

In The Search of Immortality – From the Imprisonment of the Body to the Imprisonment of the Machine

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Abstract: Transhumanism is a movement that believes as species we need to evolve further and defy the limits of our condition, which is closely linked to having an organic body. The Transhumanist assumption is that as human beings, we are more than what we are in our current form. To achieve our destiny, we need to defeat the limitations that come with the condition that we were born with. While Transhumanists aim to free us from our corporal body and its limitations, critics express concerns about re-designing human beings and claim that these attempts may bring the end of humanity as we know it. This article will briefly discuss the topic of human nature and Transhumanist views about it.

Key words: Transhumanism, human nature, human body, enhancement, posthuman, mind-upload, immortality

On The Strangeness of Being a Human

As Sir Julian Huxley described it, up till now human life has generally been, brutish and short and the great majority of human beings (if they have not already died young) have been afflicted with misery in one form or another - poverty, disease, ill-health, over-work, cruelty, or oppression. They have attempted to lighten their misery by means of their hopes and their ideals. The trouble has been that the hopes have generally been unjustified, the ideals have generally failed to correspond with reality.⁵⁶

Although it may not be a very optimistic or cheerful way to start talking about human beings, the problems listed above are indeed a big part of the human experience. Even reading a daily newspaper makes us

⁵⁶ Huxley, J., 1957. *Transhumanism*. [online] jhp.sagepub.com. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/002216786800800107> [Accessed 20 September 2022].

realise the horrors of wars, cruelties and other human realities such as illnesses, ageing and mortality.⁵⁷ The majority of these intentional or non-intentional evils are closely related to who we are. Frailty and vulnerability are essential parts of our body and our human condition in a large context.

As human beings, we all have a body, which enables us to experience the colours, emotions, sensations – anything that can be associated with being a human. Yet, our bodies also bring us limitations. There are many things we wish we could do, but we simply cannot do them just because of our particular human experience. For example, no matter how hard we try we are not able to fly like a bird, swim like a fish or reach immortality. For improving our lives and actualise our higher ideals and wishes, we use the help of machines.⁵⁸ However, this situation reminds us of our limitations once again. Although machines integrate with our biological bodies more and more each day, they are still external to us. If one day we find ourselves out there in nature, on our own and without the help of machines and tools, we would be in a very vulnerable situation. Our bodies are fragile and open to attacks and perhaps this is the reason why we have such strong survival instincts. We try to improve and be stronger to protect ourselves from external attacks. Our human nature is closely related to our organic body⁵⁹ with its animalistic side. In this context, if we see human nature in a negative light, our body is our limitation. It is something that prevents us from being our higher self (which has traditionally been associated with cognitive abilities such as reason and imagination) and from achieving our aims and ideals.

We do not have full control over our body, oftentimes it controls us. If we argue that its purpose is to protect us and help us survive, it also fails us in many ways. Although it may look beautiful and harmonious from a distance, when we look inside we see things that are unpleasant to the eye.⁶⁰ Some people are also not content with the way their body looks from the outside or they think it is not in the way they

⁵⁷ O'Connell, M., *To Be a Machine* (London: Granta Books, 2017), 3.

⁵⁸ Hausekeller, M., "Messy Bodies: From Cosmetic Surgery to Mind-Uploading", *Trans-Humanities Journal* 6(1) (2013), 63-75.

⁵⁹ Hausekeller, M., "Human Nature from a Transhumanist Perspective", *Existenz*, 2013, 8(2), 64-69.

⁶⁰ Hausekeller, M., "Messy Bodies".

would like it to be, they believe they can improve it. In this context, “re-shaping and transforming individuals that are in a perfectly healthy condition gain a larger presence in the present-day medicine, although restoring the wholeness and intactness still play a central role.”⁶¹ The desire to improve one’s body is one of the reasons why biomedical enhancements or cosmetic surgeries are so popular and gain support among the public. It appeals to our sense of re-gaining control, rebelling against our bodily limitations and exceeding them, which are characteristically human as well. Human beings have the ability to imagine and create like no other living being. Perhaps this is the reason why we as human beings have higher notions about ourselves and the idea of the original sin is so relatable, especially when we think about the strangeness of the human condition. Maybe we genuinely see ourselves as “gods in ruins” as Emerson once put it.⁶²

Transhumanism and their view of the Human Nature

The idea of altering the human condition, radically transforming human beings and our imprisonment to our bodies, appears most strikingly in the movement of Transhumanism. The supporters of this movement strongly believe that as species we need to evolve and defeat our nature to be what we are supposed to be. For them, we can shape ourselves and gain total control.

The developments of science and technology herald a new stage for human existence, Transhumanists believe we will be and should be able to transcend our genetic inheritance. One of the main reasons for that is the mind-blowing pace of technological development and the threat of Artificial Intelligence surpassing human intelligence. Many Transhumanists believe we need to merge with machines to successfully compete with them. Yet, our survival instinct against technological development is not the only reason why proponents of this movement enthusiastically support this change. At this point, we should also note that although Transhumanists can differ in their views and may have disagreements with each other, they agree on central arguments such as radical life extension and defying

⁶¹ Gordijn, B. and Chadwick, R., *Medical enhancement and posthumanity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 9-25.

⁶² O'Connell, *To Be a Machine*, 1.

the limits of our nature in general. What they promise overall is the radical improvement of the human condition: radically extending human life span, reversing and stopping ageing, improving our focus and mood and ultimately freeing ourselves from our corporal limitations. In other words, what they offer is a happier, healthier and longer life and potential immortality. What is not to like?

According to critics of the movement, if Transhumanists achieve their aims through radically altering human nature, if this is achievable, the future humans will be unrecognisable to us and this can potentially prepare for the end of humanity. The Transhumanist promise can be seen as a new technological utopia, where human beings exist as cyborgs or do not exist in their corporality at all.⁶³ This is where minds can be uploaded into computers and transferred into various machines eternally. All these possibilities raise the questions of what we understand from being a human and where we cross a line with all these modifications. Is it achievable or is it desirable? The topic also brings us straight back to the discussion about the essence and the nature of human beings. Is it something flexible that can be shaped or is it fixed and must be accepted as it is?

“Transhumanists view *Homo sapiens* as a “work in progress” with the potential to be radically transformed by technology.”⁶⁴ If human nature was fixed, it would not continue to evolve and science and technology would not be able to help the Transhumanist goal. Yet, if human nature is changeable, it can be configured, constructed and de-constructed. According to Transhumanists, human nature and human identity are not fixed and the essence of human nature is information.⁶⁵ This information can be and should be transferred between humans and machines and the communication between them should be meaningful. In this context, it can be argued that Transhumanists have a rather instrumentalist and reductionist view of human beings, as they reduce them into data patterns that can be configured indefinitely. Transhumanists foresee that soon

⁶³ Hausekeller, M., “My Brain, My Mind, And I: Some Philosophical Assumptions of Mind”, *International Journal of Machine Consciousness*, 04(01) (2012), 187-200.

⁶⁴ Elkins, G., “Transhumanism and the Question of Human Nature”, *American Journal of Intelligent Systems*, 1(1) (2012), 16-21.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

there will not be a significant distinction between human beings and machines, as the interaction between them increases each passing day. Chips and implants will enable the communication flow between human beings and machines.

The ultimate Transhumanist goal is to transfer the human mind into a machine and this will enable human beings to defy the limits of their nature once and for all by not existing in a bodily form anymore. Transhumanists see the human body as fragile and defective in its current state. If it is a biological machine that is designed to make us survive, it is failing us because we get sick, we experience pain and we die. In this context, Transhumanists seem to criticise the design of the body and want to replace it with something more durable. The change can start with small parts, by replacing the ones that do not work or that we do not like. The process can be seen in doing maintenance work on a machine. We can replace the parts that no longer function or are no longer desirable. In such cases our bodies cannot decline but can only improve with the latest technology. In this context, it can be argued that Transhumanists would like to redefine the meaning of a human being by redesigning it through technology and making it less biological and something more than the animal that it currently is.

By defying its nature and eventually becoming nature-less, the human being will turn into a posthuman. The true essence of a posthuman is information, which can be translated into other machines and consciousness which can reach immortality by existing on various digital platforms. If the human mind can exist in machines and somehow preserve its identity, that would mean there will not be much difference between human beings and machines. In this way, the mind can be uploaded to any platform and continue its existence in endless combinations and possibilities.

Transhumanists believe “the human life is too short for all the possible lives we could experience.”⁶⁶ In other words, they believe we are limiting ourselves by committing to one particular way of life chosen by the individual in this lifetime. They also hold the view that our life is not long enough to wait for natural evolution to happen and for that reason, we need to use the help of medicine and technology to improve our-

⁶⁶ Hausekeller, M., “Human Nature from a Transhumanist Perspective”, 64-69.

selves and potentially defeat death. Preserving consciousness is the ultimate way of achieving this. Overall, Transhumanists believe our conscious and intelligent mind is imprisoned in the weak and fragile body and it must be freed. In this context, they seem to have dualistic and materialistic views about human existence (although it is not necessarily in the classical sense we understand the terms). They appear to see the human body as something material which can be replaced by more durable machines and the human mind is something that can be separated from the body and preserved. According to them, identity can also be kept in this process and we do not need to fully understand how the brain works when trying to copy it. In other words, for them, the attempt to preserve consciousness is better than not doing anything and losing the chance of immortality.⁶⁷

This utopia may remind the reader of the famous brain in a vat theory, where an evil genius (or maybe a Transhumanist with evil intentions) can feed the brain with daily information and designed experiences; the brain can be manipulated forever with constant back-ups, without the brain being able to put an end to it because there is no physicality. It may not even be aware of the manipulation. Even a small thought experiment shows that the potential separation of the mind and the body can lead to many problems while trying to solve others.

Criticism

Transhumanism claims to solve human problems such as illnesses and death but risks dehumanising human beings by seeing them as mere data. We can argue that this is a reductionist and instrumentalist way of seeing a human being. As Michael Hauskeller points out, it appears that Transhumanists also create a dichotomy between the negative part of human nature (mostly associated with the human body and the animal side of the human being) and the positive part of human nature (which is generally associated with the cognitive abilities and higher ideals). Bio-conservatives such as Francis Fukuyama, Michael Sandel and Leon Kass reject such dichotomy and argue for a whole, united experience. This united experience comes with limitations and this is exactly what bio-conservatives believe makes life beautiful and exciting. We fall into

⁶⁷ O'Connell, *To Be a Machine*, 22-40.

this world and we find ourselves in various situations which create crucibles for us. We overcome these crucibles and become stronger. We love, we suffer, we empathise and all these emotions are due to our frailty and vulnerability. In other words, our limitations make us ethical beings and our crucibles make life interesting and worth living.

Here the question is whether living inside a computer would be life at all. Even if it brings us immortality, would we genuinely want that? What happens if our uploaded consciousness falls into wrong hands? While we try to escape the imprisonment of the body, do we actually create a worse form of imprisonment?

Cyborgization of the human body in an attempt to reach post-humanity and also creates the risk of establishing an immense difference between the enhanced and non-enhanced. The human mind merged with AI would most likely be a lot more capable than the unenhanced human mind. This situation does not only apply to our cognitive abilities, but to our physicality as well. Here the danger is there might be an immense gap between the enhanced and non-enhanced people, which may result in bigger cruelties and potentially more suffering.

Conclusion

Today many prominent researchers are working towards achieving better mind and machine interaction. For example, Elon Musk's brain-machine interface company Neuralink has recently announced that direct mind-machine interactions are performing well on monkeys and soon there will be clinical trials on human beings as well. Potentially this technology will enable people with paralysis to use items with their minds.⁶⁸ This can be seen as an example of how technology can help people by reducing their bodily limitations. It can also be seen as an example of using technology therapeutically. Yet, restoration or treatment is not always the purpose of biomedical interventions. These alterations can be made with the purpose of radically changing the human being. As discussed above, these interventions can have catastrophic effects.

⁶⁸ the Guardian. 2022. *Elon Musk's brain chip firm Neuralink lines up clinical trials in humans*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jan/20/elon-musk-brain-chip-firm-neuralink-lines-up-clinical-trials-in-humans>> [Accessed 03 April 2023].

While we try to escape from one imprisonment, we may find ourselves in a worse one.

We fear machines and we are fascinated by them at the same time. We celebrate when the machines that we create become more human-like. Yet, we also want to turn ourselves into machines. We want to improve and perfect ourselves. We often complain about suffering and the shortness of life and we want to live forever by eliminating death. For achieving these goals we are ready to do alterations that can completely change who we are. At this point, we can perhaps stop and reflect on the urgency of our lives and instead of complaining, we can start living to the fullest.

As Seneca put it,

It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested. But when it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death's final constraint to realize that it has passed away before we knew it was passing. So it is: we are not given a short life but we make it short, and we are not ill-supplied but wasteful of it... Life is long if you know how to use it.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Seneca, L., n.d. *On the shortness of life*.