Transhumanism and Its Critics:
Five Arguments against a Posthuman Future

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ABSTRACT

Transhumanism is a social, technological, political, and philosophical movement that advocates the transformation of human nature by means of pharmacology, genetic manipulation, cybernetic modification, nanotechnology, and a host of other technologies. The aim of this movement is to increase physical and sensory abilities, augment intelligence and memory, and extend lifespan. After providing some background on transhumanism, its philosophical heritage, and its goals, the author looks at three arguments against transhumanism, arguing that they are unpersuasive and should be rejected. This paper presents two arguments against transhumanism that have merit. The first argument is an argument from justice that addresses the distribution of benefits and burdens for funding, developing, and employing enhancement technology. The second argument examines a significant assumption held by many transhumanists, namely, that there is an essential "human nature" that can be transcended.

Keywords: Enhancement, Holism, Humanism, Posthuman, Reductionism, Slippery Slope, Transhumanism

INTRODUCTION: TECHNOETHICS AND TRANSHUMANISM

Technoethics is an intellectually broad and multi-professional field of study that is intentionally unrestricted to the examination of just one kind of technology, a singular profession, or particular ethical issue. Technoethicists are interested in the plethora of overlapping ethical and social issues found in, for example, computer ethics, engineering ethics, military ethics, bioethics, environmental ethics, nanoethics, and neuroethics. More generally, technoethicists are eager to explore the ever-changing relationships among humans and technology (e.g., ethical implications for life, social norms and values, education and work, politics and law, and the environment) that no one field of applied ethics can capture (Luppicini & Adell, 2008).

Specialization, of course, has its merits, but can lead to disparate and isolated silos of inquiry. This is particularly true when dealing with a highly faceted subject such as transhumanism. As a movement, transhumanism is "ecumenical," transcending professional affiliations and encompassing the broad and diverse use of technology. Transhumanists fully understand that we are in a new era of technologic convergence that will change human life as we know it. Technoethicists understand this as well (Roco & Bainbridge, 2002). For these

reasons, the field of technoethics—its diversity of topics, disciplines, and research methodologies—is well situated to explore transhumanism as it should be explored.

The Values and Goals of Transhumanism

For transhumanists, science and technology are the stepping stones to a world where we will be stronger, smarter, disease free and possibly immortal. By means of science and technology, we will have the freedom to become more than human. In the future, we will be able to change and shape our own natures at will, to transcend ourselves physically, mentally, and emotionally. Through the power of science and technology, the choice to be or not to be human will be ours. This possible future may seem absurd to many, but for transhumanists it is their *raison de être* (Harris, 2007).

There are good reasons for transhumanists to be optimistic. For one thing, governments around the globe are investing billions of dollars to research the commercial, medical, and military applications of nanotechnology (Roco & Bainbridge, 2002). As of today, we are using nano-particles to make our clothes stain resistant, camouflage soldiers, and more importantly to identify and to treat some cancers. In the future, transhumanists expect nanobots to inhabit our bodies, continuously repairing damaged cells, tissues and organs, as well as keeping our arteries free of plaque. A second reason for optimism is that biotech companies and governments have been working feverishly to develop genetic tests and therapies for various ailments, which could eventually lead to the rise of genetic enhancements (Stock, 2002). Third, the use of information and communication technology continues to grow exponentially. In medicine, implantable microchips and biosensors are now being used as prostheses for quadriplegics, allowing them to type and send email by means of electrical impulses transmitted directly from their brains to their computers (Viseu, 2003; Bauer, 2007). One day, it may be possible to have cell phone-like devices implanted within your skull. Transhumanists see a day when no cell phone is ever misplaced.

Contrary to the claims of its detractors, transhumanism is not a form of racial eugenics. In fact, transhumanists are categorically opposed to pseudoscience, racism, and authoritarianism. Second, transhumanism is not a religious movement or cult. Most transhumanists are non-theistic. Third, transhumanism is not a political movement in the narrow sense. Transhumanists range across the entire spectrum of political views. Rather, transhumanism is a broad movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally altering the human condition through applied reason, especially by using technology to slow, if not eliminate, aging and to enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities (Bostrom, 2005).

Transhumanism's intellectual lineage is rooted in *humanism*, a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and relies primarily upon reason, science, and technology to understand and improve the human condition (Herrick, 2005). Transhumanists are like humanists to the extent that they value and employ reason, science, and technology. Unlike humanists, transhumanists are not satisfied with the mere perfection of man; they strive to transcend humanity's physical and cognitive limitations in order to become *posthuman*. Strictly speaking, then, a transhuman is a transitional human taking the first steps towards becoming posthuman? A posthuman is a human descendant who has been augmented to such a degree as to be no longer a human, that is, no longer a member of the species *Homo sapiens*. As a posthuman, you would be smarter than any human genius. Your body, assuming you had one, would not be susceptible to disease and would not deteriorate with age. You would have a greatly expanded capacity to feel emotions and to experience pleasure, love, and artistic beauty. You would not need to feel tired, bored, or irritated about petty things. In short, transhumanists want to create a world that allows individuals to live longer, happier, and smarter lives where humans and posthumans peacefully coexist.

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