

Is Transhumanism the Most Dangerous Idea in the World?

In 2009, Nick Bostrom wrote an article entitled, “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up.”¹ Bostrom, cofounder of the World Transhumanist Association and philosophy professor at Oxford University, directs the Future of Humanity Institute. In that article, he argues that many people would be better off becoming posthuman with the help of new technologies. One key premise of transhumanism is the desirability of becoming posthuman.

The transhuman represents an intermediate form between the human and the posthuman. The transhuman possesses its own traits, which exceed human capacities, and transhumans therefore come into being as part of the posthuman’s developmental process. Yet transhumanists themselves are still debating the exact meanings of transhuman and posthuman. Two positions prevail among transhumanists (Sorgner 2009):

Fereidoun M. Esfandiary, also known as FM-2030, takes it as a given that the transhuman is still a member of the human species, despite possessing traits so far beyond normal human ones that they constitute a bridge to the posthuman. The posthuman, for its part, would be a being that does not belong to the human species any more, and instead represents a further evolutionary step for humanity. FM-2030’s line of thought shows structural analogies with Nietzsche’s. Unlike FM-2030, Bostrom proposes the variant claim that posthumans would still belong to the human species while possessing traits that exceed those of humans living today, although he too argues that these special capacities need

not imply a new form of moral consideration, but that moral equality between humans and posthumans could emerge. The question of whether a moral equality would emerge is central for any evaluation of transhumanism. The novel *Brave New World* and the film *Gattaca* depict dystopian visions of the political problems that could accompany biotechnological developments.

The challenges for social justice exemplified in these stories are one reason Francis Fukuyama considers transhumanism the most dangerous idea in the world (Fukuyama 2004). Should we heed the warnings of the bioconservative political scientist and student of Alan Bloom, or might transhumanism represent the decisive intellectual orientation of the future, one that will make this a world worth living in, as transhumanists claim? These radically different views represent the extreme ends of the spectrum, especially within English-language discussions. In German-speaking countries, by contrast, transhumanism has not received much attention either in academic or in public discussions. This may result from the fact that a bioconservative stance prevails with regard to human biotechnology research and to the application of innovative research findings in that area. Transhumanism represents the bioliberal opposition to this verdict. Beyond that, it represents the most radical embrace of scientific, medical, and technological developments.

The most prominent statement by a German intellectual on transhumanism occurs in Jürgen Habermas's text *The Future of Human Nature*, which characterizes the transhumanist movement as follows:

A handful of freaked-out intellectuals is busy reading the tea leaves of a naturalistic version of posthumanism, only to give, at what they suppose to be a time-wall, one more spin—"hypermodernity" against "hypermorality"—to the all-too-familiar motives of a very German ideology. Fortunately, the elitist dismissals of the "illusion of egalitarianism" and the discourse of justice still lack the power for large-scale infection. Self-styled Nietzscheans, indulging the fantasies of the "battle between large-scale and small-scale man-breeders" as "the fundamental conflict of all future," and encouraging the "main cultural factions" to "exercise the power of selection which they have

actually gained,” have, so far, only succeeded in staging a media spectacle. (2003, 22)

The naturalistic version of posthumanism to which Habermas refers is transhumanism, and he lumps it together with the topic of Peter Sloterdijk’s widely received 1999 talk entitled, “Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism.” Sloterdijk’s talk gave decisive stimulus to the debate on human biotechnologies at the end of the 1990s. The phrases in quotation marks in Habermas’s text come from Sloterdijk’s talk on the “human zoo,” and, as those references suggest, Habermas’s text is an implicit answer to Sloterdijk’s talk.

The above quoted passage by Habermas misses the mark in several respects:

1. The phenomena he writes about are not posthumanist and are not even “a naturalistic version of posthumanism”; rather, they are transhumanist.
2. Sloterdijk is not a transhumanist.
3. There is reason to doubt that transhumanism lacks “the power for large-scale infection.”

Each of these objections merit further elaboration.

Objection 1: I will present a more precise differentiation of trans- and posthumanism in the chapter entitled “Pedigrees of Metahumanism, Posthumanism, and Transhumanism.” This range of concepts is discussed in detail within the introductory guide *Posthumanism and Transhumanism: An Introduction* (Ranisch and Sorgner 2014). One hallmark of posthumanism is its indissoluble bond to the tradition of Continental philosophy, whereas transhumanism has prospered in the naturalistic and utilitarian thought of the English-speaking world.

Objection 2: Sloterdijk’s talk, “Rules for the Human Zoo,” solely argues for the necessity of reflecting on the ethical questions raised by human biotechnologies. There are only two reasons why Habermas would find his talk disconcerting: the talk draws on Plato, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, who are suspected within the German-speaking world of advocating a totalitarian and fascistic line of thought (for the most part unjustifiably,

in my view), and the talk takes up a vocabulary (human zoo, breeding) that hardly softens that impression. Sloterdijk has not uttered any affirmative moral judgments on the enhancement of humanity. On December 6, 2005, Sloterdijk gave a presentation at the University of Tübingen called *Optimierung des Menschen?* (Optimization of the human?),² where he made it explicit that he, just like Habermas, views the application of human biotechnologies for therapeutic purposes as morally suitable but sees it as morally problematic to use them for enhancement purposes. That view means that he cannot be a transhumanist. By definition, transhumanists embrace the use of enhancement technologies.

Objection 3: Perhaps we cannot speak of transhumanism's "power for large-scale infection" in German-speaking countries. There are however good reasons to believe that this lack of interest does not hold in an international context. Several facts speak for the opposing view: the large volume of academic publications that engage with transhumanist positions, especially in the fields of bioethics and medical ethics, the fact that leading transhumanists hold positions at top universities in the English-speaking world (such as Oxford University), and the intensive, multifaceted engagement with questions of transhumanism in the artistic and cultural domain. Popular engagement with transhumanism proliferates in the form of well-known films (*Gattaca*, *Transcendence*), novels (Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an Island*, Dan Brown's *Inferno*, Zoltan Istvan's *The Transhumanist Wager*), visual art (Patricia Piccini's *Still Life with Stem Cells* or *Alba*, the fluorescent rabbit by Eduardo Kac), and science fiction literature in general.

Habermas also makes the provocative claim that transhumanists are a bunch of "freaked-out intellectuals" with Nietzschean fantasies. This portrayal is controversial among transhumanists, probably because they are aware of Friedrich Nietzsche's murky reputation, and they don't want association with Nietzsche to bring them under suspicion of supporting morally reprehensible views.³

After this brief background in transhumanism's neglect in the German-speaking world, the next question is whether increased engagement with this intellectual movement could exert a decisive influence on German-language debates on bioethics and medical ethics or on the philosophy of technology. Detailed engagement with this question requires

a more nuanced account of the movement. I will thus introduce some further facets of transhumanist thought below.

FACETS OF TRANSHUMANISM

The use of the concept “transhumanism” was first coined by Julian Huxley in the 1951 article, “Knowledge, Morality, and Destiny,”⁴ and then developed in his 1957 book *New Bottles for New Wine*. The author was the brother of Aldous Huxley, the author of *Brave New World* (1932) and the uncle of “Darwin’s Bulldog” Thomas Henry Huxley. The novel *Brave New World* represents a direct response to notions propagated by Julian Huxley, which he already advocated before he developed the concept of transhumanism.

For the contemporary understanding of the concept, the most decisive work is the book, *Are You a Transhuman?* published in 1989 by FM-2030, who used to be called F. M. Esfandiary but renamed himself FM-2030 to draw attention to the arbitrariness of name assignment and to announce his wish to celebrate his one hundredth birthday in the year 2030. He already died in 2000 from complications resulting from a pancreatic tumor. Max More’s article, “Transhumanism: A Futurist Philosophy,” originally published in 1990, also exerted a formative influence on the contemporary understanding of the concept. Max More was born Max T. O’Connor and changed his last name to More as a reminder of the importance of self-overcoming—humans always want to achieve more and to overcome their limitations constantly, in his view, and thus he chose the evocative name, “more.” FM-2030 and Max More have more in common than having established the contemporary concept of transhumanism and having changed their own names to match their worldviews. They also both had ties to the transhumanist artist Natasha Vita-More. She and Max More are still married.

A further important step in the history of transhumanism was the founding of the World Transhumanist Association by Nick Bostrom and David Pearce in 1998, along with the political debate among transhumanists, which occurred in reaction to James Hughes’s book, *Citizen Cyborg*. Hughes takes on a social-democratic position in opposition to More’s

extropic variety of transhumanism (extropy—the opposite of entropy—is used in a metaphoric sense), which tends much more toward libertarian stances. This discussion continues today when bioethicists take up the so-called Gattaca argument. Bioethicists reflect on whether the further development of enhancement technologies would lead to a segmentation of society into the gene rich and the gene poor, or the posthumans and the humans. They also think about whether belonging to one group might come with different rights than belonging to the other.

There are two ways to explain why social division would not necessarily stand as a threat. Consider the analogy between vaccinations and other enhancement technologies; vaccinations are after all a kind of biotechnological enhancement. There had been a legally sanctioned vaccination requirement in Germany until the 1980s, but it is no longer in effect. Vaccinations, which are reliable, helpful, and safe for many people, are covered by health insurance if desired. Health insurance even pays for special vaccinations in some cases. There are however many unusual vaccinations that individuals must pay for out of pocket. Analogously, the safe and helpful enhancement technologies could be universally available in the same way, in order to ensure that a segmentation of society does not occur.

Here is the second reason why the Gattaca danger need not loom. Thirty years ago, only business leaders could afford cell phones. Today almost every member of Western society could potentially own and use such a phone. This example illustrates how successful technologies that are helpful, reliable, useful, and safe are quickly in demand by so many people that the technologies soon become more affordable and within reach of many people. We could expect an analogous development with other enhancement technologies, which would prevent a segmentation of society into groups of different value. If the consequences described in this scenario did occur, however, the next concern would be that citizens who do not wish to use these technologies would still be forced to use them. This judgment may be correct, but it need not be a criticism as the following example emphasizes. Thirty years ago, students were still permitted to submit hand-written papers. This is no longer acceptable today since it is generally expected that they are written on computers and formatted in a specific way. Students are thus compelled

to use computers. Is this fact morally problematic? Not necessarily. For many people, computers are affordable, reliable, safe, and useful. The advantages clearly outweigh the disadvantages. Students hardly ever find themselves wishing to write a paper without a computer. If a lot of enhancement technologies are inclined to develop in just this way, then it is likely that the consequences would be analogous to those in the aforementioned case. The reasons sketched here make it clear that the splintering of society into a Gattaca-like structure need not necessarily accompany the further development of biotechnologies. With this reassurance, we can enjoy the rewards of engaging more deeply with transhumanism. Such engagement need not be morally dubious work.

Even before Julian Huxley constructed the notion of transhumanism, there were already thinkers who worked on topics that would later be decisively integrated into transhumanism. Especially noteworthy are the utilitarians, some Enlightenment thinkers, Darwin, and Nietzsche—although this ancestry is controversial. The goals and basic views of transhumanism rely on a naturalistic notion of humanity, which differs by degree, not by type, from other organisms. Transhumanist views often, but not necessarily, imply a utilitarian ethical position and liberal-democratic social order; there are however libertarian and social-democratic branches of the movement.

The decisive feature of transhumanism is its advocacy for new technologies to increase the probability that transhumans or posthumans will emerge, so that evolution no longer depends on natural selection but can let human selection set its course. This development deeply calls into question whether humanity has reached its maturity. As small children depend on their surroundings and only begin to become masters of their own lives as teenagers, so human evolution has depended on natural selection. Now humanity is slowly coming to its evolutionary teens, where we are ever readier to take control over our own evolutionary process. The analogy has limited scope; it only represents an attempt to approximate transhumanist philosophy.

The strong embrace of radical enhancement technologies is the defining feature of transhumanism and represents the movement's most innovative aspect. Transhumanists especially support the enhancement of emotional, physical, and intellectual abilities, along with the

extension of the healthspan during which the transhuman or posthuman can emerge (Bostrom 2009, 113–16). The transhuman or posthuman is not only about a new description of humanity, not just a new anthropological position, but rather it is about new developments in humanity. This movement is characterized by an optimistic view of the future and of the further development of humanity.

Transhumanists offer one main premise for arguing that surpassing humanity is desirable: individuals will regard their own quality of life as higher when their emotional, physical, and intellectual abilities are enhanced and their healthspans are extended. Whoever commands greater capacities and remains alive longer in a healthy condition generally leads a more comfortable life than those for whom this is not the case. A lot of transhumanists support this claim with evidence from psychological research (Bostrom 2009, 116). Do we indeed become happier when we develop and apply new enhancement technologies?

The traits and capacities that are especially relevant for fostering a good life are emotional, psychological, and intellectual capacities, along with a long healthspan. Lately, the leading enhancement technology researchers and transhumanists are considering the possibility of pharmacologically improving morality.

Which technologies should be prioritized from the transhumanist point of view? Based on present concerns, the following four areas of enhancement technology are discussed below: 1. genetic enhancement; 2. pharmacological enhancement, that is, medications, drugs for doping or recreation—in short, neuroenhancement; 3. cyborg enhancement by establishing interconnected human-machines, commonly known as cyborgs (cybernetic organisms), that is, complex systems that combine living organisms with digital or nondigital machines, which would allow humans to link up with digital as well as mechanical machines; 4. morphological enhancement, that is, beautification surgery.

THE EVALUATION OF TRANSHUMANISM

Is transhumanism the most dangerous idea in the world? Transhumanists embrace the liberal-democratic order as foundational and thus attach

great importance to the norms of freedom and equality; Max More focuses on freedom, whereas free and equal rights are the focus for James Hughes. I for one consider both of these standards *the* key achievements of the Enlightenment worth defending. Movements directed against these basic standards are undoubtedly much more dangerous than transhumanism. This is not to say that no dangers can be found in transhumanist ideas.

A common reaction to transhumanist thinking is spontaneous disgust. Just thinking about self-modification makes many people go “Yuck!” The American bioethicist Leon Kass even believes that there is wisdom in such a reaction, the wisdom of revulsion contained in the yuck factor (Kass 1997). However, an emotional, negative reaction does not seem to me to arrive at an adequate or plausible assessment of transhumanism. Telling another narrative of the possibilities arising from human biotechnologies can provoke other emotional reactions to transhumanist proposals, such as an affirmative “Yeah!” Modifying a human being need not be disgusting. 250 Two hundred and fifty years ago, the enhancement of humans by vaccination had not yet been developed. “Yeah!” Two hundred years ago, there were no anesthetics yet. I find it terrific that we can now use anesthetics. “Yeah!” One hundred and fifty years ago, there were no antibiotics yet. I am very grateful that they are now available. “Yeah!”

In fact, progress in biotechnology is linked to many remarkable achievements. Of course, every technical innovation also comes with new dangers. Transhumanists are well aware of these dangers, and they are intensively grappling with them. Does this mean that there are no moral problems associated with transhumanism? This is hardly the case, as some transhumanists even speak of enhancement as a moral duty, and they even apply this obligation to the processes of genetic enhancement. For example, they argue for the moral duty to select and implant the fertilized egg after in vitro fertilization and preimplantation genetic diagnosis that has the highest chance of living a good life. Not only transhumanists uphold this assessment at present. The bio-liberal director of the Uehiro Center of the University of Oxford, Julian Savulescu, propounds this thesis, which I consider to be morally problematic, since it is inextricable from certain paternalistic tendencies

(2001, 413–26; Sorgner 2014a). It certainly resembles transhumanism though.

Within this section, I was primarily aiming to explain transhumanism and to put its tenets up for discussion. To disregard the role of transhumanist considerations from the bio-, medical-, and technical-ethical discourses would amount to a lack of international outlook. Engaging with thoughts does not imply agreement with the thoughts under discussion. Transhumanism involves considerations that challenge widespread prejudice in an intellectually stimulating way and encourages us to think further.

Do I want to be a posthuman when I get older, like Bostrom does? That is not how I would formulate the objectives for my life planning, but I do believe that constant self-overcoming is central to promoting my own quality of life. I also consider scientific research, especially in biotechnology, extremely important and advocate for greater sponsorship of those research fields. I consider the availability of anesthetics, vaccinations, and antibiotics important achievements. I hope that future achievements will also address important challenges. This stance can be parsed as a weak form of transhumanism.⁵