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Jenny Huberman. *Transhumanism. From Ancestors to Avatars.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 292 pp.

Jenny Huberman provides an anthropological examination of contemporary transhumanism as well as an introduction to the field of cultural anthropology. Her study is mainly aimed at students and focuses primarily on the United States because, “American techno-utopianism,” she writes, “has its own particular set of intellectual and cultural genealogies and is not necessarily representative of transhumanist orientations elsewhere” (6–7, 13). This American particularity is exemplified in a libertarian-capitalist and a democratic-socialist strand within transhumanism, which map directly onto current political and economic dichotomies in the United States (see 9–10, 214–16, 225–26).

In engaging transhumanism, the author aims to illustrate what it means “to think like an anthropologist” (218, quoting Matthew Engelke). Therefore, the study introduces key figures and seminal texts – “classics” – of cultural anthropology and sociology (e.g., Alfred Hallowell, Clifford Geertz, Erving Goffman, Marcel Mauss, Victor Turner, Anthony Wallace), putting insights from these studies into comparative perspective with the transhumanist movement. The chief aim of the discipline of cultural anthropology is to understand the beliefs, ideas, and practices of other groups of people who seem very different from one’s own. Its contribution is mainly “to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other pastures, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said” (217, quoting Clifford Geertz). The methodological commitment in anthropology to “cultural relativism” (11) leads the author beyond straightforward criticisms of transhumanist ideas to an earnest “attempt to understand the world from transhumanists’ point of view” (219) and thus to ask questions of the following kind: What would lead transhumanists to believe what they believe, imagine what they imagine and aspire to what they aspire to? This approach, geared towards understanding a movement that might in many ways diverge from one’s intuitions, perspectives, and value judgments, leads the author straight to the vital questions of the digital transformation of our societies: “How are new forms of technology reconfiguring human life in the twenty-first century” (5)? “How are technologists assuming an ever-greater role in shaping the future of our species” (231)? Moreover, what role do transhumanist interpretations of technology and their narratives play in bringing about these futures? Answering these questions, one is primed to recognize the role of the “technological imagination” (6, 91–93, 231–35) as a powerful force in shaping our societies and their futures. It is this sensitivity

to the imaginative aspect of culture, or more precisely, the interplay between culture and technology, that makes us aware of technology's role in shaping the very form and content of our imagination, thus shaping any future of which we *can* conceive. In this light, following James Herrick, the author correctly argues that transhumanists have a more considerable influence on today's societies than might be expected because they are crafting compelling future visions and capturing the imagination of many contemporaries.

After a short introduction, the study is divided into seven main chapters which examine core aspects of the transhumanist agenda: cultural change (Chapter 1), immortality (Chapter 2), notions of a good life (Chapter 3), freedom and the body (Chapter 4), notions of the self (Chapter 5), kinship systems and family (Chapter 6), the economy (Chapter 7). In conclusion, Huberman summarizes the main points of the preceding chapters, relating them to the questions introduced at the beginning of the book.

One essential contribution of Huberman's study is its analysis of inherent tensions within the agenda promoted by transhumanists *vis-à-vis* their actual views of the world, society, technology, and human beings. These tensions are (1) between "the transhumanist tendency to celebrate the autonomy and agency of the individual while at the same time extolling the virtues of technologies that will increasingly usurp the need for such agency" (227). Transhumanists are striving to create a future of freedom that on closer inspection seems incompatible with individual autonomy. Transhumanist future visions, especially scenarios involving an artificially superintelligent "entity" replacing human beings in the wake of a so-called "technological singularity," have little room left for human agency and freedom. On a side note: The "singularity" – a theme the author only marginally addresses with reference to Ray Kurzweil (see 146–49) – might have deserved more attention since it is one of the driving ideas in the transhumanist narrative. Nevertheless, even apart from any reference to a "singularity," most transhumanist accounts see other forces and technologies shaping our societies in the future. They reckon these systems are less prone to making mistakes and bad judgments, are more efficient, and generally somehow "better" than human beings, and therefore, the torch should be passed to them. (2) Huberman analyzes a related tension "between the values placed on objective and subjective experience in the transhumanist worldview" (228). While transhumanists see technology as a means to increase "subjective" purposes and pleasures, they still are ardently committed to the belief that it is mainly "objective," empirical, rational science that will enable human beings to create a better world and ultimately engineer a "subjective" paradise. The most significant tension, Huberman argues, lies (3) between the

“transhumanist pursuit of technological enhancement and morphological freedom, on the one hand, and their capacity to contribute to new forms of *technonormativity* and social control on the other” (229). Transhumanist promises of a better life are overshadowed by the unceasing desire, if not mandate, for continual enhancement and ultimately depend on a biological upgrade. Thus, while transhumanists try to liberate human beings from their limitations through technology, they also establish standards of value, desirability, and acceptability for the brave new world to come. Such “standards of *technonormativity*” (229–30) stand to impact social disciplinary programs and stratifications in the future profoundly, and ultimately, they will also alter a future society’s catalogue of individual rights. Finally (4), Huberman sees an apparent tension between transhumanist optimism and apocalyptic pessimism, i. e., “the gloom and doom” (230) which animates transhumanist narratives.

Despite such inconsistencies, the transhumanist “technological imaginary” today has already become an active force in the making of our societies, influencing the movers and shakers of today’s economy, politics, and scientific community (see 234). Huberman’s comparative approach to analyzing transhumanism brings to light the cultural “plasticity” (220) of what it means to be human. There are different ways that “different societies view, construct, and inhabit the world” (220). These differences can remind us that the transhumanist future narratives are not, and need not be without alternatives. Ultimately, the question is not, are transhumanists right or wrong? But rather: “[W]hat kind of world, what kind of future do we *want* to create” (235, emphasis mine)? In answering this question, we might be able to imagine a positive technologically progressive future, that stands as an alternative to transhumanist narratives. These alternative futures could be about a society driven by a more holistic anthropology, humanistic values, and spiritual virtues, a future in which a human being’s dignity is located well beyond any transhumanist calculus of the quality and worth of human life.

In assessing the study as a whole, one sometimes wishes for further analysis and critical reflection on the numerous themes mentioned. Ultimately, however, that would have carried the project off course. Readers will need to consult other works on the subject or possibly wait for future studies to quench their thirst. Critically one could add that, as an introduction to ‘transhumanism,’ the book would have benefited from more extensive clarifications of the term itself and a peek at its historical, philosophical, and religious roots. To be sure, the author does provide a description of transhumanism as “a sociocultural movement devoted to using science

and technology to overcome the limitations of human biology and usher in an enhanced future” (19, see also 224) and quotes the definitions provided by Humanity+’s website (21–22). Clearly, it is notoriously difficult to ‘define’ a phenomenon as sketchy as the contemporary transhumanist movement. However, this is all the more reason to invest in terminology. One would have especially expected profiling of “transhumanism” against other salient terms such as “technological posthumanism,” “methodological posthumanism,” and “critical posthumanism” – and the various agendas behind them¹. All of this does not diminish the achievement of Huberman’s work in navigating murky territory. To sum up, this book well achieves what it has set out to do. It is an accessible, well-structured, and concise introduction to both transhumanism and cultural anthropology and can be recommended to interested readers.

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Griffioen, Amber. *Religious Experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 75 pp.

With a volume on religious experience, Amber L. Griffioen expands the series *Cambridge Elements* by another central topic in the field of philosophy of religion. In about 60 pages of five chapters, the author provides a helpful overview of the state of the discussion, especially in the English-speaking world. The first chapter tells a historical genealogy of the subject, which is limited to the most essential: Starting from the conceptualization of religious experience in theological mysticism, Griffioen quickly moves on to the “experiential turn” in modern theology and philosophy, which in a sense marks the birth of the discussion on the subject in the modern philosophy of religion: With Friedrich Schleiermacher, experience, or more precisely “feeling” (of absolute dependence) becomes the primary epistemic medium of religion. Rudolf Otto further differentiates this feeling into the fascinating and the tremendizing aspects of religious experience and locates it now decidedly within the irrational capacities of human beings. Griffioen

1 On this background, see Sharon, Tamar. 2014. *Human Nature in an Age of Biotechnology. The Case for Mediated Posthumanism*. In *Philosophy of Engineering and Technology* 14. Dordrecht: Springer.

