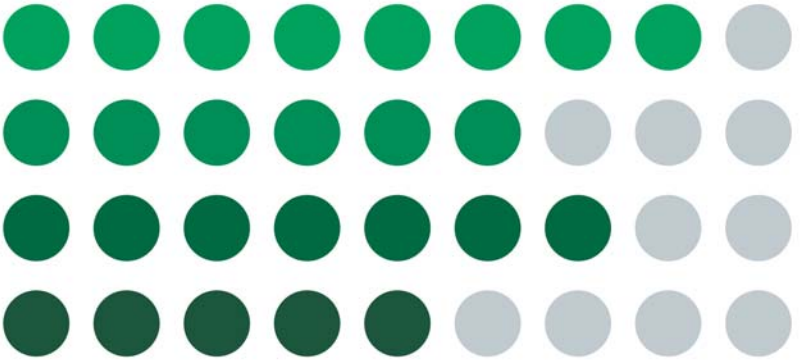

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSHUMANISM

A Critical Analysis

Benjamin Ross

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are already enhanced. We slurp psychostimulants called "coffee," sport carbon-based body modifications called "tattoos," replace worn out joints with ceramic alloy equivalents, and augment our brains with smartphones and data clouds. There are those who would say these technologies signal that we are not just enhanced, but *transhuman*. Transhumanists claim that to be transhuman is to be in transition to the next evolutionary phase of what counts as human – a phase defined by radical technological alterations to the body. Thus, transhumanism is a cultural movement which advocates a philosophy predicated on the argument that humans ought to transcend the limits imposed by our biological heritage.

While this may sound like speculative science fiction, transhumanist philosophy is not a fringe concern. For example, opportunities to invest in radical life extension technologies already abound in Silicon Valley. Google was an early investor in the secretive biotech start-up Calico, which aims to devise interventions that slow aging. Billionaire venture capitalist Peter Thiel has invested millions in parabiosis: the process of

"curing" aging with transfusions of young people's blood (https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/08/peter-thiel-wants-to-inject-himself-with-young-peoples-blood). Another biotech firm, United Therapeutics, has recently unveiled plans to grow fresh organs from DNA. The firm's founder has stated that her company exists to use technology "to make death optional" (https://www.technocracy.news/silicon-valley-can-billions-dollars-succeed-making-death-optional/). The desire to engineer human beings into posthuman beings is not limited to vastly extending lifespans, however. There are also areas of transhumanist philosophy devoted to accessing potentially unlimited intelligence and continuously experiencing psychological well-being. These ambitions raise serious questions about the compatibility of two distinct classes of human. How will enhancement relate to human identity? What if one does not seek enhancement? What will happen to the ways humans experience meaning? Does suffering have value? What will be worth living for in a world where radical technologies displace human finitude? These questions and others will be investigated in this critical analysis of the philosophy of transhumanism.

To speak of the philosophy of transhumanism can be a daunting task on at least two fronts. First, transhumanists generally recognize that there is no unified voice which speaks for all who profess a commitment to transhumanism. As technology transforms human life at an ever-increasing pace, the different perspectives which emerge as to how converging technical devices ought to be used for the purpose of self-redesign appear (and disappear) just as quickly. And yet, it is possible to discern a variety of themes which continuously appear across transhumanist discourse. These themes are: an attitude toward humanity as constantly evolving with no fixed nature, a preoccupation with biotechnological "upgrades" which are meant to extend

physical capacities, and a general view that impermanence, entropy, and the related suffering that they cause to humanity are technical glitches waiting to be edited out of the species.

Second, speaking on the philosophy of transhumanism can be problematic if one approaches the topic with the assumption that it is a naïve, philosophically shallow movement. To the contrary, this book seeks to show that there is a depth to transhumanist philosophical commitments – especially when regarded as one perspective on the uncertainty engendered by the limits of death, ignorance, and psychological pain. Presenting transhumanism in this way is meant to be a corrective for the misperception that it is simply an implicit ideology of Silicon Valley meant to evoke a tech-bro utopia. In order to analyze and assess transhumanist philosophy in its own terms, a comparative format is required. As a critical introduction, this book will utilize the philosophical dimensions of existentialist and Buddhist thought primarily as counterpoints to the transhumanist arguments for approaching uncertainty within the human condition. If transhumanism argues for a technological voiding of limitations, the aforementioned philosophies offer an alternative view, namely, that limits are essential to the meaning of being human. In what follows, I probe transhumanist philosophical commitments in order to reveal that the core philosophy of transhumanism is the claim that there is nothing about human beings that cannot be conceived as a technical problem. As a result of this thoroughly materialist and computational view, transhumanism sees the techno-engineering of a posthuman species to be both beneficial and inevitable.

Chapter 1 will introduce the key players, and offer concepts through which to consider the philosophy of transhumanism. In this chapter problems will be raised concerning transhumanist thinking, and introduce the opposing view of

bioconservativism. Additionally, since much of transhumanism is devoted to speculative nonexistent technologies, automation will be offered as a model to think through transhumanist concerns in the present. Chapter 2 will offer a narrative of transhumanism beginning with its mythical antecedents, proceed through the proto-transhumanism of the Modern period, and consider contemporary transhumanist institutions. Chapter 3 focuses on the challenge that transhumanists Aubrey de Grey and Ray Kurzweil present to mortality. The chapter will ask whether human immortality is a coherent idea, and consider the consequences of achieving a data-driven amortality.

Chapter 4 continues the analysis of transhumanism as it challenges limits to knowledge (ignorance) and limits to well-being (suffering). Ray Kurzweil is presented as a key figure of transhumanist thought, along with David Pearce, who desires to eradicate suffering through genetic engineering. The hubris of transhumanism will be viewed through the existential lens of Friedrich Nietzsche in Chapter 5. Nietzsche's critique of the "last human" will be interpreted in terms of transhumanist thought, and a role for the philosopher in the context of transhumanism will be presented.

Finally, Chapter 6 offers Buddhism as an alternative response to suffering. This chapter will profile "Buddhist Transhumanists," and consider what connection transhumanism's attitude toward impermanence shares with Buddhism's philosophy of impermanence. Whether one is for or against transhumanism, as a cultural construct the movement raises important questions about what will continue to count as human in a future predicated on radical technological change.

1

REDESIGNING HUMANS

Transhumanism is the collective term for the range of technocentric thought which converges on the desirability of radical human enhancement. Leading transhumanist philosopher Nick Bostrom (2011) offers the following definition:

> *Transhumanism is…an outgrowth of secular humanism and the Enlightenment. It holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods.*
>
> (Bostrom, 2011)

These enhancements are drawn from the fields of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive science, via tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine automation, genetic engineering, and cryogenic freezing. The intellectual core of transhumanism is that human beings are in transition to the next phase of humanity – radical

technological interventions to the body and mind will soon result in capacities presently unavailable.

Transhumanists do not speak with a unified voice, yet there is a clear overlap in goals. For example, Ray Kurzweil, Director of Engineering at Google, and Aubrey de Grey, Chief Science Officer of the SENS Research Foundation, both predict vastly extended lifespans. Kurzweil's vision is predicated on eschewing the body for a digital immortality, while De Grey's vision requires continuous rejuvenation of the physical form. Their projects reflect a central claim of transhumanism: human nature is not fixed. On the contrary, it is open to a variety of cognitive and physical upgrades. Not everyone agrees that such modifications would be "upgrades," however.

Those in opposition to transhumanist ideas have been labeled "bioconservatives." Critics include bioethicist Leon Kass, activist Bill McKibben, and political scientist Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama (2004) has gone so far to label transhumanism "the most dangerous idea in the world." The dangers can be generally divided into social-political and metaphysical categories. In terms of the social-political, for example, it is uncertain whether the radical technologies developed within a capitalist framework could ever be equally distributed among the population. Examples of metaphysical dangers concern the effect of transhumanist technologies on questions of human identity and meaning. However, both categories point to a singular worry: transhumanists are seeking to accelerate an end to the era of human beings as we know them.

This chapter outlines the basic philosophical assumptions underlying transhumanism with a focus on the thought of Nick Bostrom and Max More. Bostrom and More are key figures in the presentation of transhumanist ideas in an academic setting. The concepts of posthumanism and

epistemological certainty will be investigated as the primary philosophical commitments of the transhumanist, and bio-conservativism will be introduced as the position opposed to transhumanism. Lastly, automation technology will be used to problematize the idea of human enhancement, and raise questions about the future trajectory of radical technologies.

1.1 TRANSHUMANIST PHILOSOPHY I: SUMMONING THE POSTHUMAN

According to Bostrom, described in *The New Yorker* as "arguably the leading transhumanist philosopher" (Khatchadourian, 2015), transhumanism is a way of thinking about the future premised on the idea that the human species in its current form is an early phase. Prophetic statements speculating on the bodies of future humans have a long history drawn from myth, religion, and scientific speculation. What has changed over the last century is the proliferation of actual technologies capable of radically re-engineering humans. CRISPR Cas9 is a prime example of this class of technology. In November 2018, Chinese researcher He Jiankui genetically altered human germ cells using CRISPR, which were artificially inseminated and carried to term resulting in the birth of twins. It was later discovered that though the experiment concerned altering the twins' genes to protect them from HIV, the procedure inadvertently enhanced their brains as well. Jiankui's research signals that CRISPR represents one example of the reality of transhumanism – a radical technology which has been reliably utilized to re-engineer human traits.

Transhumanist Steve Fuller characterizes the movement from the humans of today to the re-engineered beings of

tomorrow as the transition from Humanity 1.0 to Humanity 2.0. Humanity 1.0 is defined by our biological limits:

> *Basically, it is the conception of the human condition that you might say is enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights…it's an understanding of* Homo sapiens *as a kind of living, flourishing creature, but one who has certain kinds of limitations. For example, the human being will eventually die…And even though the human being is very much part of the world of science and technology, it is also part of a kind of natural world in a pre-scientific, pre-technological world. That's Humanity 1.0. And it's what we normally call a human being.*
>
> (http://opentranscripts.org/transcript/virtual-futures-transhumanism-risk-steve-fuller/)

The distinction between Humanity 1.0 and 2.0 reflects a vision of the human body and the human condition as only contingently related to our humanity. While Humanity 1.0 is defined by biological limits such as mortal bodies, Humanity 2.0 is defined by better-than-human technological enhancements. Thus, gene-edited babies, augmented cyborgs, or artificially intelligent robots may be the next "carriers" of human nature as Humanity 2.0, transmitting what is distinctive about humans while avoiding the limits of our current biology. By making this distinction, Fuller is conceptualizing transhumanism as the commitment to being *in transition* to Humanity 2.0 – a commitment to post-humanism. It is the desire to transition from human (1.0) to posthuman (2.0) that marks transhumanism as a distinctive cultural movement.

There is confusion regarding the terminology of post-humanism as it is used by transhumanism and contemporary