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Transhumanism or Pragmatism?

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Abstract

Transhumanism is the most radical part of posthumanism, where this philosophical movement tries to redefine what is human. The reason for the birth of posthumanism is the increasingly fast development of AIs and different enhancement technologies. Scientists create more and more human-like AIs. AIs are getting more similar to humans every year. What are these enhancement technologies (ETs)? Are they good or bad from a moral point of view? The field of ETs is vast, and it includes highly diverse issues from cosmetic surgery, through sports and cognitive enhancements, to genetic engineering, and further.

Transhumanism prefers the perspective where humans and robots are directly connected, and human features are equal to technological features. It follows from this that transhumanists want not only to transcend the traditional humanist concept of the human being, but also lean towards destroying it. They argue we should not preserve the human being if it can become something better. However, the human world, in a humanist sense, need not be destroyed. There is an alternative in pragmatism. This paper will show John Dewey's, Richard Rorty's, and Richard Shusterman's approaches.

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TRANSHUMANISM OR PRAGMATISM?

Alexander Kremer¹

INTRODUCTION

Since the permanent scientific and technological revolution reached a new level, I am convinced that we have to analyse it in a more general context, not only on the level of technology. New technologies, which not only improve our given skills but also create new abilities that can change 'the future of humanity thoroughly, started to be invented with the beginning of the third millennium. These changes are not necessarily positive, but they have roused the passion of many people. This enthusiasm emerges mostly without theoretical support (in the case of laypeople, criminals, military leaders, etc.), but we can also find the theoretical background in the forms of posthumanism and transhumanism.

Posthumanism is a loose philosophical movement, which means those branches of philosophers who try to explain humanity's future in an increasingly technical world. Posthumanism has five main types: a) antihumanism, b) cultural posthumanism, c) philosophical posthumanism, d) posthuman condition, and e) transhumanism. Transhumanism is the most radical part of posthumanism, which tries to redefine what is human. The reason for the birth of posthumanism is the increasing development of AI and different ETs. Scientists are creating more and more human-like AI, and AI is becoming similar to humans every year. (Look at e.g., Sophia, the first android robot who received Saudi Arabian citizenship, gives many interviews and sings a song in *The Tonight Late Night Show*. Nevertheless, Sophia is only one of the

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“independently” communicating and learning robots today.) What are ETs? Are they good or bad from a moral point of view? The domain of ETs is extremely broad, and it includes very diverse territories from cosmetic surgery to sports and cognitive enhancements, to genetic engineering, and further.

Transhumanism prefers the perspective in which humans and robots are directly connected, and human features are equal to technological features (see, for example Neil Harbisson, the first officially accepted cyborg artist and transspecies activist based in New York, or the transhumanist Nick Bostrom, cited in this paper). It follows from this that transhumanists want not only to transcend the traditional humanist concept of the human being but also to destroy it. They argue that we should not preserve the human being if we can become something better.

ARGUMENTATION

Nevertheless, we have to see clearly the decisive question and not let ourselves be fascinated by the new scientific and technological potentialities. The decisive questions are namely not technological, but rather moral and political questions. To understand this standpoint, we should start with the clear fact that *natural processes are morally neutral in themselves*. The moral character of the natural processes depends on the moral content of the aims and activities at and in which we use them (e.g. the nuclear chain reaction functions not only in a nuclear bomb but also in a nuclear power plant). If we use a neutral natural process for a bad aim, the neutral natural process seems morally wrong because it is embedded in a morally bad context. If we use a neutral natural process for a morally good aim, this process seems to be morally good as well, because it is embedded in a good context of social activity. However, we should not forget that the natural process remains neutral; only the human aim and activity can be morally bad or good.

Let us use an *analogy*, and we can recognize that it is always true in connection with the latest scientific and technological developments, as well. *New technologies function as natural processes*. These are morally neutral in themselves, and from a moral point of view, everything depends on their social context (e.g. CRISPR-Cas9 technology is beneficial for medical treatments, but we can also create chimeras. If we use new technology *as therapeutic technology*, it is morally good. If we use new technology *as enhancement technology* – as unnecessary augmentation of a

human capacity or bodily form –, it is bad.) Everything depends on the moral content of the human aim and activity in which the new technology is embedded. The latter one remains neutral, but the human context (the human aim and activity) can be morally good or bad.

At this point, we should not forget a significant *difference*. Humanity could *not* create such technologies in earlier centuries, which had such long-running consequences. But nowadays we can change the human race if we change, for example, the human genome with the CRISPR-Cas9 genetic engineering technology. As we already cannot control global warming and the contamination of our environment, etc., we will not be able to do it regarding the modified human genome or artificial intelligence. *It follows from this that it is our moral obligation and responsibility towards ourselves and the future human generations to move forward very slowly and cautiously* regarding these dangerous new technologies, which can drastically change the human race and our environment.

However, the moral decision is not enough. We need the power to realize the moral decision, and this power can be found only in politics. Human communities can validate their moral decisions exclusively in the proper legal and political decisions that are results of democratic social debates. These considerations significantly increase the importance of political decisions (together with that of the political systems and institutions), especially the importance of democracy. It follows from this that in our epoch, political decisions are much more important than scientific questions. This recognition is that is missing in transhumanism and can be found in pragmatism.

TRANSHUMANISM

After placing this new social tendency, the always increasing scientific and technological development, into a broader moral and political context, it becomes clear why most transhumanist's standpoints are problematic. Most representatives of transhumanism prefer individualism and individual freedom, and do not mention moral and political questions. They are mostly playing with the technological novelties in the sandbox of the scientific and technological revolution in a complacent and irresponsible way, and do not deal with political institutions and democracy. If we look at e.g. Nick Bostrom's texts, then we can find only individualism and negligence regarding the moral and political problems:

To start with, *transhumanists typically place great emphasis on individual freedom and individual choice, especially when it comes to ETs*. The reason for this is twofold.

First, it is a fact that *humans differ widely in their conceptions of what their own perfection would consist in*. Some want to develop in one direction, others in different directions, and some prefer to stay pretty much the way they are (whether because of religious or other motives). It would neither be feasible nor desirable to impose one common standard that we should all aspire to. *The best approach then is to let people choose for themselves which ETs they want to use on themselves if any*.

The second reason for this element of individualism is the poor track record of collective *decision-making in the domain of human improvement*. The eugenics movement, for example, is thoroughly discredited; and other collectivist utopian projects have mostly been total failures.²

We can also quote from a different book, *Post- and Transhumanism. An Introduction*.³ If we look at the chapter about politics (written by James Hughes), we can find the next individualistic approach:

While transhumanists have more normative consensus than the posthumanists, they are not in agreement about very much beyond their core commitments to non-anthropocentric personhood, techno-optimism, and individual liberty. *Transhumanists generally agree that the development of life extension and cognitive enhancement therapies should be pursued and that individuals should be able to choose to use them. They agree that individuals should be able to use reproductive technologies to have children, and to choose those children's characteristics*.⁴

² Nick Bostrom, *Transhumanist Values* (2001), www.nickbostrom.com/tra/values.html (Last accessed: October 13th, 2019).

³ Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, eds., *Post- and Transhumanism. An Introduction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2014).

⁴ James Hughes, "Politics," in *Post- and Transhumanism. An Introduction*, ed. Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2014, p. 139).

If we read the concluding passages of the chapter on politics, we can read the next characteristic sentences:

In the end, transhumanism and posthumanism are distinguished by the work they are trying to do. *Transhumanists want to create a future in which every individual can use science and technology to free themselves from the constraints of nature and fulfill their own concepts of the good life.* Posthumanists are attempting to show how our concepts of the body, nature, happiness, freedom, and fulfillment are socially constructed so that we are pushed to a deeper questioning about the future that we create. The transhumanist project grounds the posthumanists in applied biopolitics defending our bodies, brains, and reproduction from counter-Enlightenment. Posthumanists are the skeptical intellectuals teasing apart the ways that the revolutionary project needs to question its own categories and agendas so that the revolution will be truly liberatory. By engaging with one another the two communities have much to gain.⁵

Let us have a look at the chapter “Morality” (by Robert Ranisch), and we can read the next passage:

There is no comprehensive transhumanist morality or moral theory. It is still possible to identify common moral claims concerning right or wrong action, what is of value and what constitutes a good or virtuous character. *Without a doubt, transhumanism as a techno-optimistic political and cultural movement is distinguished by a specific set of normative assumptions, and transhumanist organizations dedicate themselves to moral questions.* Nevertheless, transhumanism comes in many forms, representing a wide spectrum of moral and political orientations.⁶

⁵ James Hughes, “Politics,” in *Post- and Transhumanism. An Introduction*, ed. Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2014, p. 145).

⁶ Robert Ranisch, “Morality,” in *Post- and Transhumanism. An Introduction*, ed. Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2014), 149.

“Most transhumanists “explicitly affirm the possibility to overcome human biological nature in a radical way. To realize transhumanist visions, “ideally, everybody should have the opportunity to become posthuman.”⁷ By the same token, technology is not yet developed, and admittedly, “there is no manner by which any human can become a posthuman”⁸ *at the moment*. As a consequence, *everything transhumanists can hope for is that people are willing to submit themselves to the transhumanist “social experiment,”*⁹ which makes them part of an evolutionary chain that may eventually lead to posthumanity. *By contrast, achieving posthumanity is not the aim of bioliberals. While a few bioliberals embrace such possibility,¹⁰ this should rather be seen as a side effect of human enhancement.* Even though “there is nothing wrong” that we may end up in posthumanity, “becoming transhumans is not the agenda.”¹¹

CONCLUSION: PRAGMATISM

Contrary to many transhumanists, *pragmatists support democracy.*¹² Let us take either classical pragmatists or neopragmatists. That is why I am convinced that we do not have to destroy the human world, taken in a humanist sense. I believe that we have an alternative option in pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism was (and is) also a very loose philosophical

⁷ N. Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30 (Supplement - Ethical Issues for the Twenty-First Century) (2005): 10.

⁸ Humanity+ (n.d.), *Transhumanist FAQ: 3.0*. <http://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-faq/> (accessed December 3, 2019).

⁹ M. Walker, “Ship of Fools: Why Transhumanism Is the Best Bet to Prevent the Extinction of Civilization,” in *H±: Transhumanism and Its Critics*, ed. Hansell, G.R. and Grassie, W. (Philadelphia: Metanexus Institute, 2011), 94-111.

¹⁰ J. Savulescu, J. “The Human Prejudice and the Moral Status of Enhanced Beings: What Do We Owe the Gods?” in *Human Enhancement*, ed. Savulescu J./ Bostrom N. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 211-47.

¹¹ J. Harris, *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 39

¹² I am convinced that many transhumanists (e. g. Nick Bostrom) support the extreme individualism (see N. Bostrom’s text mentioned above) that cannot be accepted even in a liberal democracy since its vocabulary must be shared. It means that its citizens should use self-limitation. My view is in harmony with J. St. Mill’s opinion: “That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” (J. Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism and On Liberty* Second edition. Ed. with an Introduction by Mary Warnock (Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 94.

movement, but its participants have common features like the practice-oriented interpretation of human life and truth, naturalism, meliorism, “experientialism” and experimentalism, and what is the most important for us: democracy. *If we look at John Dewey’s, Richard Rorty’s, and Richard Shusterman’s philosophy, it is clear as day that pragmatism tries to maintain democracy and humanism.*

It is already commonplace that we cannot prove any ultimate metaphysical essence of the human being. However, already the classical pragmatist’s naturalism meant that human being is a transactional being since it always lives not only as a part of nature but also in mutual practical relationships with nature. Humans form a biological race, and we cannot live without natural goods as long as we remain humans. It follows from this that we are (and will be) a part of nature and we are not only intelligent but also emotional and suffering beings. As Dewey put it, we are “transactional beings,” but democracy is the best way to develop our human features, since – according to his famous expression – “democracy is a way of life.”¹³

Richard Rorty replaced experience with language in his philosophy, but even he spoke about a new type of solidarity and democracy. Since humans do not have any intrinsic spiritual features that could be the basis of solidarity, he chooses a new basis. This new basis is the recognition that pain and suffering is a common feature of these rational beings who we are, and we have to increase our empathy. We have to make ourselves more and more sensitive regarding the suffering of other human beings, and this is the empirical basis of Rorty’s new solidarity. Relying on this new solidarity, we can build a new type of human, the so-called liberal ironist who can create, in Rorty’s opinion, a new liberal democracy, where politics is much more important than science.

Richard Shusterman replaced language not only with experience but also with the living soma. In his project, *somaesthetics* the soma is the “tool of tools” since we could not appropriate anything and create anything without our soma. (See perception, eating, drinking, artworks, etc.) On this basis, Shusterman prefers the emancipatory “somapower” to Foucault’s oppressive, exploitative “biopower.” Shusterman does not want to deal with political questions directly, but he supports democratic

¹³ John Dewey, “Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us,” in *The Essential Dewey (Volume I): Pragmatism, education, democracy*, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Indiana University Press, 1998), 341.

social tendencies with his lectures, papers, books, and his somaesthetic practice.

If I want to summarize my standpoint, I can say that *pragmatists*, contrary to many transhumanists, support democracy and *our moral obligation and responsibility towards ourselves and the future human generations*. Thus, I am convinced that we are better off if we choose pragmatism!

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