

Podcast Episode 3: Transhumanism - a short introduction

As of 9.4.2021

Episode overview

In this episode I will provide a short introduction of transhumanism. I intend to cover the key beliefs of transhumanists, then discuss what transhumanism might do to human identity, and further on touch on cultural frameworks in which transhumanism is operating.

Intro

Transhumanism is a movement whose members combine characteristics of radical technologists, modern spiritual seekers, and entrepreneurs looking for an early-stage entry into the biggest industry which ever was. They are investing their time and money into their shared belief that modern technology will allow humans to overcome aging and death, that we may be entering a posthuman stage of development leaving our biological roots behind, and that this will happen much faster than present society is capable to imagine.

Those who were brought up in an Anglo-Saxon education system are of course familiar with the wonderful poem by Dylan Thomas: Do not go gentle into that good night, rage rage, against the dying of the light. How aptly these two lines describe the mood of many transhumanists.

Transhumanists provide the ideological core of the life-extension industry. They are not just the visionaries and entrepreneurs of radically extended lifespans. They are the philosophers, priests, and activists of a movement which intends to renegotiate the entire human condition.

Beliefs

The key themes in the transhumanist belief system are

First, that it is possible to live forever by stopping and reversing biological aging.
Second, that capabilities of data networks and machines will surpass those of humans very soon.
Third, that super-intelligence can be achieved by merging man and machine, and
Last, that technology will produce better humans, in the physical, mental, and moral sense

What underlies these beliefs is recent progress made in biomedicine, data science, artificial intelligence, and robotics. Where Transhumanists differ from mainstream thinking is that they compound actual scientific progress with several futurist assumptions:

The first of these assumptions is that biology is increasingly becoming an information technology and is as such subject to exponential increases of capabilities. Ray Kurzweil has called this idea the Law of Accelerating Return, which is basically Moore's law in more universal terms. Aubrey de Grey has

formulated the idea of Longevity Escape Velocity, meaning that there will be a point when the development speed of life-extension technologies surpasses increased life expectancy during a given time period. In simpler terms these ideas mean that from some point in the very near future advances in life-extension technology will add more years to an individual's remaining life-span than aging would take away.

Obviously, transhumanists are futurists, and their optimistic assumptions of exponentially increasing speed of technological advance in the life-extension industry may come true or not. At the moment, the underlying cellular biochemistry and brain processes are not nearly enough understood to come to that unshakable conclusion that during our personal live times, we would actually be able to benefit from all those technologies. What is sure on the one hand, is that numerous research and development projects are under way with the effect to delay or reverse cellular aging. But are they enough to address all causes of aging, will they be sufficiently effective, and will they arrive in time to stop our own aging process before we die? As baby boomers, we should better have those treatments available in 15 years to make a difference. Actually, meeting that timeline is firmly expected by transhumanists considering common drug development schedules. That means that in 5 years or so there should be a flow of news about successful experiments with lab animals.

Another assumption of transhumanists is that humans will increasingly merge with machines up to the point when biology as evolutionary platform will be replaced by artificial intelligence. And that is not perceived as a bad thing, as biological evolution is seen as too slow for keeping up with the pace of technological change. Transhumanists maintain that evolution has equipped present humans for a life in the savannah, but not to cope with modern life. A.I. should therefore be used by humanity to transcend biological limitations.

A third assumptions made by many transhumanists is that consciousness is over-rated. It is either unnecessary for life as such or will appear as a by-product of complexity. However, this assumption is contested among transhumanists. Some are happy to let ethical concerns guide the development of technologies, while others are not.

Identity

Transhumanist beliefs have dramatic implications for human identity. Most of all they question free will and the existence of an autonomous self. Obviously, in the obscurity of science labs and philosophical seminars biologists and social scientists are largely not convinced of the existence of free will anyway. However, transhumanists carry this thought into the public domain, and use it to justify enormous changes to the concept of what we call human. What value has human experience if personal identity, the idea of "me" is questionable. Is experience and memory mechanistic and subject to scientific investigation, reducible to bits of information? What about cultures, relations, and emotions? What about mind? All these could be considered as emergent properties from material processes of our body in a specific environment. As such, can they really be reduced to pure information and function as a separate closed system? This seems to be open to debate: how can mind be uploaded virtually into a computer when the material and environmental context from which it has emerged, has disappeared. And would our mind not necessarily change when our biological body is converted into a cyborg or a

machine? May be this is irrelevant from a trans- or posthuman perspective, but present humanity may not be easily convinced to give up its identity.

Culture

Each belief is correlated to certain cultures and social groups more than to others. In that sense transhumanism can be considered as being firmly rooted in the Silicon Valley culture. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs have become wealthy and influential by creating information technology. Same as social life is increasingly determined by data, biological life itself is increasingly seen as algorithm. As a result Silicon Valley is well placed to provide the people, the skills, and the resources to engage in biological research. In the process biology seems to become a sub-domain of IT. As an example, we should note how Google has set up Calico, a research and development company aiming to develop technologies against aging. Dying is seen as a problem to be fixed due to our faulty biological body, an engineering problem to be solved. Once a billboard was spotted on Google campus saying “Google, please solve death” (O’Connell 2017:179), capturing the general attitude quite well.

Transhumanist thinking also very much corresponds to the way of how software programmers think. Mark O’Connell, who wrote an excellent book about transhumanism, called the prevalent attitude of programmers a “narcissistic fantasy of heroism and control”, and that they seem to think that “the fate of the species lay in their hands through writing good or bad code” (O’Connell 2017:103). Today’s IT programmers transport their culture into the daily life of consumers by creating computer game narratives soaked in age-old human mythology. Immortality and death are always just a click away. The same type of convictions that things can simply be fixed is found among biohackers, who believe that radical self-improvement is possible on a personal basis.

Another area where transhumanist thinking correlates with culture is Christianity. Beliefs must fit into historical mythologies to feel right. In the case of transhumanist beliefs, spiritual redemption through technology is written large on the wall. Technology has become the tool of redemption from our human and socially conflicted selves. In that sense Transhumanism fits neatly into the Christian religious mold.

I would love to explore later, if transhumanism has spread to Asian cultures. Perhaps yes, but it would probably need to adapt to different mythological forms. So far all transhumanists I have met or heard about are white North-American, European, or Russian. Scientists and entrepreneurs in India, China, and Japan are also working on A.I., robotics, and biochemistry, but at this point I don’t know if they package technical progress in a narrative like transhumanism, or if they use different narratives from their own cultures.

End

As expected in radical futurist scenarios, exciting new opportunities mingle with the naive. History shows us that science fiction does actually foresee technological developments. We know for sure that technological inventions can’t be stopped. We also know that people who question society’s ability to cope with new technologies, have been proven wrong every time. Will utopia become dystopia? This

judgment can only be made in hindsight. We can choose to engage with this new type of thinking, however outlandish it may appear, or stick our heads in the sand.

Bibliography

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O'Connell, Mark (2017): To Be a Machine. Granta Books, London

The Immortalists, a short video by Jason Silva; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIOFBqDVfhE>