Podcast Episode 20: Posthumanism – two different worlds

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Hey everyone! Welcome to the new episode of the Life Extension Podcast – technology & magic, society & business. You are listening to this podcast, because you find recent approaches to radical life extension exciting, and you would like to hear about this topic from a variety of perspectives. In this episode about the two different worlds of posthumanism I invite you to take a really high-level view of radical life extension, to appreciate how our topic relates to worldviews and politics. Continue listening if you like to hear about the social and political playing field of your personal future.

Introduction: 1. Revisiting the two worldviews developing in modern societies as a sequel to "cyborgs" episode, 2. Creating contrast to transhumanism

In this episode I am returning to a topic which I have already introduced in my earlier episode about cyborgs. I had described cyborgs as the symbolic projection of the two most important radical worldviews, which are presently developing in modern societies.

Posthumanism is the umbrella term of these worldviews. One of them is transhumanism. The other one is often called critical posthumanism, but I prefer to give it the name environmentalist posthumanism. To the unsuspecting eye these different ways of looking at the world appear like ivory-tower deliberations of not very practical topics. Nevertheless they have deep social and political implications, as they harbor entirely different visions of the future!

Political arenas in the past always seemed to be defined by two opposing ideological poles influencing the action, and in relation to which each political idea and movement has been defined. Poles through which the social world was viewed, interpreted, and contested in the past were e.g.: feudal system or republic, purity of race vs multiethnicity, bourgeoisie vs proletariat, right/left, patriarchal/feminist, colonizer/colonized, capitalism/socialism, culture/nature, straight/diverse. Each pair of poles defines the entire field of what we believe to know and our field of possible action. The newest manifestation of a pair of ideologically charged poles are transhumanist and environmentalist posthumanism. Compared to former pole pairs their names sound rather academic. Other, simpler words will perhaps appear in the future. Some may have thought that our near-term political future will be played out between another pair of poles, namely democratic vs autocratic governance. That view might not be wrong, but appears not to explain as much as the two worlds of posthumanism, as both transhumanism and environmentalism carry the possibilities of democratic and dictatorial rule in them.

Regular listeners to the Life Extension podcast are already familiar with transhumanist thinking. In this episode I aim to create context in the philosophical, social, and political sense, by opposing transhumanist to environmentalist posthumanism.

Let me explain why I am so interested in these opposing worldviews while discussing radical life extension. This is because ideas and motivations of radical life extension are firmly embedded in the transhumanist side of the picture. Therefore, comparing transhumanism to what it is not, or rather by what it is contested, is useful to provide wider context. As a consumer everyone is entitled to do whatever it takes to live longer. But we should also be broad-minded enough to frame that desire in a wider context, to understand the benefits and the costs, and what one is up against. Even more so, understanding that wider context makes us understand our own motivation for what we apparently choose to do by our own free will, and the extent to which our decisions are actually influenced and manipulated by historical and social processes of sense-making, as well as our psychological fears. Knowing all the options and then deciding on our own lifestyle, and may that include the possibility to live really long lives or just normal lives but without the fear of death, is just smarter. Understanding the full picture, there won't be any worry of right or wrong, there is just choice.

Historical and social background of posthumanism:

So what means posthumanism, and what are its origins? Transhumanism is posthumanist, because it aims to transcend the human. By overcoming aging and ultimately death, by enhancing human capabilities to god-like or at least superhuman levels, and by colonizing the universe transhumanism aims to upgrade the human condition through science and technology. The transhumanist belief system remains firmly anthropocentric. As a successor to humanism it is historically and philosophically rooted in the period of the European Enlightenment. Humanism has emphasized certain aspects of human identity, such as valuing formal education, rationality, and science, usually within a shell of European whiteness and maleness, and the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie. Other human forms, aspects, or lifestyles were relegated to the domain of "the other". Those definitions led to social exclusion and suppression within European societies, and to the justification of colonizing non-European societies as described by Rosi Braidotti, a philosopher of posthumanism (Braidotti 2013). As such the worldview of humanism had its failures, while at the same time being extremely beneficial to the development of formal science and engineering. Those failures led to social movements of anti-colonialism, feminism, and environmentalism. In comparison, transhumanism can be seen as a modernized version of humanism, even humanism in overdrive, focusing on science and technology to better the human condition, but with similar tendencies to exclude and possibly suppress those who don't play the same game.

Environmentalism is posthumanist in a different way. It aims to decenter the human, making it part of the wider ecology of living beings within a shared environment. Instead of categorizing human life through simple dualisms, meant to support dominant power structures, it views living beings and different aspects of humanness as entangled with each other and the material world, none dominating the other, each finding its ecological niche, and all together creating live. Environmentalist posthumanism is philosophically rooted in postmodernism, an approach to overcome grand explanatory structures and instead favoring many fragments existing in relation to each other. It also inherited and expanded feminism, not only criticizing the female/male and nature/culture binaries, but about any other possible binary as well, such as human/animal, hetero/gay, white/coloured, and any domination of one social sub-group or living species over the other.

Difference between the two worlds of posthumanism are also revealed by their conceptualization of the human body as described by Francesca Ferrando (2014), another philosopher of posthumanism. This relates to the mind-body problem in philosophy, which I have previously discussed in an episode about mind-uploading. Popular transhumanist imagination largely builds on the Cartesian dualism of body and mind as separate and unrelated entities. This view, which makes mind uploading, human robotic life, or avatars theoretically possible, is however criticized as reductionist. In fact some transhumanist thinkers have already recognized this problem and explore how exact brain copies and simulated environments may need to accompany mind uploading. Differently to transhumanism which believes in the transferability of mind and human identity through technological means, environmentalist posthumanism takes the entire body, not just the brain, as the historically developed place where knowledge is situated. The body may not even be enough – knowledge is also stored in relations with other living beings and the material environment. Transhumanist and environmentalist posthumanism stand for different modes of knowing, which has important implications on human identity. What is human, and what is the other? How narrow or how wide can humanness be defined? Where are the boundaries? In consequence, how other is the other really, or has it always been part of us which we chose to ignore in order to favor a certain structure and a certain meaning to social life over their alternatives? In popular view the colonizing human was simply rich, male, white, and hetero. Obviously that's not true as a lot of poverty, femaleness, coloured skin, and queerness appear in colonial history as well, but that remained under the radar due to social conventions and to support the dominating power system.

To understand both worlds of posthumanism we also need to understand what triggered them. After all, worldviews change for a reason. Modern societies are faced with three large trends at the moment, which are changing the world as experienced by most. Digitalization, globalization, and urbanization can be understood as the background to posthumanism. Most people see clearly or at least suspect that the social world in which they are living is rapidly changing. Digitalization and globalization lead to disruptions impacting individuals and societies: jobs, income, consumption, social recognition incl the definition of social class are affected. Social status is being renegotiated as impacts of those major trends are unevenly distributed. On top of this comes urbanization, with digitalization and globalization leading to a stronger emphasis of urban clusters at the expense of nation states. Citizens of big cities have come to be culturally more related to citizens of other big cities than to their rural hinterlands. Life in urban centers has become more valued and access correspondingly more difficult due to limited space. In the contrary, through increased competition for a piece of urban space, just staying there has become difficult as well. The rural population feels increasingly excluded from consumerist and cultural opportunities of the urbanized, and perhaps more importantly, is aware of declining social respect for their role in society.

Digitalization, globalization, and urbanization have resulted in a destabilization of the social world in which we live, raising incertitude and fear, often expressed in apocalyptic form. The subjective feeling that everything is going to break down, that the world which one has become used to and somehow entitled to, is coming to an end, has triggered the need for new worldviews. Posthumanism in the shape of transhumanism and environmentalism is responding to this need.

In the following I want to explore the ways in which the two worlds of posthumanism continue former worldviews by reworking and modernizing them.

Transhumanist posthumanism – rescuing capitalism in the name of a utopian human future

As we all have noticed, neoliberalism as an expression of the capitalist system has come under intense pressure lately, and has probably reached the end of its shelf life. Privatization of public goods has saved considerable state budgets and in many cases has led to much better services, which now had to be paid for at market rates instead of by state subsidy. At the same time, new technologies have led to an incredible concentration of capital and power in a few private hands. Although private economic sectors are on average delivering much better results than the state sector, distribution of those benefits has become an issue of public criticisms. No matter if critique of neoliberalism is right or wrong, the whole idea of capitalism as economic system has suffered. It seems capitalism as a social vision has run out of visionary strength, particularly as with the collapse of state socialism its counter-pole enabling to create contrast has disappeared. In this gap transhumanism has stepped in with a really grand vision of physically, mentally, and morally enhanced humanity. Instead of focusing on the enslavement of modern humans through smartphones and algorithms, transhumanism promises that advances in science and technologies will give us higher purpose, abolish conflict and suffering, making us immortal super-humans colonizing space. Obviously this vision is utterly utopian. But nowadays modern Western societies seem to long for new utopian ideas, the name "utopian" itself having lost much of its negative connotation obtained through the experience of various totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. Rooted in Silicon Valley culture transhumanism has become a manifestation of pure entrepreneurial, tech- and engineering minded spirit of capitalism, refreshing and even rescuing the idea of capitalism itself. Particularly in American culture transhumanist beliefs are also supported by apocalyptic fears of the more privileged, who respond with escapist fantasies to the perceived threat of social break-down – an escape to the bunker, to an island, to Mars (O'Connell 2020), or to immortality and super-humanness (note). I will not discuss transhumanism much further here, as I have already done so in several previous episodes. I will rather focus a bit more on environmentalist posthumanism as its counterpart.

Environmentalist posthumanism – anti-capitalist critique in new clothes

Environmentalists routinely raise apocalyptic fears when interpreting climate data, the diminishing number of species, or the exploitation of resources and the environment by human activity. While environmental changes are happening without any doubt, and this perhaps at a higher speed than in the past, it is less clear, that these would lead to the end of the world for all. Expected changes are well within the historical range of fluctuations in the planet's environment and are unlikely to lead to the end of human civilization. Rather their impact appears to be unevenly distributed. While some locations suffer, others benefit. Subsistence farmers in dry areas may be threatened by a disappearing food source, but wealthier Europeans could just react to flooding with better engineering or to changing temperatures by adjusting the climate controls of their homes, otherwise enjoying warmer summers and longer tourist seasons, or in the really worst case move to another place in comfort. The wealthier, luckier, more capable, or better organized people will more easily adjust to environmental changes, while the same might not be true for the rest. Here it becomes obvious that environmentalist critique in the political arena is in fact a critique of the capitalist system, and not just a disinterested scientific investigation. This is where selectively interpreted science data about environmental changes serve to

reinforce real social changes caused by new technologies, globalization, and urbanization to produce apocalyptic fears – fears that define the environmentalist posthuman worldview. Environmentalism and anti-capitalism use the same social tactics of mobilization, namely grass-root networking and claims for equality, solidarity, and justice. Feminism is the political and academic root discipline driving the old argument, but with a twist. Instead of decentering male dominance, they engage now in decentering the human. They strive to replace the Anthropocene with multi-species collaboration, challenging suppressive social structures with the vision of destructive-creative "compost", a metaphor used by Donna Harraway (2016), who is one of the most important academic representatives of this way of thinking. Newest symbol for the fight against capitalist exploitation modes and at the same time delivering the possibility of redemption is the mushroom, as described by Anna Tsing (2015) and Merlin Sheldrake (2020). Fungal networks are shaping the planet to a much larger extent than humans ever will. They enable human life and will eventually outlast it. They don't even have a problem with environmental catastrophe – they will flourish despite of it. Taking a view of the world as diverse, messy, and entangled, but and because of it life-enabling, is contrasted with a world of old dualisms, human exceptionalism, and capitalist-patriarchal dominance through technological progress.

Conclusion

As a conclusion I want to summarize the take-away message from this episode: transhumanism and environmentalism are just two stories among many other stories in modern societies. However, they succeeded to lock into the much stronger narrative of our economic and political system, in which every person and institution is a stakeholder. Transhumanism was hi-jacked by that master narrative as rescuing capitalism in the name of an utopian human future, while environmentalism has turned into anti-capitalist critique in new clothes. Transhumanism aims to transcend the human, environmentalism to de-center the human. Together they shape the two worlds of posthumanism.

Notes

Of course, personal death is the ultimate and only real apocalypse for all conscious beings. But only transhumanists seriously pursue the project of immortality.

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