

## Book Review

# Human being @ Risk. Enhancement, Technology, and the Evaluation of Vulnerability Transformations

by Mark Coeckelbergh, Springer, 2013

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How do persons and societies cope with risk and vulnerability? This is the fascinating philosophical question to which Coeckelbergh's book, *Human beings @ risk* intends to respond. Human beings are at risk since they are in the world: vulnerability, Coeckelbergh claims, is condition of being in the world, in other words it is something inherent to human condition. At the same time, human beings are always already engaged in the struggle against risk and vulnerability in order to minimize or radically eradicate them from their life: acting to reduce vulnerability is an instinct implanted in human beings by nature, which drives human behaviours in social environment like the Hobbesian instinct of self-preservation.

The issue seems to be clear and linear enough: both vulnerability and the human struggle against vulnerability represent naturally and historically existential conditions, they are strictly related and the latter is a consequence of the former one. Nevertheless, the relationship between human being and vulnerability is more complex than what may appear at first sight, since the human struggle against vulnerability entails a reflection on the concept of human enhancement and a careful evaluation of related ethical problems: is it ethically acceptable to overcome the human limitations by the means of technology in order to remove or radically minimize vulnerability? "And can we become invulnerable? Are there limitations to 'making the human'?" (Coeckelbergh, 2013, p. 10).

The ongoing debate on human enhancement and its assumption is highly polarised between who defends the human nature (conservatives like Habermas, Fukuyama, McKibben, Elliot), on one hand, and who wants to

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change human nature, to improve human capabilities moving towards the post-human age (transhumanists like Bostrom, Ord, Stock, Kurzweil), on the other hand.

In his essay, *Human Being @ Risk*, Coeckelbergh does not intend to argue for a position in this debate, but he tries to overcome the static nature of the positions and to mitigate the polarisation in the discussion, by developing an anthropology of vulnerability, which includes a normative dimension of anthropology: thus, the question “is not only what we are as humans (descriptive), but also what we should be (normative)” (Coeckelbergh, 2013, p. 21).

According to the author, technologies hence human being and transform human vulnerability – they already do it – but do not eradicate it. Human vulnerability, he claims, is ineradicable and we may just transform it by technologies; therefore, he invites us to think about “what kind of vulnerability we want” (Coeckelbergh, 2013, p. 10) in relation to what we should be or want to be.

Within the philosophical perspective elaborated by the author, the anthropological question becomes a political question and lately a question related to democratic praxis in our contemporary societies.

Coeckelbergh’s essay is focused on the philosophical and anthropological analysis of the critical relationship between vulnerability and technology: the aim is help us to cope with the existential condition of vulnerability, without sacrifice a dynamic idea of human being as perfectible being who tries to go beyond his limits.

Now, let us observe the book in outline: it is articulated in three strictly connected parts, through which the author develops his normative anthropology of vulnerability.

The first part discusses the descriptive anthropology of vulnerability. After an overview of the debate about human enhancement, in which the author briefly retraces the main arguments of both positions transhumanists and conservatives, he proposes a dynamic interpretation of human being, which allow him to get out of the conservative position without falling in the radical transhumanist one: human nature has always evolved, human being has always been changed by technologies, nevertheless it does not mean that any kind of human transformation and improvement is possible (Chap. 2).

Within this anthropological framework, Coeckelbergh conceives vulnerability as existential condition (Chap. 3), interpreting it by both the

Heidegger existential categories and Jackson empirical anthropology. The idea of vulnerability, as existential condition, makes rise the need of a culture of vulnerability (Chap. 4), which is discussed by the author through an analysis of the representations and practical experiences of vulnerability.

In the second part, Coeckelbergh moves from the descriptive anthropology to the elaboration of the normative anthropology of vulnerability. He takes in consideration firstly the ethics of vulnerability (Chap. 5), pointing out that there is no opposition between ethics and technology, since both represent different ways of our attempt to understand and figure out the deepest meaning of vulnerability.

Following this line of thought, the author suggests to observe how human vulnerability has already been transformed by technology; to examine in which sense we are at risk today in the light of the past and, finally, just at that point we are able to evaluate the material and ethical meaning of these transformation operated by technology.

At this point, Coeckelbergh examines the meaning and implications of the ethics of human enhancement (Chap. 6), focusing on the transformation of our values as a consequence of the new possibilities opened by technologies. Then, he turns his attention to the aim of transhumanist project: by exploring possible sceneries of a post-human development, he points out that hypothetical post-humans would be still vulnerable; and he concludes that if the aim of transhumanist project is to eradicate vulnerability, then it is doomed to fail, since vulnerability can just be transformed and never be eradicated at all.

Even looking at today technologies, like Internet or some technological applications in medical field, we have to recognize that while they reduce past forms of human vulnerability, they create new and different kinds of vulnerability (Chap. 7).

Therefore – the author concludes – given that technology already change human nature and taking in consideration that vulnerability can not be eradicated, then the crucial questions are the following: which changes and improvement of human nature do we want and do we consider sustainable? And, consequently, what kind of vulnerability do we prefer? To what extent do we still recognize ourselves as humans? According to Coeckelbergh, these questions are not merely private, but they are public affair: issues regarding human nature like human enhancement, vulnerability and the use of technology on human being should be addressed to society and discussed within the public space.

In this manner the author introduces the notion of the politics of vulnerability: what does it intend? He identifies different meanings of this notion, from the politics of human rights to the new forms that politics should assume in order to face the new kinds of vulnerability created by technology (Chap. 8).

Remaining on the ground of politics, then Coeckelbergh focuses on the relationship between vulnerability and the three key concepts of political philosophy: freedom, justice and democracy. Exploring the moral and political implications which rise from these relations, he deals with Hobbes thought, especially the man antisocial instincts and the conception of risk, the Rawls two principles of justice, and Arendt theories on democracy and political freedom. What it emerges is that new forms of vulnerability continuously rise and they generate new problems to those concepts of political philosophy which have moulded the modern and contemporary public space.

In the last chapter (Chap. 9) of the second part the author elaborates the idea that coping with vulnerability is an art, and as an art it requests skills: how to acquire these skills? He claims that such skills can be acquired by adopting a relational-ecological conception of existential vulnerability, which takes a shape in the book.

In the third part, Coeckelbergh reunites the arguments he has articulated during the essay and concludes that we may cope with vulnerability firstly by reflecting on the descriptive question about the history and future of vulnerability transformations, and then by reflecting on the normative question about which vulnerability we want, that finally means reflecting on the question: what kind of society do we want? On the contrary, according to the author, thinking about the dream (or nightmare) of invulnerability like an end of the human enhancement has no sense at all, since the book shows that vulnerability is embedded in our relation with the world. Paraphrasing the Achilles story told us by the ancient Greek myth, Coeckelbergh at the end claims: “we are – and we will remain – at once the heel and the arrow” (Coeckelbergh 2013, p. 204).

Finally, we may say that the strengths of the essay are: on one hand, the shift from the static notion of human nature to that of human being as a dynamic being; on the other hand, the idea of vulnerability as relational category inherent to our existence in the world. These two arguments allow the essay to overcome the static debate on human enhancement and to open a normative perspective that makes possible an inquiry on the relationship between

vulnerability and technology transformations on the ground of philosophical anthropology, as well as on those of ethics and politics.

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