

Transhumanism: Utopian Vision or Dystopian Future?

by

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Transhumanism is a radical movement promoting the transformation of the human condition. Its exponents advocate the proactive application of science and technology to “enhance” (reconstruct or improve) cognitive and emotional functions, as well as physical and sensory capacities. Advances in genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, robotics, and nanotechnology, transhumanists argue, will and should enable the sciences to vastly expand intellectual faculties, conquer age-related diseases, eliminate unhappiness and anxiety, and stave off aging and perhaps even death itself. Transhumanism would thus have us play God with our own evolution as a species, rapidly transitioning humans into transhumans and, eventually, “Posthumans.” I will contend that in the process we would be destroying what is most valuable about humanity; transhumanism’s vision of enhanced personal freedom would produce a dystopian future world.

Nick Bostrom, a transhumanist philosopher at Oxford University, has been globally celebrated for his conjectural research concerning existential risks, the ethical considerations of human enhancement, and the benefits and downsides of heightened artificial intelligence. He is also the founder of the Future of Humanity Institute, a multidisciplinary research center that enables exceptional futurists, to reflect upon global priorities and possibilities. Transhumanists are, ultimately, philosophers who would aim to transform the human species far beyond its biological heritage by applying both current and future technologies. Most problematically, they consider aging and even death, both unnecessary, in the context of our intensifying scientific advances, and undesirable; ironically enough, Bostrom himself posted an online essay, entitled, “Transhumanism, The World’s Most Dangerous Idea.”<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, an outspoken critic of

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Bostrom. Transhumanism: The World’s Most Dangerous Idea.” Retrieved from <https://nickbostrom.com/papers/dangerous.html>

Bostrom, points out, transhumanism seeks to liberate humanity from its biological constraints.<sup>2</sup> Certainly enticing, and seems to sound harmless enough. But at what cost would this bondage be broken?

In 1957, Julian Huxley (1887-1975) coined the word *transhumanism*, foreseeing an efficient, powerful society, committed to the full development of human potential, obviating the welfare state obsolete. To Huxley, this described “evolutionary humanism,” the deliberate effort of mankind to “transcend itself—in its entirety, as humanity...man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing the possibilities of and for his human nature.”<sup>3</sup> Later transhumanist thinkers have included advocates occupying the fringe of academia, such as Fereidoun M. Esfandiary, who changed his name to FM2030 (2030, being the presumptive date of his hundredth birthday, though he would actually die in 2000), and considered transhumanists to be moving beyond the human restrictions of both time and space.<sup>4</sup> Max More, Ray Kurzweil, and Hans Moravec, also staunch transhumanists, believe that new technologies should bring an end to human existence as such, by ushering into the world a class of “Robo sapiens” that would replace *Homo sapiens*, producing the next phase of our revolution. For example, Moravec predicted in 1999 that “before the next century is over, human beings will no longer be the most intelligent or capable type of entity on the planet.”<sup>5</sup>

Such technocrats would use electorally sanctioned, government-funded technological research programs to re-create humanity, a society-wide effort at “playing God.”

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2 Francis Fukuyama, “Transhumanism.” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, October 23, 2009.

3 Gregory R. Hansell and William Grassie, eds (2001)., *H+-. Transhumanism and its Critics* (Philadelphia: Penn. Metanexus Institute), p. 20.

4 FM2030 (1970), “Towards New Ideologies,” <http://www.aleph.se/Trans/Intro/ideologies.txt>

5 Hansell and Grassie, op.cit.

According to transhumanism, the fundamental right to autonomy of the individual provides the ethical ground that justifies applying genetic, nano, and robotics/AI, (GNR) technologies to expand the range of choices available to all, thus improving, "the human condition." Bostrom meanwhile labels transhumanism's naysayers as "bioluddites and bioconservatives."<sup>6</sup> David Trippett of the Genetic Literacy Project suggests that the Transhumanist face two alternatives, one of which is to promote taking advantage of advances in GNR technologies and other medical sciences to enhance the biological functions of human beings (which would mean never going back again). The other alternative is to legislate to prevent these genetic manipulations and physical modifications from rapidly becoming entrenched in humanity, through the socially coercive technomedicine that would gradually but quickly confront us all.<sup>7</sup> Who should have the right to decide? Who should have the right to decide who has the right to play God in this modern age?

And what about that aspect of ourselves which most would agree most makes us human, our consciousness? The fundamental tenet of transhumanism, its quest to achieve immortality, would require an attack upon our human consciousness and ultimately complete repossession of the human body.<sup>8</sup> If the transhumanist vision of replacing the human body with a mechanical surrogate were achieved, the admonitions of such science fiction films as *Terminator*, *Blade Runner* or even *Frankenstein*, would become a reality. Human empathy gone, we would become non-human, not transhuman nor posthuman. Guilt, shame, envy, compassion, and fear would be

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6 Nick Bostrom. "Transhumanist Values" in *Ethical Issues for the 21st Century*, ed. Frederick Adams (Philosophical Documentation Center Press, 2003); reprinted in *Review of Contemporary Philosophy*, Vol. 4, May (2005).

7 David Trippett. "Transhumanism could push evolution into hyperdrive, Should we embrace it?" Genetic Literacy Project, April 19, 2018. Retrieved from <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2018/04/19/transhumanism-could-push-human-evolution-into-hyperdrive-should-we-embrace-it/>

8 Lisa Renee. "Transhumanism-The Consciousness Trap." Retrieved from <https://veilofreality.com/transhumanism-the-consciousness-trap/>

reduced to states corrected or induced by 800mg doses of an opiate, rendering one's world always pleasant.

Our emotions, organically evolved over millions of years, provide anchors that control our desires and impulses— for example, motivating us to want to treat everyone fairly. Another shameful (or is it shameless?) aspect of transhumanism is that while its adherents pretend its opportunities for self-enhancement will become available to all humanity, equality of access is quite improbable. Post-industrialized society would devolve into even more profound class war, another version of the proletariat vs. the bourgeoisie, pitting the in-process or aspiring transhumans against the posthumans. Such a world would be far more dystopian than utopian.

Somewhere along the road to engineering immortality, transhumanists also plan to do away with the aging process. Genetic and other biotechnologies would not only cure Alzheimer's disease, cancer, late-onset diabetes, and other age-related diseases, but manage to wipe out aging itself, vastly increasing the "healthspan" as well as the lifespan. Another leading transhumanist is Aubrey de Grey, a gerontologist who sees himself as an "anti-aging engineer,"empassioned with fixing aging as a mechanical problem. De Gey lobbies aggressively for putting all available resources into the "War on Aging."<sup>9</sup>

As living human organisms, rather than mechanical toys, we are born, make both good and bad decisions, experience pleasure and pain, and throughout it all (outside of early childhood) expect at some point to die, all of which creates the cycle of human life. Under the regime of posthumanism, one would presumably enjoy the prospect of immortality, and continue living life as happily as before without the threat of leaving loved ones behind. One's impending death is not customarily looked upon as a positive aspect of our lives, yet it is looked upon as a

9 Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan, "Engaging Transumanism," H+-Transhumanism and its Critics, p.20

positive aspect of our lives, yet it is an essential part of living, making room for future generations and compelling us to appreciate the lifespans we have. We move through life in a sense constantly aware of our eventual demise, even if only on the backburners of our consciousness. Transhumanists would smother the flames of those back burners.

When the flames of youth grow dimmer, and age diminishes but also focuses our physical and mental abilities, one usually has developed important skills and talents with life experience, including forms of compassion and empathy that mature as the aging process proceeds. Yet the posthuman would live on perpetually, without a care in the world about getting old—or perhaps even any impending demise, if protected by drastic physical modifications. The actual purpose of life—to live, despite limitations—would not be enhanced, but destroyed by the Transhumanists. The very idea of postponement of mortality is an act of rebellion against God, according to Hava Tirosh-Samuelson.<sup>10</sup> Ought we not to want to ensure that our lives will have had meaning and worth, while our imprints are what live on forever? However, it is this very embodiment of organic life that transhumanism seeks to transcend in its most radical form, cyberimmortality.<sup>11</sup>

“Cyberimmortality,” another bit of transhumanist jargon, illustrates how deeply Bostrom and other futurists have pinned their hopes for the betterment of humanity on the idolatry of scientism. Massimo Pigliucci, a philosopher at the City University of New York, blogs that these futurists “are almost always both spectacularly wrong and absolutely inconsequential to actual technological developments.”<sup>12</sup> Melinda Hall points out that transhumanism would take upon itself the mantle of adjudicating what lives are worth living. Transhumanists claim to focus on

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10 Ibid. 42

11 Ibid.

12 Massimo Pigliucci, “*Why we don’t need Transhumanism*,” *Rationally Speaking*, October 04, 2010. Retrieved from <http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2010/10/why-we-dont-need-transhumanism.html>

the protection and extension of autonomy, arguing that morality and justice are bolstered whenever and however physical and mental strengths are enhanced. Yet in so doing, they harbor both an unjustifiably negative view of the present and an unwarranted view of the seemingly limitless possibilities of technology. These extremes of self-rejection and impatient agitation are the dual hallmarks of out-of-control utopian thinking.<sup>13</sup>

Bostrom is unintentionally correct, therefore in writing that Transhumanism is one of the world's most dangerous ideas. He and his compatriots are playing with fire in advocating their naïve visions of transforming the human race. Since at least 1957, this dystopian philosophy has been steadily gaining speed among many very deep-pocketed entrepreneurs and other frantic thinkers that expect feasible solutions to burst forth out of a whole new realms of GNR technologies and miraculously leave our basic humanity intact. Through their faith in an evolutionary philosophy that would transcend time as well as space, Bostrom and his revolutionary soldiers are all playing God. They would create a profoundly dystopian future world if succeeded, not the utopian one they seek.

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<sup>13</sup> Melinda Hall, "Vile Sovereigns in Bioethical Debate," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol 33, no.4 2013 <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v33i4.3870>

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