On the Importance of Being a Cyborg Feminist

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Transhumanism's relationship with postmodern philosophy and critical theory is a strange one. For example, Nick Bostrom's influential "A History of Transhumanist Thought" spans centuries, covering the gamut from Utnapishtim to the President's Council on Bioethics, but makes little mention of those who radically challenge the core Enlightenment narrative upon which he builds his history. Figures like Nietzsche, Marx, and Donna Haraway do all receive a nod in Bostrom's essay, including Haraway's cyberfeminist motto, "I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess," but their ideas go unanalyzed. Of course, the context for these thinkers is often ignored and their works simply mined for epigraphs and potent, argument-punctuating lines such as Haraway's. Make no mistake: Bostrom's essay (indeed, his entire corpus of work) is essential reading for any serious transhumanist. But there are gaps in his history that are reflective of a larger dismissal of certain philosophers by transhumanist intellectuals. Among those neglected, I would list Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Jurgan Habermas. Clearly there is insufficient time and space to even begin to discuss all of these figures properly, so I would like to draw your attention to just one in particular, Donna Haraway, and her work with cyberfeminism.

Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" is the locus classicus of cyberfeminism. Published as an essay in 1985 and then redrafted as a chapter in Haraway's Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature in 1991, the manifesto has aged particularly well, remaining relevant within feminism and cultural studies, and it is often quoted in transhumanist works. The manifesto was written as a rebuttal of eco-feminism, a philosophy that views technology as inherently patriarchal and advocates communism and deep ecology as a counterpoint to what they see as the Western capitalist patriarchy. Drawing partially upon Foucault (whom she also mocks), Haraway argues instead that the very forms of power used by hegemonic forces can be used for resistance and liberation.

Haraway co-opts hegemonic power through her figure of the cyborg. She begins by defining the cyborg as a blasphemous, ironic, rebellious, and incomplete entity that undermines the categories we so cherish in Western society: animal-human, organic-machine, and physical-nonphysical. Though a product of Western capitalist patriarchy, like all good science-fiction

heroes the cyborg is disloyal and insurrectionary. Thanks to its heritage, Haraway sees the cyborg as capable of taking the West's concept of historical and intellectual progress, the capitalist drive for communication and cooption, and the patriarchal hierarchy and transmute all three into a postmodern socialist-feminist counter-force. Haraway's cyborg is a rhetorical refutation of both eco-feminism and Western capitalist patriarchy, acting as a kind of guerilla postmodernsubject, able to take the potent qualities of its enemies and utilize them for its own purposes. In short, Donna Haraway's cyborg is rebellion embodied in a single techno-organic subject.

"A Cyborg Manifesto" helped to found cyberfeminism and cyborgology, the latter of which was expanded upon by Chris Hable Gray. The former, cyberfeminism, focuses on the ways in which scienceand technology interact with gender roles and their mutual constructions in society. In addition to Haraway's continuing work with companion species, technologically mediated communities and critical science studies, theorists like Judy Wajcman, N. Katherine Hayles, and Nina Lykke have all contributed significantly to cyberfeminism. The corpus of cyberfeminist literature reads like transhumanism through the looking-glass: an odd counter-perspective that parallels, contrasts, undermines and buttresses simultaneously. When Haraway says, "Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations," she captures this counter-position perfectly. Transhumanists point to the pinnacle of what it believes humanity could become; where it might be going, and asks, "why not?" and "how do we get there?" Cyberfeminists (and postmodernists in general) look at the abject, the debased, the grotesque and the marginalized and ask "why is it so? How did this become the fringe?" Transhumanism needs cyberfeminism because it functions to expose the way in which defining the "human," and in turn, the "transhuman," can repress, reject, and otherize those it claims to help.

Cyberfeminism takes as an axiomatic principle that, though technology is inherently neutral, the entire process of technological development, design, and engineering is influenced by society and culture and, thus, in part by normative forces such as patriarchy. While eco-feminists propose to fight fire with water, countering tech with nature, cyberfeminists champion fighting fire with fire. Feminism — and critical theory in general — provide tools and concepts necessary for transhumanists to understand how "the human" is socially constructed. "What makes us human" is constantly up for debate because the meaning of "human" changes through history and from culture to culture. The accepted or "normal" definition is the result of sociological power structures best described by French philosopher Michel Foucault. For example, Foucault noted in A History Of Sexuality that a "sodomite" was one who had committed the act of sodomy, perhaps once, perhaps on multiple occasions, while the later designation of "homosexual" was someone with a medically or psychologically diagnosed pathology. In short, a man having sex with a man went from a single act, a sin, to a condition, a problematic state of being. Furthermore, it is now largely recognized as one sexuality among a multitude. The implications for transhumanism are clear: if Foucault's method of historical genealogy can be used to deconstruct what is seen as "natural" sexuality, then what other "natural" aspects of the human subject can be shown to be equally constructed and open for change, perhaps in the form of augmentation (of body, mind) or elimination (of suffering and death).

Judith Butler extrapolated Foucault's genealogy to the level of identity, explaining that "normal" and "self" are things we perform and reiterate, such as gender norms or patterns of speech. Interestingly, feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz parallel's Foucault's theories with those of Charles Darwin. Both Darwin and Foucault expose the non-teleological progress of history and, concomi-

tantly, that human progress, both biologically and socially, is determined in the retrospective. The transhumanist project, like any technological advancement, will place new tools into the hands of authorities to control and regulate life. Feminist and critical theorists have done immense amounts of work exposing these systems of control and demonstrating the methodology for changing them. The transhumanist model of political change should, unquestionably, be built upon the cyberfeminist model of political change.

For a specific example, we turn to reproductive technology. Be it birth-control, STD prevention, assisted reproductive technologies, abortion methods, ultrasounds, neo-natal care, or a myriad other technologies that are involved in birth, the politics and ethics around these debates are classic arenas of feminist thought and action. The main reason for this tight coupling is that despite pregnancy's obvious impact on women, women's voices are often silenced or manipulated in the heated political arguments. Transhumanists are liberal/progressive almost by definition, supporting as many options for the human body as possible, and tend to support many feminist issues, such as abortion rights, safe-sex education, and birth-control options. Politically, feminists and transhumanists are often in complete agreement. Why then, you might ask, should transhumanists make a concerted effort to embrace feminism when both philosophies seem to work together so well as it is?

The issue is one of the chicken-and-the-egg: does technology liberate society from norms or does political social theory liberate technology from norms? This question is, perhaps, the core issue of cyberfeminism. Judy Wajcman's "In What State is the Art?" explicates the debate and concludes that while the rise of cyberfeminism has given people the tools and understanding to better utilize technology for feminist goals, technology currently does more to reinforce gender roles than to undermine them. If we extend this conclusion from just gender to all societal norms, we are confronted of a picture in which technological advancement without accompanying social movements becomes a source of danger and repression instead of hope and liberation. Cyberfeminism matters for transhumanism because we cannot overcome the limits of biology without overcoming the limits of society: the latter will always inhibit the former, not the other way around.

Of all the examples I could present, the most forceful is that of transgenders and intersexuals. Both communities are heavily dependant upon and subject to the medical, technoscience, and legal institutions that form our society in ways that uniquely highlight how interlinked transhumanism is to cyberfeminism. For a person to change biological sex requires trained medical professionals to both approve the procedureand to "diagnose" the reason for it, in order to ensure it is covered by insurance. The latest advances in technology and scientific know-how determine how "complete" the transition can be, not to mention how quickly, safely and painlessly the procedure is. In the legal realm, things are more complex. How does one corroborate a male birth certificate with a female driver's license? Can that person be drafted? Who can that person marry? For a person living between a socially constructed binary, the law can be a Kafkaesque labyrinth of contradictions, dead-ends and trompe l'oeil's wherein a person-in-between ceases to be a person at all.

For transsexuals and intersexuals, transhumanism is a real, visceral, day-to-day lived philosophy. Yet the technology, while liberating in that it allows better transitions every year and provides better medical support for those who have transitioned and those born in-between, has not changed the social norms that entrap and restrict trans and intersex individuals. Because of that failure, we need a philosophy of social change, one that is built upon the discourse of

dissolving cultural norms, of countering social standards and undermining hegemonic power. Transhumanism can articulate the technologies, the potential selves, the unlimited beings we can be, but it needs cyberfeminism to prepare the way, to alter the politics and deconstruct the norms of culture and society that would bind technoscience to mindsets of the past. Transhumanism and cyberfeminism are complimentary philosophies that, when united, are capable of driving the technological development, political change, and societal progress necessary for both to be successful.

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