Triangulations: Human Nature, Culture, and Technology
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Triangulations: Human Nature, Culture, and Technology proposes a framework in which to situate questions about technology, the human condition in the 21st century, and the coming of the posthuman. Today there is a widely held assumption that rapid technological change is leading to a period in which human nature will itself be radically altered, potentially leading to a “posthuman” future in which human nature as we know it no longer exists. The objective of this monograph is to draw on the very best work in philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology to demonstrate that the debate over technology’s impact on human nature has been stymied by questionable assumptions regarding both human nature and technology and their interrelation.

Drawing first on the tradition of philosophical anthropology, Triangulations argues that much of the narrative surrounding the currently popular trope of the posthuman is ill-conceived and premised upon an inadequate understanding of what it means to be human. Philosophical anthropology, which is focused on the two general questions “what am I that I am a human being?” and “what is my place in nature (or the cosmos)?,” provides the grounding for the task of rethinking the posthuman from a more adequate starting point. Philosophical anthropology is noted for its interdisciplinary commitments and the very best philosophical anthropologies, including Helmuth Plessner’s Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch (1928), Ernst Cassirer’s An Essay on Man (1944), and Michael Landmann’s Fundamental Anthropology (1985), range over philosophy, biology, anthropology, and cultural studies, and provide a framework for examining the role of culture in shaping human nature, as well as the manner in which human beings creatively shape culture. Philosophical anthropology has been hampered,
however by its marginal treatment of technology and, especially today, any account of culture and human nature must take into consideration the significance of technology. Fortunately, there are intriguing parallels between philosophical anthropology’s treatment of human nature and the treatment of technology in recent philosophy of technology, especially in works such as Arnold Pacey’s *The Culture of Technology* (1983), Don Ihde’s *Technology and the Lifeworld* (1990), and Andrew Feenberg’s *Questioning Technology* (1999). These works are key to disclosing questionable assumptions about the nature of technology in much of the work on the posthuman, that, for instance, it is neutral and merely instrumental in its impact. Contemporary work in philosophy of technology, however, has remained relatively silent on the impact of technology on human nature. Key texts by leading philosophers of technology such as Feenberg and Ihde fail to engage with the debate over the posthuman. In its failure to come to terms with the posthuman, philosophy of technology would be well served by forging closer links to philosophical anthropology.

*Triangulations* proposes to engage these two discourses in closer dialogue so as to constitute a more fruitful framework in which to address the posthuman and the question of technology’s impact on human nature. It sets out an original contribution to the emerging debate over the posthuman by linking two discourses that are central to that debate but which have been largely absent from it. Furthermore, it contributes to the current debate over the posthuman by linking two discourses which, despite their affinity for one another, have not been engaged in dialogue. Combining an interest in philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology, *Triangulations* suggests an approach to the posthuman that moves us beyond many of the questionable assumptions that have to date informed the debate over technology’s impact on the human condition.
The outlines of that debate and a measure of the significant stakes at issue are dramatically on view in two cover stories from Wired magazine. The February, 2000 issue features on its cover a photo of cybernetics pioneer Kevin Warwick, his arm bent and his shirt sleeve rolled up, as if ready for a fix. But in this case “the fix” is a superimposed x-ray image that discloses a glass-enclosed microchip surgically implanted in Warwick’s left arm. Warwick, the cover announces, is upgrading the human body—starting with himself. In the accompanying article, Warwick writes: “I was born human. But this was an accident of fate—a condition merely of time and place. I believe it’s something we have the power to change. I will tell you why” (2000, 145). Just two months later, though, Wired features on its April, 2000 cover a crumpled page torn perhaps from a dictionary. On this discarded page we read: “human adj. 1. of, belonging to, or typical of the extinct species Homo sapiens <the human race> 2. what consisted of or was produced by Homo sapiens <human society> n. an extinct biped, Homo Sapiens, characterized by carbon-based anatomy; also HUMAN BEING.” Bill Joy, cofounder and Chief Scientist of Sun Microsystems, has been having second thoughts about the computer revolution and in his article “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us” explores how it is that “our most powerful 21st-century technologies…are threatening to make humans an endangered species” (2000, 238).

These two cover stories represent in microcosm the sometimes fierce debate over the status of the human condition in our twenty-first century technoculture. Is technology transforming the conditions of human life? Is the human condition merely an accident of time and place, something to be altered through a mix of biotechnology, cybernetics, and nanotechnology? Do we risk creating a posthuman future where human beings effectively cease to exist? Or should we embrace the possibilities of the posthuman, freeing ourselves from the
limits of our humanity? These issues have been debated in a number of texts over the past decade, including Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future*, Leon Kass’ *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, Jurgen Habermas’ *The Future of Human Nature*, N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman*, Andy Clark’s *Natural Born Cyborgs*, Nicholas Agar’s *Liberal Eugenics: In Defense of Human Enhancement*, and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Inhuman*.

Despite the significant attention this debate has garnered, there is little consensus on the pressing issues central to it. This is due in large part to the lack of a clear and considered framework within which to appraise these issues. Entrants to the debate are especially at cross-purposes with one another when it comes to some of the significant terms in the debate, including human nature, culture, and technology. *Triangulations* proposes to intervene in this debate through a critique of some of the key assumptions made regarding human nature and technology and by offering an alternative framework in terms of which to address issues central to the debate. Despite its relatively recent emergence on the scene, the notion of a “posthuman future” has generated debate and controversy across the humanities and social sciences, has been the focus of innumerable articles in the mainstream press, and was the focus of a recent report by the President’s Council on Bioethics (*Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*). In arguing that the framework in which this debate has taken place must be significantly reworked, the proposed project should be of broad interest to various constituencies in the debate over the posthuman and technology’s impact on human nature.

*Triangulations* is tentatively divided into eight chapters and opens with two chapters which draw on and develop resources in philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology that are subsequently used to address key issues in the debate, including the human being’s place in a technological cosmos, the power of technology to reshape self and
subjectivity, the impact of the cosmetic surgery industry on our understanding of natures and norms, and the popularity and significance of metaphors of hybridity in popular culture. The topics and issues of all eight chapters have been previously addressed in published articles or conference presentations. In several previously published essays I have defined the nature and significance of the anthropological task and defended its importance and centrality to the humanities. Two chapters will be based on published essays which explore the conception of the human being common to accounts of the digital techno-culture and the posthuman. These essays, which draw on philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology, provide the backbone to the proposed monograph. In further published work, I have explored more precise articulations of human nature and technology as they arise in debates over technology and subjectivity, cosmetic surgery, cyborgs, and our place in the cosmos.


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