

An Eco-Social Perspective on Transhumanism

Article by Carmen Madorrán Ayerra

August 16, 2019

From pacemakers supporting our vital functions to smartphones taking on jobs once done by our ears, eyes, and minds, humanity is increasingly dependent on technology. Transhumanism, a movement inspired by the possibilities of developments from artificial intelligence to biogenetics, argues that this can only be a good thing. Going beyond the limits of our bodies and minds, even of life itself, is to be embraced. In the second of our series on the [Fourth Industrial Revolution](#), Carmen Madorrán Ayerra traces the rise of transhumanism, asking whether its utopian vision is credible in an age of social and ecological crisis.

The concept of transhumanism refers a multiplicity of philosophical currents that explore the possibility using science and technology to go beyond the human species. The transhumanist vision resembles that of many modern utopias in that it critiques our existing situation through the imagination of a desirable future alternative. The difference is that transhumanism is also committed to searching for the most appropriate scientific and technical means to bring that future about. Considered by some as the “[defining worldview of the postmodern age](#)”, transhumanism can be understood then as a technoscientific utopia, a worldview that stems from a dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the here and now and which seeks to transform it. As opposed to literary utopia, transhumanism is utopian practice.^[1]

Transhumanism makes a series of promises: the increase of physical and intellectual capacities, the elimination of genetic disease, and the potential for personalised drugs and vaccines. A tenet of the movement is that “the first human being to live a thousand years is already living.” In the words of the philosopher Antonio Diéguez, “it’s been a long time since there was a doctrine that showed such enthusiasm for changing reality.”^[2]

A brief history

The term “transhumanism” appeared for the first time in 1927 in *Religion without Revelation* by Julian Huxley, brother of the writer Aldous Huxley, to refer to the idea that humanity can transcend itself.

The first text to use scientific transhumanism as understood today dates back to 1983, when Natasha Vita-More published the “Transhuman Manifesto”, which formed the basis for the “[Transhumanist Declaration](#)”.

Transhumanist ideas have been steadily gaining ground since and have made their way into both academia and business world, with Fereidoun Esfandiary’s 1989 book *Are You a Transhuman?: Monitoring and Stimulating Your Personal Rate of Growth in a Rapidly Changing World* one notable contribution.

As for institutions, Max More launched the Extropy Institute in 1992, the first organisation created to spread the word about the transhumanist project. The most important international transhumanist organisation today is [Humanity+](#), a think tank of educators, entrepreneurs, and innovators who want “people to be better than well.”

Cybernetic transhumanism

Machines are at the centre of many transhumanist visions of the future. Towards the end of the 1940s, Alan Turing, a progenitor of artificial intelligence, designed a computer programme that could play chess. Turing argued in 1950 that computers were capable of intelligent behaviour and developed the famous Turing Test to determine whether or not a computer is capable of intelligence.

In 1980, the philosopher John Searle introduced the distinction between strong and weak artificial intelligence (AI). For Searle, strong AI means that a programmed computer does not imitate the mind, but is itself a mind, whereas weak AI involves programming computers to perform specialised tasks. Searle aimed to show that strong AI is essentially impossible. A useful distinction in this respect is the one made between general intelligence, which applies across different cognitive tasks and is associated with human intelligence, and specialised intelligence, which applies to one task. While computers can be programmed with specific intelligence, whether they can make use of general intelligence is yet to be confirmed.

A discipline that has run parallel to the development of AI is robotics. Questions on AI and robotics are often closely related, as with autonomous robots. Two of the most important authors on robotics, Marvin Minsky and Hans Moravec, put forward the idea that humans could substitute their brains for machines, becoming machine and breaking free from the uncomfortable limitations of humanity.

Some claim that, in a world full of prosthetics, human and machine are already composite

Raymond Kurzweil is a prominent advocate of strong AI today. He is renowned for promoting the paradigm of singularity, which he defines as “a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed.”^[3]

For Kurzweil, the best way to prevent the extinction of the human species confronted with the arrival of artificial superintelligence is integration with machines. In his own words, “future machines will be human, even if they are not biological.” Despite great advances in weak AI, the prospect of creating a general artificial intelligence does not seem a real possibility in the coming decades. And Kurzweil’s enthusiasm is far from the only reaction to the propounded advent of the singularity.

Perhaps cyborgs are the most immediate image we have of transhumanism. Some claim that, in a world full of prosthetics, human and machine are already composite and that imagining future or sci-fi scenarios is therefore unnecessary. Of the different kinds of prosthetics which can be distinguished, “smart prosthetics” are relevant to the discussion on cybernetic transhumanism. These complex prosthetics are designed to constantly interact with the body and, in doing so, anticipate the use of technology to improve quality of life imagined by transhumanists.

Biomedical transhumanism

Genetic engineering and synthetic biology are at the heart of biomedical transhumanism. Despite differences in aims and methods, they share an overall objective: to improve the human species by modifying nature through the use of science and technology. Their common point of departure is a claim to have mastery over life and the potential to redesign and recreate it based on human needs and wishes.

Among the antecedents of modern synthetic biology, biological utopianism acquired particular prominence towards the second half of the 19th century. A prime example can be found in William Winwood Reade, who was convinced that in the future human beings would be able to alter their bodies, even eliminating death and diseases. The expectations placed upon biology were high, an idea captured in John Desmond Bernal’s *The Social Function*

of Science: “bodies will be left behind.”

A central feature of synthetic biology is its interdisciplinary nature, in addition to its ambitious proposition: increasing human capacities (physical and mental) with a view to extending life and improving its quality.

When it comes to the near-future expectations of certain authors, the paradigm that often comes up is that of human enhancement technologies, considered the future of medicine, which encompass both chemical (or pharmacological) improvement and genetic improvement. So far advances have undoubtedly been greater in the field of chemical improvement: as is the case of the drugs Prozac, Ritalin, and Provigil. That said, any steps made in the field of genetic manipulation would be hugely significant, as this would allow these improvements to be made permanent. This may sound like science fiction, but recent advances in genetic engineering have been spectacular.

Enhancement: preparing to escape humanity

Albert Camus never thought that his description of man as “the only creature who refuses to be what he is” was true in the most literal sense.[4] The proposition of transhumanism is to use the totality of techniques available today, looking beyond education or law, to seek out possibilities offered by biomedicine and cybernetics.

One question that demands a wider social debate is what is meant by enhancement. More often than not, this is taken for granted among transhumanist advocates. But what are the limits of these changes? One of the more controversial answers would propound that the limitations of human alteration vary from case to case, depending on the individual in question. Another option would be to attempt to draw a dividing line between improvements that are therapeutic and all the rest. In any case, it is clear that the question of enhancement opens up a crucial discussion concerning freedom, autonomy, and inequality.

*the question of enhancement opens up a crucial discussion
concerning freedom, autonomy, and inequality*

Last but not least, another area in which human limitations must be overcome according to transhumanists is the moral sphere. The urgency to resolve the problems endangering the human species – such as the environmental crisis – are offered as reasons not to be sparing with our efforts, resources, and research.

Some authors, such as Yuval Noah Harari, argue that if technoscientific innovation offers up an option for improvement in any sense, humans have the moral obligation to pursue it. The goal is to achieve a hyperbolic human; in short, the search for superhumans. This search has been characterised by the philosopher Jorge Riechmann as the “antropofuga”, which can be broken down into different types of escapism: the attempt to escape human nature; the attempt to escape the biophysical limits of the planet; and plans to escape Planet Earth itself.[5]

What are the ramifications of a transhumanist model at a time like the present?

Transhumanism in the Century of the Great Test

There are numerous problems that arise when considering transhumanism in the context of a global ecological and social crisis such as the one experienced today. First, the problem of accessibility and supremacy is one of the most common counterarguments, as it is reasonable to think that the kinds of enhancements transhumanism proposes would further separate the rich from the poor. It is not a stretch to imagine a future in which enhanced individuals are the ones in positions of power.

Meanwhile, both the irreversibility of changes and the unpredictability of consequences should encourage the exercise of caution. Living in a world in which humanity's actions have far greater impact and reach than ever before in history should raise our sense of responsibility here. Moreover, the appeal of the precautionary principal grows when faced with the possibility of irreversible changes. As Riechmann has pointed out, it is impossible to 'un-invent' the hydrogen bomb or genetic manipulation.

Finally, the problem with seeing opportunity in transhumanism is that, just when we urgently need to face the harsh reality of the social and environmental problems that afflict us, it actually serves to undermine that effort. Though not necessarily the intention, this technophile utopia strengthens the collective self-delusion that technological innovations will solve our major problems.

*transhumanism is a utopia that can only ever materialise as
a dystopia*

Another element to consider is the question of resources. Most transhumanist thinkers assume that energy will be plentiful in the coming decades. However, energy consumption at the current rate is not a path that can be pursued for much longer. This reality renders many of the technoscientific transhumanist proposals – ideas that that Diéguez calls “the last plan for secular salvation” – unviable.

From an eco-social perspective, the challenge posed by the century of the Great Test is none other than positioning our social and ecological systems within the limits of the planet. In order to do so, reducing the burden these systems have on the biosphere is vital. At this crucial juncture, two paths stretch ahead of us, representing two irreconcilable options. On the one hand, the proposal to escape from human limitations and, on the other hand, the acceptance of those limitations and the modifications that they entail.

As Riechmann has argued on more than one occasion, transhumanism is a utopia that can only ever materialise as a dystopia. First, because in the present situation of environmental overreach, the pursuit of a high-tech industrial society will end up finishing off the Earth; and second, because the breakdown of the biological unity of the human species will lead to a world of inequalities and biologically determined domination.

In this way, the idea of transhumanism as an attempt to go beyond the human can be countered with “humanism of the defective human being”, as Riechmann has defined it, accompanied by judiciousness, courage, and a commitment to sustainability and social justice that embraces the limits of the world we live in, as well as those of the human condition.

[1] This distinction between literary utopias and utopian practice has been made by Tower Sargent in *Utopianism. A very short introduction*. 2010. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[2] Diéguez, Antonio Javier, 2017. *Transhumanismo. La búsqueda tecnológica del mejoramiento humano*. Barcelona: Herder.

[3] See Kurzweil's signature work, *The Singularity is Near. When Humans Transcend Biology*. 2005. New York: Penguin.

[4] Camus, Albert, 1967. *El hombre rebelde*. Buenos Aires: Losada

[5] Riechmann, Jorge, 2004. *Gente que no quiere viajar a Marte*. Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata. See also *El principio de precaución en medio ambiente y salud pública: de las definiciones a la práctica* (2002), *Gente que no quiere viajar a Marte* (2004), *La habitación de Pascal* (2009), *El siglo de la Gran Prueba* (2013), *¿Derrotó el smartphone al movimiento ecologista?* (2016).



Carmen Madorrán Ayerra studied philosophy at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, where she is now also a teacher and trainee researcher. She is a member of the university's Interdisciplinary Research Group for socio-ecological transitions (GinTRANS²). Her work focuses on contemporary political philosophy and contemporary ethics.

Published August 16, 2019

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/an-eco-social-perspective-on-transhumanism/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.