BOOK REVIEW

Michael Hauskeller: Sex and the Posthuman Condition
Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014, 98 pp

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Abstract   This new book from Michael Hauskeller explores the currently marketed or projected sex/love products that exhibit some trait of so-called "posthumanistic" theory or design. These products are so designated because of their intention to fuse high technologies, including robotics and computing, with the human user. The author offers several arguments for why the theory behind these products leads to inconsistencies. The book uses a unique approach to philosophical argument by enmeshing the argument's major points in a concomitant discussion of pieces from world literature pertaining to posthumanism. The method is compelling, heightened by great world authorial insights that rarely find their way into philosophy and shores up some strong argumentative points. Yet some of the argument still needs more elucidating.

This book's title may go into the same rare category as Harry Frankfurt's (2005) *On Bullshit*: light and popular-sounding, for philosophy. Both books, though, wrestle with some weighty professional issues. Hauskeller's new volume is a follow-up, something like a long appendix, to his recent (2013) *Better Humans*? Both works challenge sociopolitical ideas and proposals set forth by certain industrialists, technicians, and philosophers loosely under the catchall "transhumanism" (sometimes "posthumanism," as in Hauskeller's usage). Generally, this normative sociopolitiical outlook maintains that people should implement technologies to change our species into another, heightened kind of being. Proponents contend this change will be salutary. The discussion between proponents and challengers to this proposal's ethical soundness has been heating up over the past decade. However, challengers are comparatively few. The proponents' side is well-funded by

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technology concerns, including software and robotics producers eager to implement their products, whether current, planned or in R&D. The Future of Humanity Institute (Kosov 2015) and Singularity University (Vance 2010) are two sizable organizations with strong funding. Challengers have little such philanthropic funding. If some, such as Leon Kass and Michael Sandel, have served on governmental boards, wealthy industry appears to shy away from them. Many proponents, including Google's Ray Kurzweil with heavy military backing (Vance 2010), have both government and industrial support.

Hauskeller's new volume focuses on the posthumanist use—current and prospective—of technologies to improve or otherwise control love life. The book looks beyond the speculative uncertainties of whether the anticipated techniques involved, such as mind-uploads or maximally humanlike automata, will yield a conscious mind like a carbon-based unit's. Rather, it investigates whether the sociopolitical proposals motivating the development of products such as mental uploads are consistent or coherent.

The book uses a strategy unusual for philosophy but with potent effect. It puts this whole discussion into a broad sociopsychological, historical, and even aesthetic perspective. Most prominently, throughout it looks to literature, from the ancient to the contemporary, for examples of posthumanist tendencies and nemeses. Works discussed include the Pygmalion tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, E.T.A. Hoffman's story "The Sandman," French Symbolist Villier de l'Isle Adam's novel *The Future Eve*, Michel Houlebecq's *The Possibility of an Island*, de Sade's *oeuvre*, and Ursula K. Le Guin's stories "The Poacher" and "Nine Lives." These works reveal a range of attitudes about what bears closely on posthumanist concepts over the past couple of millennia. Bringing these into the discussion exhibits an understanding of and sympathy with the common human dream of improving one's lot *qua* type of being, if even by transforming it artificially. The approach is sensitive to the texts and literary interpretation. The author appreciates the difficulty in translating fictional texts into philosophical positions. The most successful of these literary analyses may be that of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Lawrence is evidently pertinent to our contemporary posthumanist sex market.

Lawrence's work is popularly known through films based on his works, especially for his celebration of the body and the id and for living so fully in one's corporality that it becomes one's soul. Lawrence offers an appropriate springboard for one of Hauskeller's main theses. We are bodies; our brain is only one part of our body; it is not us. To live fully as human beings, we must live fully integrated with our bodies: To be disgusted by our bodies and to long to live outside of them is to "live in advanced alienation" (56) of ourselves and thereby diminish our lives significantly. (All page numbers refer to *Sex and the Posthuman Condition*.) "If the body is not alive and awake, then the mind cannot be either. Life dwells in animal nature." (57) Moreover, "The spirit, the mind, left to its own devices, is dead" (57).

The book's literary strategy works to the extent that it steeps Hauskeller's arguments—which he weaves into the literary expositions—in a rich humanistic milieu. But the strategy falls short in wanting more fleshed-out arguments. To see how well the arguments work and where they need strengthening, it is necessary to

look into the current posthuman sex market and the more far-reaching products projected.

Online entrepreneurs have already taken advantage of a certain potentially large market, perhaps as large as that for pornography. Devices offered are aimed to fill in for what, in human history and prehistory, has commonly been a live human being. The site sexbots.com is one current marketer the author discusses. This company offers a type of automaton, a 'life-like sexual companion' with 'life-like movements' and 'natural flesh-like feel' (12). A simpler doll designed for coitus is Roxxxy Pillow from truecompanion.com. Lacking arms and legs, it has the bare essentials. An even smaller substitute for the live thing is the Kissenger, from Hooman Samani, an AI and robotics engineer at National Taipei University. About the size of a tennis ball, this product has an opening to be kissed and a transmitter that sends signals to another Kissenger user. This other user, upon pressing lips to its opening, can sense the lip movements of the original sender and duly respond. These products appear to be attracting many sales.

More elaborate products obsess researchers. At the opposite extreme from the Kissenger, in terms of amount of detail sensed, would possibly be total mind uploading. By this proposed service, consumers would undergo a process based on the philosophy of mind speculation that the brain's neuronal structure *is* the mind/consciousness. Thus, nanobots could uncover a brain's structure and replicate it on computer. It is surmised that this digital configuration of one's brain would think and be conscious exactly like the person in the carbon-based body. One need only hook up the afferent peripheral nerves to artificial ears and eyes to sense the outside world, and to artificial skin to sense another entity's artificial (or natural?) skin. Supercomputer connections with enhancements would heighten intellect and emotions. All of one's experiences, whether mental, physical, or emotional, could be significantly intensified beyond the solely carbon-based body-and-brain's greatest potential. Further, somewhat like a web site, this uploaded brain structure could be replicated thousands and billions of times—whatever one can afford. One may thereby be in several places at once (or nowhere at all) and even be replicated indefinitely. One allegedly could have love and sexual relations with all kinds of other entities, even simultaneously, without the hindrance of jealousy. Ingenious programming could control one's wants and emotional responses. Love and sex would transcend its biological basis, the emotional shakiness of reproduction and parenting, and venereal disease. Instead lovers would focus on the pure ethereality of souls interacting, with ecstatic potential limited only by the amount of electricity available from the local power plant. Love and sex could ascend to such heights as to make current carbon-based efforts look like that of bacterial rods exchanging genes.

In this environment, one argument of Hauskeller's is that there is significant inconsistency between:

1) the proposed program's disdaining of the reputedly demeaning emotional mistreatments rife in carbon-based love and
2) the fact that the other entity involved in a posthumanist love/sex act is "reduced (demeaned) to being just another sexual titillation device" (86).

That is, one strong emphasis in posthumanist love/sex promotion has been the following. For carbon-based beings, the erratic emotional stresses arising from the other person's irrational nature detracts from one's own "autonomy." This autonomy is the capacity to do just whatever one wants (up to the point that interferes with another's autonomy). Such autonomy is supposedly crucial to one's dignity. Thus, carbon-based relationships are demeaning. However, an inconsistency arises, from the fact that the surrogate sexual object, whether automaton or uploaded entity, is to be interacted with only to the point that that entity does not interfere with one's presumed autonomy. The other entity is thereby to be used as a sexual fantasy device—not to allow other emotional stresses to interfere. That is, the other entity is reduced to an undignified object. Furthermore, the user is using the other entity even more demeaningly than the carbon-based lovers are demeaning themselves by subjecting the other to emotional stress. As Hauskeller observes (reader, please be careful, the sentence has two embedded clauses),

> … transhumanist fantasies of a sexual future in which real human others, who by their very nature will always resist their complete instrumentalization and disempowerment, are being replaced by subservient artificial bodies that mimic the responsiveness of real persons or by virtual entities, can be understood as sublimated rape fantasies (87).

I cannot here provide the whole argument for why this scenario would indeed invoke rape fantasies. Briefly, in this kind of love/sex act the other entity, stripped of all content but the sexual part that is pertinent to the act, is much like a rape fantasy in which the other is treated in a brutal way. The other is wholly demeaned—inconsistently with the concern about demeaning that motivated the posthumanist sex-project.

One may object that a sexbot cannot be demeaned because it is not a human. Or the other, uploaded entity cannot be demeaned because it is willing to participate in the act, stripped of all emotional involvement. Or, if there is emotional involvement from either party, one need only program-in the extent to which either party would allow emotional involvement. That mutual agreement cannot be demeaning. However, the robot-sexbot case brings in another philosophical problem. The artificial lover is to be constructed as closely as possible to a human lover. Yet, this feat cannot be fully accomplished without leaving in all the emotional messiness and threat of abandonment that a human lover brings.

Assume for the moment that the automaton were made to supply all the robot-user's needs, able to make the sorts of choices that would favor the user ("I choose to love you, and so I really love you") but still emotionally controllable and never abandon the user. That robot would have to start coming very close to being a conscious moral agent. Yet, a conscious moral agent would have to have the choice not to love and to abandon the association. If the user still does not care if, and does not require that, the automaton be that humanlike, there is another, social danger: "A real human lover can be replaced by a robot without loss if and only if other people can never be more than means for us." (14) Such a scenario of means-only has some well-known dangers for human society.

As for the objection that uploaded entities could rationally program-in or completely bypass emotional involvement and thereby circumvent demeaning one another: There is a counterargument implicit in this book, although not fully brought forward. Namely, the program to upload and leave behind the rotting "meat puppet" carbon-based body grows out of a long-recurrent theme in post-agrarian cultures, especially in monotheistic doctrines: disdaining the human body (Miller 2015a). From the evolutionary perspective, though, we learn how the body, its reproductivity, and its mortality are tightly interrelated. In fact, the brain and its functioning are also tightly interrelated with body-and-sex/mortality. In humans, erotic love is tightly interwoven with reproduction, childrearing, and social structures, at least historically. I cannot go into whether, in humans, these features are all necessarily interwoven and cannot be teased apart. Pertinent here are the background doctrines that lead to the motivation for uploading and uploaded "sexuality."

This project is based on the Cartesian notion that something essential about a human being—the "soul," say—is extricable from the body (Chalmers 1995). This part is what is uploaded. Consider an agent who disdains the disgusting rotting "meat bag," fears mortality or seeks immortality, or simply hopes for a more intensified experience than one's "meat bag" can supply. This agent may seek to make such an extraction of one's essential being and upload it. However, whatever the prospective uploader's precise reason, one should reasonably ask, "Why pull into the pure ethereal world of computer/silicon existence the messy tools of nature's sloppy reproduction-slavery and anathema to presumed autonomy, called 'love' and 'sex'? Indeed, these experiences and acts titillate our current bodies. But it is presumptuous and self-indulgent to bring in these mistakes that nature blindly and fatuously created. Further, there is no clear reason to bring into the upload's pure ethereal cyber world these obsolete fleshly traits. If one is being truly clean and precise, one should scrap these messes at once, whatever your sentiment may pine for otherwise."

However, despite finding posthuman sex's philosophical inconsistencies, the book's arguments, while fortified by the great literature, could use fuller detailing. Generally, the book's succinctness is aesthetically appealing. But it brings up topics that call for further philosophical elaboration than this slender volume provides. It does accomplish much in simply bringing into this philosophical debate important issues such as those in Lawrence's work. An argument that deserves fuller examination is one just mentioned, that of the posthumanistic disdain of the body. It is worth noting that during the Renaissance, the human body was celebrated (Burkhardt 1990), much along the lines of Lawrence. One need only think of Michelangelo's *David*. After the West's millennium of dark disdain for humanity and its organism, the Renaissance held up the human body in all its muscle, bones, and form as being as great as the very image of the Creator. In that epoch, the body is reunited with the mind. Despite the common posthumanist self-identification with the Enlightenment, the movement's steady dark deploring of the flesh, disdain for the Earthly present, dwelling in the future for whose supposed purity it strives all reveal marked medievalism. This sociopolitical outlook shares little of the life-celebration of the Renaissance's child, the Enlightenment.

Another argument that warrants more elaboration is that in Chapter 7, concerning how the transhumanist label "bioconservative" for those who criticize their program can backfire. Much of the transhumanist impulse, Hauskeller notes, actually demonstrates fear of change, with "fearing the change of death as the greatest evil." (75) Meaty, pulpy, and sap-flowing life is constantly changing and unpredictable, as are the very lives of humans—change itself being the only constant, as Heraclitus observed. Hauskeller contends that posthumanism seeks to put a clamp on life's changeability, keep it harnessed, with reins always in our (corporate leaders'?) hands. Yet life would thereby be drained of its very nature—though, yes, consistent with posthumanism's bio-disdain. Still, this argument needs more substance and completion. Is the point that between these sides in the debate there is simply a draw about changeability? Posthumanism can readily respond that change will remain, we still shall evolve (and animals and plants may)—evolution will simply now be directed by our (corporate?) leaders for our best benefit. Exactly what level of changeability is at stake needs clarification (See Miller 2014, 2015b).

Despite these shortcomings, the book brings up issues whose importance to the immediate present signal how pivotal are the more perennial underlying philosophical problems. Commerce and financially powerful technicians relentlessly plod on, intent to realize these sociopolitical ideals that depend upon their techniques. Readers with an interest in the health of the present world should read this very accessible book. Everyone from philosophers to industrialists and average readers could benefit. While some of its arguments about posthuman love/sex need filling out, all readers can get their own thoughts flowing through critical streams.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethics Statement   As this is a book review, there has been no experimental research and therefore the issue of informed consent does not pertain. Furthermore, no animals were used in any experiments, since there were no experiments conducted for this book review.

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