Bioethics in the Age of New Media

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Preface

No longer is human existence defined by its unique temporal and spatial coordinates: one body, one life, in a specific space and time. Instead human life is increasingly defined by the agential, instrumental deployment of resources for bodily renewal, both its temporal and spatial context subject to extension or translocation.

Susan Merrill Squier, *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*

[T]he typical American has come to think of himself less as a citizen than as a kind of patient, whose life purpose is to develop, sustain, and fine-tune his psychological well-being.

Carl Elliott, *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream*

What I want to show is that the general Greek problem was not the *tekhnē* of the self, it was the *tekhnē* of life, the *tekhnē tou biou*, how to live.

Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*

Bioethics has come to occupy a significant place on the public agenda. Many social groups, encouraged and provoked by the media, have been engaged in an ongoing debate over issues concerning life and health as well as the medical interventions into both: abortion, doping, compulsory vaccination, cosmetic surgery, genetic screening, and so on. However, it is the transformation of the very notion of life in the digital age that has been evoking particular hopes and anxieties among the public in Western liberal democracies. This book engages with many of the ethical challenges that technology poses to the allegedly sacrosanct idea of the human and with the new understanding of the relationship between humans, animals, and machines that new technologies and new media prompt us to develop.

It is perhaps unsurprising that radical technological experimentation should provoke ethical debate. Some commentators have even gone so far as to say, as did Andreas Broeckmann, the director of the major international new media festival Transmediale.05, that the proliferation of new media such as the Internet and cell phones and the developments that have occurred in the areas of robotics and biotechnology have led to "an increased disorientation," which has in turn caused ethical vexation.[1] And yet, even though there has been a lot of discussion among media experts and cultural theorists about the need to address ethical questions—we can mention here the work of Donna Haraway, the projects of Critical Art Ensemble and many of the interventions made at the above-mentioned Transmediale—it is at the level of a permanently deferred obligation that debates on bioethics in the age of new media frequently remain. Indeed, there exists little in-depth theorization of bioethics by cultural and media critics or new media artists. Since the 1970s, mainstream bioethical enquiry has predominantly been the domain of moral philosophy, as well as, more recently, sociology and the health care professions. What has been lacking in most of these more conventional studies is a sustained engagement with media and technological processes, coupled with a second-level reflection on the appropriateness of the traditional philosophical discourses for addressing issues concerning new technologies and new media. It is only over the last few years that media and cultural theorists have joined the debate. Bringing a different set of concerns and theoretical perspectives to bioethical enquiry, they have not so far been very successful in transforming the discipline of bioethics or even substantially shifting the parameters of the debate as such. I hope my book will go some way toward remedying this state of affairs.

One of the principal aims of *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* is therefore to explore and understand the conflicting sentiments in the public domain, as well as among media practitioners and theorists, scientists, and philosophers, when it comes to articulating moral positions about human and nonhuman life and its technological transformations—from the moral panics over how technology is going to destroy biological life as we know it and replace it with its machinic counterpart to a utopian belief in the liberatory power of technoscience. In order to

facilitate this exploration, the book provides an overview of what I term conventional or traditional positions in bioethics as developed in moral philosophy and focused more explicitly on health issues. The other major aim of this book is to suggest the possibility of articulating an alternative framework for thinking about bioethical issues. To do this, I draw on some of the current work on ethics by a number of theorists of culture, technology, and new media[2] and connect it with ideas on ethics developed from within continental philosophy.

The "new media" focus of my project requires perhaps some conceptual justification, especially given the terminological instability of this notion. As Martin Lister et al., authors of the eponymous volume on new media, explain, the term refers to, "on the one hand, a rapidly changing set of formal and technological experiments, and, on the other, a complex set of interactions between *new technological possibilities* and *established media forms*."[3] The absolute "novelty" of the media and technologies I am referencing here does not therefore remain uncontested in my book: "the new" always carries a trace of "the old."[4] The "new media" moniker is nevertheless useful as it highlights significant changes—technological, political, and experiential—that have taken place in our society over the last few decades and that have been associated with digitization and the use of computing in so many different areas of life. The term also points to "media and cultural studies" as an interdisciplinary framework that informs my study and its particular set of concerns over the recent years. Media and cultural studies analyze the relationship between humans and technology as a cultural, historically specific process and pay attention to the specificity of the media forms and practices such as digitization, interactivity, convergence, and virtuality associated with more recent technological experiments that shape our ontology and epistemology—our being in the world and our ways of knowing it. The methods, approaches, and texts taken from media and cultural studies are not designed to displace philosophy in my analysis but rather to supplement the more established philosophical debates and narratives when it comes to dealing with ethical questions in the context of the current media culture. I am also aware of the fact that, as the object of my study—human–machine hybrids, genetically modified or cloned organisms, artificial life—is very much in the process of emerging, it is

not enough to simply apply the already established theoretical perspectives in order to study it. Indeed, a number of cultural theorists have argued that the forms and practices associated with "new media" call for new models, theories, and approaches that hybridize the traditional theories of media and cultural studies with established philosophies while at the same time remaining open to new trajectories of thought.[5] The book is thus intended, among other things, to stage a dialogue between philosophy, on the one hand, and media and cultural studies on the other.

It is worth remarking that a number of writers who have recently been involved in rethinking bioethics in the context of new media culture—we can mention here Rosi Braidotti, Adrian Mackenzie, or Eugene Thacker[6]—have done so from the perspective of Gilles Deleuze's materialist philosophy. While my book is by no means positioned as anti-Deleuzian, and while it shares intellectual kinship—in spirit, if not in letter—with a number of Deleuze-inspired concepts such as "becoming," "assemblage," or "difference," it also proposes a counterpoint to the more frequent applications in the current scholarship of the Spinozist–Deleuzian paradigm to questions of new media, technology, and the body. In doing so, it brings a very particular framework of "philosophy of alterity" into bioethics, with its primary theoretical references coming from Emmanuel Levinas, as well as two other thinkers whose work on difference inscribes itself in the same tradition: Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler. I want to show with this book that the conceptualization of ethics in terms of hospitality and openness to the alterity (difference) of the other offers a productive model for thinking about life and the human, both in its social and biological setup.[7] As a philosopher who cares profoundly about life, especially about the precarious life of the other, Levinas can provide us with a useful set of concepts for responding responsibly to other bodies and lives as they present themselves to an embodied self. Of course, as many readers are probably already suspecting at this point, the humanist limitations of Levinas's own ethical position will need to be addressed throughout the course of this volume. Stiegler's conceptualization of the human as always already technological, and therefore as responding to an expanded set of obligations, will be decisive in this attempt to make Levinas's ethical theory applicable to

what we can tentatively call posthuman subjectivities. Last but not least, feminist interventions into philosophy and new media research play a significant role in my argument, in terms of enabling a reflection on the materiality of the body and reworking the traditional methodology and writing style of philosophy.

As well as being an overview of the existent theories of bioethics, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* is intended to make a case for an ethics of life rooted in the philosophy of alterity, with life studied in both its molecular and social aspects. This perspective allows me to outline what I term a "nonsystemic bioethics of relations," which facilitates the exploration of kinship between humans and nonhumans (such as animals and machines). It is precisely by pointing to a place of difference that I hope to challenge the hierarchical system of descent through which relations between species and life forms have traditionally been thought. Focusing on the multiple instances in which this difference manifests itself, always differently, helps me to avoid collapsing various beings and life forms into a seamless flow of life. The orientation of my project is thus as much affirmative as it is critical: it has as its principal objective the possibility of sketching out a nonhumanist bioethical framework that does not negate the singularity of "the human" but that interrogates the human's privileged position in the dynamic system of relations with other living creatures and nonanimate beings.

That said, what counts as "living beings" cannot be so easily ascertained. It is through the interrogation of couplings between the living and the nonliving, the human and the nonhuman, that this book aims to challenge the viability of traditional principle-based bioethics—humanist, normative, and universally applicable—in the new media age. It also raises questions not only about positioning the human as a starting point for ethical deliberation around which everything revolves but also about declaring "human life" as an a priori value in all circumstances and as always *worth more* than, say, "animal life." The critique of the position of the animal as a fault line against which the human defines his or her humanity and special place on Earth among sentient beings is part of this questioning. However, rather than shift the analytical focus from humans to animals or even to machines, my analytical unit consists, as suggested above, of *the differential relation between the human and the*

nonhuman, with the human emerging via, and in relation to, technology. I do not position technology as something added, then, or as something that disrupts or threatens the original wholeness of the human. Instead, taking inspiration from Stiegler, I understand it as a constitutive and creative network of forces through which the human distinguishes himself or herself from his or her environment. The Greek etymology of the term "technology," in which one can hear echoes of both art and craft, brings to the fore the productivity of the technical relation, which sets up, or creates, the human in the world by differentiating the human from his or her constitutive surroundings—tools, language, memory, environment.[8] This relation between the human and technology is posited here as originary, although it acquires specific cultural inscriptions in different historical periods. New media foreground this relation in unprecedented ways, while also increasing its intensity and multiplying the threads of relationality. Thus, while the book deals as much with the question of technology as it does with the media (new or old), it is through what has become known as *new* or *digital* media that this relationship can, or even should, be evaluated in a new light.

One area where this conceptual transformation has been most evident is the realm of the body. As argued by Bernadette Wegenstein, the body undergoes a process of flattening in the new media age and becomes a screen, a surface of reflection, or, indeed, a medium in itself.[9] In other words, the body is both an image, that is, a medium of communication in the same way pictures, photographs, and magazines are, and "a perceptive apparatus through which the world is processed."[10] In short, it is another medium of communication, alongside television, radio, and the Internet, via which information travels. It is precisely on and through the body as medium—reduced to two-dimensional genetic code, made over in extreme plastic surgery, experimented on in bioart—that different bioethical "problems," or "instances," are enacted throughout the course of this volume.

Departing from the more accepted definition of bioethics as the interrogation of "ethical issues arising from the biological and medical sciences,"[11] I should also make it clear right from the start that my understanding of this concept here is much broader. Bioethics for me stands for an "ethics of life," whereby life names both the physical,

material existence of singular organisms (what the Greeks called *zoē*) and their political organization into populations (*bios*). Conventional bioethics has typically been more preoccupied with the *zoē* aspect of life, that is, the "raw," biological life of singular organisms (hospital patients, lab animals, genetically modified species), with an explicit exclusion of *bios*. However, every time we are faced with singular decisions concerning individual beings, and their lives and health issues, we are already situated in, and drawing on, a broader political context. A bioethical decision is therefore not only just moral but also political in its not always acknowledged motivations—but it also has political consequences. (A close reading of selected texts by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben will allow me to analyze the intermeshing of politics with "life" today under the aegis of what the two thinkers term "biopolitics.")

The expanded definition of bioethics as "an ethics of life" I am proposing here raises perhaps a danger of this ethics becoming too overreaching, to an extent that it may be impossible to distinguish between "bioethics" and what we more generally refer to as "ethics." However, I believe that in an era when our bodies and minds are mediated in unprecedented ways, when the Western political concept of citizenship has been medicalized, and when "well-being" functions as a code word for individual happiness and political order, the question of whether there is room for a discrete discipline and approach of "bioethics" needs to be raised. It is the openness and permeability of the traditional idea of bioethics that this book also investigates to some extent. Of course, acknowledging this permeability does not have to amount to collapsing "ethics" and "bioethics." On the contrary, the book makes a case for bioethics as a distinct concept with which ethical issues concerning human and nonhuman bodies and lives, and their interlocking with technology and the media, can be understood in the current conjuncture that is frequently described as the digital or new media age.

In its broad focus on current media and political debates on life, health, and the role and status of the human, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* is not meant to be just for philosophers. Rather, its intended audience are all those who are concerned about "living a good life" but who are also fascinated, intrigued, or troubled by the instability of what

counts as "life," including "human life," in the age of new media, as well as by our constantly evolving relationships with other humans, animals, and technology itself. As the book refrains from postulating what living such a good life ultimately means, it may pose a challenge to those who believe they know in advance what the value of the human and of human life is and who are unwilling to interrogate the meaning and constitution of this value. But it should appeal to those who are prepared to question the humanist foundations of our being in, and knowledge about, the world or who may have already been involved in such questioning via different theoretical standpoints in the humanities and social sciences. The ethical positions with which I align myself most closely throughout the book take issue with deontological moral theories based on a specific content (say, "God," "nature," or "human dignity"). What interests me more are various nonsystemic forms of ethics which dispense with a need for a content-based obligation telling us in advance what we should and should not do but which nevertheless retain a sense of ethical responsibility.

The book has been divided into two parts, respectively titled "Theorizing Bioethics" and "Bioethics in Action." Even though the structure may hint at a theory–practice divide, the overall argument complicates this neat division while also creating problems for the notion of an "applied ethics" which is worked out in advance and employed in particular "cases." Still, part I does provide a more detailed engagement with the classical theoretical perspectives on bioethics, looking at the history of the philosophical debates around the terms "bioethics" (chapters 1 and 2) and offering a possible alternative path for developing bioethical thinking. A number of "case studies"—related to abortion (chapter 1), cybernetics (chapter 2), and the practice of blogging (chapter 3)—already appear in this part, but it is part II of the book, "Bioethics in Action," that presents a more sustained study of different cases and events through which the concepts of "the human," "animal," and "life" are being currently redefined. We encounter there the reconfiguration of bodily identity and national belonging via TV makeover shows and the biopolitical implications of radical plastic surgery (chapter 4), the positioning of the discovery of DNA structure and of the mapping of the genetic code in terms of "cracking the secret of life" (chapter 5), and the utilization of

biological material such as tissue, blood, and genes as a medium by a new generation of so-called "bioartists" (chapter 6). However, part II does more than just investigate these three case studies: it also performs the bioethical proposal more explicitly outlined in part I. The bioethics that emerges there takes the form of a framework, or a set of nonnormative pointers which can only be performatively enacted in specific instances. The book thus constitutes an attempt to enact such instances of bioethical intervention under this new framework, through a number of singular events and case studies. In all of these case studies, the notion of "life" is being reconceptualized in a radical way. Bioethics thus presents itself as a problem in the making, requiring first of all a theoretical and critical vigilance rather than a definitive solution. It is precisely a departure from the model of bioethics as "a technical fix" to a moral problem that distinguishes the bioethical project undertaken here from many of its more conventional predecessors.

The book ends with a call for "being-in-difference," which is to be seen as a hospitable—if not uncritical and unconditional—opening toward technology by a rational sentient being, but also as a form of bodily passivity, of letting oneself be-together-with-difference, or of being-mediated.

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