanist* conviction that we are indeed special and different from the rest of the (living) world (which we of course are, in some respects, while in others we are not).

Decidedly humanist is also Sharon's insistence that, although we "are constantly being constituted and transformed by" our "engagements with technology" (200), we are never

mere victims of the technologies we use. Rather, we always have a say in the formation of our own identity. Far from being passive recipients of the transformative power that technologies possess, we are able to use them to our own benefit by employing them in such a way that they help us shape our lives "in accordance with personal hopes and values." (200) Subjects, Sharon insists, are able to respond in unexpected ways to anything that is thrown at them by way of modern technologies. We can always "reterritorialize", find and create "pockets of depth" (214), actively contribute to the project that is our life (225), derive "new experiences that may not have been possible before" (222) and develop "new forms of social identity" (226). We and the technologies that constitute us are involved in a "creative process of identity formation" (231), in the course of which we can actively relate to the technologies that shape us "in a desirable manner" (233). This is clearly a very optimistic picture that Sharon draws here. More importantly, it is a picture that only makes sense if we believe in individual autonomy, not only as a value, but also as a fact. We can only be an active player in the formation of our own identity if we are *free* to respond in our own individual way to the technologies that have become an integral part of our lives. We may not be "*fully autonomous*" (230), but nobody has ever believed that anyway, unless they managed to ignore, in the fervour of theorizing, the most obvious facts of life. But it is hard to theorize, and indeed to live, without believing in the possibility of some kind of moral agency that allows us to live our life rather than have it lived for us. In that respect we cannot, nor should we, avoid being humanists.

The real question is not so much whether we are, or want to be, humanists or not, but what we think we have to gain from the *particular* technologies that we create (and that thereby we allow to create us). Technologies are indeed part of our lives, perhaps part of our very being. But that doesn't mean that we should welcome each and every one of them without first thinking very carefully about the changes that this will, or might, bring about.