Book review

Phil Torres's Morality, Foresight, and Human Flourishing: An Introduction to Existential Risks.

1. Introduction

Phil Torres is an existential risk theorist with an extensive knowledge of agential risk as well as the risks concerning emerging technologies. His new book, *Morality, Foresight, and Human Flourishing*, is a scholarly study of major existential risks ranging from supervolcanos and asteroids to artificial superintelligence and molecular nanotechnology. Torres is especially interested in the role that agents play regarding existential risks, which he calls agential risk, as well as the potential mitigation strategies that can be implemented in order to reduce potential harm and any associated unintended consequences. As he points out in the book, there may never have been a more dangerous time in human history than today, but many of the existent existential risks are multiplied or even caused not by the technologies or disasters themselves, but by the actions − or errors − of agents.

Torres leads us to reflect on our species' world encounter with threats both artificial and natural. His insights may help us to contextualize the place of individuals and groups within the broader scope of existential risks. Perhaps we can better understand just why we so often choose to adopt certain technologies without acknowledging the unintended social consequences. Why, in short, do we respond the way we do during a natural disaster? Why do we continue to adhere to certain lifestyles − at least many of us − in ways that contribute to global warming? How does the individual play a role in exacerbating and mitigating the risks?

Morality, Foresight, and Human Flourishing aims to introduce both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as new scholars to the most current topics and thinkers in the field of existential risk. Torres delivers on this promise by providing an organized and lucid account of the risks discussed in modern scholarship. Not only does Torres precisely guide the reader through various existential risks, both real and speculative, but also provides a succinctly comprehensive section on mitigation strategies. Given his objective of providing a primer to acquaint the reader with the most current thought in the field, Torres's humble, yet forceful prose accomplishes this in spades. In these respects, his book is both relevant and tasteful.

Its strength lies in its arrant study of broader issues. This includes a wide-ranging, and intellectually thorough, exploration of ideas relating risks and agents. Torres devotes a significant portion of his book to agential risk arguing that either through deliberate malevolence or erroneous negligence, the position of agents and their interactions with weapons of total destruction (WTD) is of at least equal importance to the study of risk. This interaction of agent and tool he terms the agent-tool coupling. Thus, he argues that "all advanced technologies have some risk potential, or capacity to inflict harm on humanity. But this risk potential can only be realized, under normal circumstances, by a complete agent-tool coupling" (p.97). This, in turn, provokes discussions on the position of agents in mitigating risks. Torres executes all of this with ease; it is a bold scholarly achievement.

In the process, he includes interesting investigations of specific issues. For example, he includes a discussion of the historical-cultural contexts of eschatology and its importance to current scholarship and understanding in existential risk study. Although modern existential risk scholars may tend to take a modern approach to the understanding of risk, Torres argues that scholars should familiarize themselves with historical-eschatological narratives given their profound influence on world history and cultural de-velopment. Thus, in providing a more holistic prescription towards the study of risk, Torres aims to invigorate the field by priming new thinkers to incorporate historical and cultural thinking into their understanding.

Unfortunately, there are some oddities in *Morality, Foresight, and Human Flourishing*, such as the ambiguous use of the term *posthumans* (p. 26) that is used throughout the text. Although the term has been historically employed interchangeably in scholarship that discusses both transhumanism and posthumanism, 'posthuman' refers to different, and often contrary concepts in the two theories. Transhumanist scholar Steve Fuller differentiates the two saying that "starkly put, posthumanism is *anti-humanist*, while transhumanism is *ultra-humanist*" (Fuller, 2013 p. 40). The distinction between the two theories' understanding of the post-human has become salient in recent literature (see Sorgner, 2014). To be fair, Torres is explicit in his discussion of transhumanism and ex-clusively refers to the term 'posthuman' within said context. However, a text that is current and relevant such as this one should take care in employing loaded terminology.

In earnest, any work of non-fiction of this scope and depth will contain some incongruities, particularly when drawing from

interdisciplinary fields such as critical theory. Although the example above stood out to me, the impact of *Morality, Foresight, and Human Flourishing* is not weighed down by it. An assured contribution to any success this work receives lies in its grounded prose style. The sentences are clear, brief and sufficiently explanatory without any central points burdened by being hedged or qualified. There is a brave acceptance by Torres to be inclusive and active, consistently employing the simple word "we" − combined with a refusal to resort to the passive voice. Although modern scholarship has a tendency to fetishize the passive voice in order to attain the effect of authority and impartiality, its consistent use in a work can result in a dense and often unfocused voice that Torres successfully avoids.

Unlike other topical texts, which may become bogged down in qualifying materials, Torres competently situates his claims. This permits the reader to distinguish between the author's claims and the claims he employed through supporting materials. In doing so, Torres writes in a fluid style avoiding the difficult, nuanced sentences so often encouraged in academia. This is a cause for celebration, where other works may cut off communication to readers in a field that requires novel thinkers, this one eschews this by being both intellectually rich and accessible.

The crux, *Morality, Foresight, and Human Flourishing* is current and timely, and Torres's investigative scope makes its recommendation unquestionable. His book not only serves as a well-researched introduction to risk studies but as a useful resource that should be continually referred to given its consolidation of all the pertinent information regarding risk studies and its investigations that extend beyond the normally discussed scope of the field. The author's own specialization of agential risk is a welcome and novel inclusion in such an encyclopedic volume. Its prose is interesting, inclusive, and active making it accessible to anyone interested in existential risk.

Note

All page references are to Torres, P. (2017). *Morality, Foresight and Human Flourishing: An Introduction to Existential Risks*. Durham: Pitchstone Publishing.

Acknowledgments

References

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