



# / The Art of Transhumanism

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**“Man is something that shall be overcome.”  
Friedrich Nietzsche**

As petrol prices rise, war rages on, and resources grow finite, humanity finds itself burdened by its own technocratic inefficiency. The system isn't working. Despite all the “really cool” things we can do with our stuff, we're unable to take more beneficial steps towards advancement. Yet, should we discard all tomorrow's parties because of a hangover today? Or, can technology be more rationally used, not only to improve the human condition, but to totally transform it as well? Transhumanism is a “forward thinking and future orientated” philosophy considering such possibilities and believes a new phase of social development, “posthumanity”, is not only needed, but, inevitable. Of course, interpretations regarding how “posthumans” will arrive are diverse and, predictably, offensive to creationists who insist that modifying the “intelligently designed” human “essence” is blasphemous.

## *“For transhumanism, evolution is redemption”*

evolution is redemption. For instance, Eric Aronesty, chair of the New York Transhumanist Association (N.Y.T.A.), believes “every decision we make in our day affects our evolution.” Aronesty goes on to ask, “are the decisions we’re making the most intelligent? Probably not, but why?” Thus, Transhumanism’s definition of evolution is not limited to Darwin, but is instead more broadly understood to be a social and mimetic concept. Of course, the “intelligent design” crowd will continue to refute evolution as a natural process by which things change into different and more complex forms. Nevertheless, it’s tough to ignore the way we socially adapt alongside technological innovations and changing ideas; and it would be naïve to ignore the existence of evolution, however one likes to

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Such exuberance is bound to provoke creative visions of the future; certainly many are more fantastic and illustrative of the scope of transhuman extremism. For instance, N.Y.T.A. member Don Spanton claims that

Evolution is a polarizing concept, and subsequently makes up the core of transhumanism. According to a recent Gallup Poll, “45% of Americans believe God created human beings [as they appear] in their present form about 10,000 years ago.” Thus, any definition or philosophy claiming organisms morphologically change over time as a result of natural selection and/or adaptation is, for this sect of the religious right, rubbish. For transhumanism,

define it. Transhumanism is, admittedly, inspired by some rather outlandish claims; nevertheless, its guiding principle assumes that the logic and values of traditional humanism must be reevaluated and transformed to meet the demands of an increasingly complex social and technological landscape. Transhumanist Max More (I love that name), brazenly asserts “No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality.” Thus, not only is technology outmoded and unable to meet the demands of our sped-up-society, but so are our concepts, imagination, and our idea of our mortality. Accordingly, transhumanism could be compared with Marinetti’s futurism: both believe ideas from the past only obstruct genuine social innovation. Of course, unlike the futurists, transhumanists are generally pacifists; furthermore, rather than viewing innovation as a way of mastering nature, transhumanists insist that technology and nature are analogous.

# *\_one way to extend life is by cryogenically freezing the body in the hope of being reanimated \_*

"immortality is my top priority." Most transhumanists who agree with Spanton believe death is - through technology - avoidable. Apparently, one way to extend life is by cryogenically freezing the body in the hope of being reanimated (you know, like in *Austin Powers*) in the future. Another audacious possibility is "uploading" the mind into a computational mainframe, which would, supposedly, enable one to live forever in a world of unlimited, simulated possibilities. Such boundless frontiers will most certainly be marketed to large segments of the consumer public. And why shouldn't they? Video games, pornography, and digital technologies are already so popular it would be difficult to discredit the obvious profit potential of virtual experience. Of course, the religious right will certainly not be as willing to challenge the threshold of human experience as - more adventurous - others. One can only imagine the prudish reaction to Ray Kurzweil's description of a "virtual environment," in his book *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. Kurzweil writes, "Virtual sex [may] become a viable competitor to the real thing. Couples will be able to engage in virtual sex regardless of their proximity...Virtual sex will provide sensations that are more intense and pleasurable than conventional sex, as well as physical experiences that currently do not exist. Virtual sex is also the ultimate in safe sex, as there is no risk of pregnancy or transmission of disease."

Of course, not all transhuman claims are as audacious. In fact, other future possibilities deal with more tangible - yet potentially dangerous if actualized by the capitalists, war-mongering, cronies in power - possibilities, such as nanotech and/or biotechnology. Both innovations are, currently being tested, discussed, and marketed by Wall Street; however, neither is widely accepted since many

people are, rightfully, suspicious of what might fall out of Pandora's Box if either is mass-marketed. After all, if we're able to assemble matter at the sub-atomic level what will this mean for politics, trade, and religion? K. Eric Drexler warns in his book *Engines of Creation*, "Nanotechnology will give great power to the leading force that can be used to destroy life, or extend and liberate it. Since we cannot stop these technologies we must somehow cope with a concentration of power greater than any in history."

Another transhuman hope for the future, biotechnology, has spawned similar fears; however, as is not the case with nanotechnology, these concerns regard human rights. For instance, Francis Fukuyama (member of The President's Council on Bioethics) has called transhumanism "dangerous" and argues biotechnology would "permit the emergence of new genetic classes." He asks, "If some move ahead [because of biological manipulation] can anyone afford not to follow?" In this sense, Fukuyama's understanding of a "posthuman" future shares many similarities with Andrew Nicoll's film *Gattaca* (1997), in which one's genetic blueprint determines one's "rightful" place in society. Of course, Fukuyama's fears do not represent an accurate understanding of a transhuman utopia. In the transhumanist utopia changes to the human body are only the beginning. Once humanity has stepped across its own mortal threshold and taken control of its bodily evolution, our psycho-social boundaries as a species are sure to change too.

Transhumanists believe "before any technological change can be implemented, we must reevaluate our priorities." Such a societal "reevaluation" is the best aspect of

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transhumanism and one of the few things saving it from being viewed merely as some wacky sci-fi cult. N.Y.T.A. chair, Erik Aronesty, illustrates part of this "reevaluative" tendency with a common substance – chewing gum. Aronesty claims, "Society spends more money on gum than on healthcare." I'm not sure where Aronesty found this statistic; however, I did find that "the annual amount spent on chewing gum in North America [is] equal to the United Nations' combined humanitarian appeals." Thus, regardless of the validity of Aronesty's claim, it does illustrate society's foolish tendency to invest in immediate pleasures rather than in long-term goals, such as humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, what would happen if society also reevaluated its priorities concerning war and conquest, or the environment? Essentially, transhumanism asks, "Are we selling tomorrow's needs, at the expense of today's wants?"

Whether we like it or not, human/machine interaction continues to increase at an alarming rate. "Machines are becoming more organic, self-modifying, and intelligent... How long before computers are implanted into our brains?" Perhaps not long. Why shouldn't the next revolution be against the failed project of modernity, so that society may achieve a more harmonious equilibrium between technology and the human, as well as between technology and the environment? As technology changes, so does the way we think. Will our minds be able to keep up with such speedy and efficient programs? Stephen Hawkins echoes this concern, warning "Biological systems must evolve if they are to keep ahead of technological ones." But how is this self-willed evolution to take place? Will we be able to prepare for such a shift of consciousness, as transhumanists suggest?

Transhumanism isn't advocating the development of cyborgs or nihilistic automatons but, instead, a "posthuman" existence – meaning, *beyond* our current limited conception of what we consider to be human. In this sense, we could exist as transformed beings that exemplify and magnify our very best characteristics. We're at a thresh-hold; our environment is unable to support ignorance and waste; artistic and cultural expression seems to only reaffirm the same banal social ethics that continue to bore society to death. Forces of globalization are, apparently, "Flattening the world" and repositioning the way international finances and policies are administered. We must transcend our limited and destructive mentality to build a new world that can, potentially, transform all humanity into the innovative and efficient race we know we could be. This development will undoubtedly have much to do with emerging technologies. Humanism may view people as being separate from the technology they create, but *transhumanism* moves beyond this to view technology as an integral part of us – as, more specifically, embodied humanity. If this is "dangerous" – count me in as part of the threat.

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*Illustration / Nicholas Allanach*