

Transhumanism and Unitarian Universalism: Beginning the Dialogue

Unitarian Fellowship of Storrs

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In news this week Australian researchers announced a method of removing the blood of patients with cancer, modifying their white blood cells with cancer-fighting genes, and putting the blood back. Researchers at Harvard announced they had successfully taken embryonic stem cells, cells that were not yet differentiated, grew them into inner ear cells, and transplanted them to chickens where they repaired inner ear damage. The New York Times reported yesterday from the PopTech conference on the growing number of scientists looking forward to achieving 500 year life spans. The FDA recently approved the use of a new drug that keeps people awake for days without side effects, human growth hormone for kids who are very short, and is close to reapproving silicone breast implants.

At the same time the President's Council for Bioethics issued two weeks ago mammoth attack on the use of medicine to extend human abilities beyond their nature range, and to achieve unnatural life spans. The report warns that "enhancement" technologies will threaten democracy and rob us of ineffable, spiritual quality of life.

One way to frame these emerging conflicts and debates is biopolitics. On one side in the biopolitical debates are the bioLuddites, critics of genetic engineering, reproductive technology, cosmetic surgery, psychopharmaceuticals, and radical life extension. On the other side are the advocates for these technologies, the transhumanists.

Historical Roots

But looking beyond today's debates transhumanism actually has quite ancient roots. Transhumanism is the idea that humans can use reason to transcend the limitations of the human condition. This quest has roots both in the ancient, pancultural expressions of rationalism, atheism and humanism, and in the desire found in every religious tradition to use magic to transcend sickness, aging and mortality.

The oldest surviving human myth, the Gilgamesh saga from ancient Sumeria, is about a man searching for a way to stay young forever. King Gilgamesh decides to go out on his quest for immortality after his best friend Enkidu is killed for mocking the gods. He is advised that a certain waterweed will restore his youth, but a snake eats the weed while he sleeps. In the end Gilgamesh decides that the best way for humans to achieve immortality is through their works, such as by building great cities.

Most religions offer healing, an afterlife or immortality, altered states of consciousness and a variety of superpowers - levitation, astral projection or psychic powers - to those adept at their disciplines.

Many religious traditions also promise a coming millennial paradise in which human existence will be incomparably superior. In the coming age in which the next Buddha is foretold to arrive, human beings will have thousand year life spans. In the Christian tradition the righteous will be bodily resurrected and live forever at the right hand of the Lord.

The persistence and ubiquity of traditions anticipating transcendence of the human condition shows that the desire to transcend sickness, aging, suffering and death is one of the most fundamental aspirations of Homo sapien culture.

Likewise rationalist humanism can be found in the earliest recorded schools of philosophy in Europe and Asia. Often these traditions were condemned by the religious traditions, since they cast doubt on the magical means of achieving transcendence and proposed natural, human means to improve life and society.

Socrates and the sophists proposed that all human affairs were open to critical thinking, from metaphysics and ethics to the arrangement of society. The philosopher Democritus proposed that the world known through the senses is all there is and that the world works without any prior plan. Confucius proposed codes of conduct to guide society without any referent to gods.

Schools of Indian philosophy 2500 years ago proposed that there was no afterlife and no gods, and that humans had to rely on their own reason, reflection and meditation to understand the world and be happy. The Indian sage Brihaspathy wrote in 700 BC "No heaven exists, no final liberation. No soul, no other world, no rites of caste...How can this body when reduced to dust (and then) revisit earth?" The Buddhist tradition argued that each human being could achieve a superhuman state, superior to that accessible to even the gods, solely through individual and completely human effort.

These two traditions of thought, the transcendent and the natural, began to come together in the Middle Ages with the idea that technology could be a spiritual vocation and practice found in strains of Muslim and Christian thought. The Joachimite Franciscans, for instance preached that perfecting the "useful arts" was "an approximate anticipation of, an apocalyptic sign of, and a practical preparation for the prophesied restoration of perfection."

In the 14th and 15th centuries a group emerged in Europe who called themselves "the humanists." They were practicing Catholics who believed that human beings were such special creations of God that to celebrate human beings, their powers and creations, was to celebrate God. They condemned the theology of original sin, and instead argued that humans should become more like God. An Italian humanist philosopher Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* God says to Man "to you is granted the power, contained in your intellect and judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, the divine." ⁱ

But it was in the European Renaissance and Enlightenment that humanism as we know it was forged. Renaissance humanists encouraged human beings to rely on empirical

observations, reason and the scientific method, rather than religious tradition and authority. Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620) argued for the use of the scientific method to achieve a human mastery over "all things possible." Eventually eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalists and free-thinkers proposed that human beings were the measure of all things, not religious authority. Religious humanists like Thomas Jefferson were central to the liberal democratic revolutions, which sought to create societies based on reason and free association, not the divinely sanctioned rule of kings and aristocrats. More anti-clerical and secular strains of humanism mixed with the radical democratic ideas of the French Revolution and the nineteenth century workers movement.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also began to see a flowering of scientific medicine and proposals for technological means to overcome death. Ben Franklin, referring to experiments in which he revived flies drowned in wine, wrote:

I wish it were possible, to invent a method of embalming drowned persons, in such a manner that they might be recalled to life at any period, however distant; for having a very ardent desire to see and observe the state of America a hundred years hence, I should prefer to an ordinary death, being immersed with a few friends in a cask of Madeira, until that time, then to be recalled to life by the solar warmth of my dear country!

Darwin's theory of evolution opened the possibility that the current condition of human beings was only a temporary stop between a prior lower and future more advanced state. In 1923 British genetics pioneer John Haldane published his seminal thought piece, "Daedalus: Science and the Future" which suggested that society would soon use genetics for self-improvement, and predicted extra-uterine gestation and other technologies. In 1929 Irish physicist J.D. Bernal published "The World, The Flesh and the Devil" which suggests that bionic implants and technologies of mental improvement are in our near future.

Biofuturism was also spreading in the United States, and not just in the eugenics movement. In 1935 the Nobel laureate biologist Herman J. Muller, a Jewish leftist who militantly opposed the pseudoscience of racial eugenics like his contemporaries J.B.S. Haldane and Julian Huxley, published *Out of the Night: A Biologist's View of the Future* in which he predicted that humanity will soon

"by aid of its ever growing intelligence and cooperation, shape itself into an increasingly sublime creation – a being beside which the mythical divinities of the past will seem more and more ridiculous, and which setting its own marvelous inner powers against the brute Goliath of the suns and the planets, challenges them to contest."

It was apparently Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley's brother, and friend of Haldane's, whose reflections on biological futurism and humanism led to the first use of the phrase "transhumanism." Julian Huxley argued that human beings could and should throw off the shackles of dogma and use cultural and biological means to evolve further. In Julian Huxley's 1927 book on humanism, *Religion Without Revelation*, he wrote

Human life as we know it in history is a wretched makeshift, rooted in ignorance; and....it could be transcended by a state of existence based on the illumination of knowledge and comprehension.....The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself—not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its

entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.

Huxley again affirmed his belief in transhumanism in an essay in 1957 in which he says

It is as if man had been suddenly appointed managing director of the biggest business of all, the business of evolution -appointed without being asked if he wanted it, and without proper warning and preparation. What is more, he can't refuse the job. Whether he wants it or not, whether he is conscious of what he is doing or not, he is in point of fact determining the future direction of evolution on this earth. This is his inescapable destiny, and the sooner he realizes it and starts believing in it, the better for all concerned.

Secular and religious humanism also became increasingly organized and visible in the twentieth century. The Humanist Manifesto, a religious humanist document, was published in 1933 in the US with many Unitarian ministers as co-signatories. One of the articles of the Humanist Manifesto advocates “the complete realization of human personality to be the end of man's life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now” and that therefore humanists should “aim to foster the creative in man and to encourage achievements that add to the satisfactions of life.”

Since the 1920s speculative fiction has also played an increasingly important role in stimulating biofuturist thinking, portraying both utopian and dystopian visions of human and robotic evolution. Science fiction authors such as H.G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon proposed far future scenarios in which *Homo sapiens* splinters into many different species. Although science fiction often addressed dystopian possibilities, the growing science fiction subculture around the world began shared generally optimistic assumptions about the future, science and coexistence with an increasing diversity of intelligent life, animal, machine, alien and post-human.

Inspired by science fiction scientists began to explore more visionary ways to control the body and brain and conquer sickness, aging and death. Psychedelic drugs and “brain machines” were used to induce supra-normal altered states of consciousness. In 1960 Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline proposed that NASA create an astronaut with direct control over his own metabolism and emotions, calling such a person a “cybernetic organism” or “cyborg.” The cryonics movement, which proposed freezing the dying and thawing them out later to be restored to health and youth, was founded in 1962 with the publication of Robert Ettinger's *The Prospect of Immortality*. In 1972 Ettinger wrote *Man into Superman*, in which he made clear that the cryonics agenda was far bigger than simply getting frozen, but included gender re-assignment, redesigning the digestive tract, and becoming more adaptive to extreme climates, which would allow humans to transcend the limitations of the human form. Ettinger referred to these technologies as our transition to “transhumanity.”

Most New Leftists were suspicious of the new genetics and reproductive technology because of their association with eugenics and Brave New World. But in her 1971 feminist classic *The Dialectic of Sex* Shulamith Firestone concludes that women need artificial wombs to finally liberate them from any special role in reproduction, a role that makes them physically and economically vulnerable.

In the 1960s the left-wing Iranian futurist F.M. Esfandiary changed his name to FM-2030 and began using the term “transhuman” to refer to people whose lifestyles, cultural worldviews and use of technologies were transitional to post-humanity. In his 1989 book “Are You Transhuman?” FM-2030 says

(Transhumans) are the earliest manifestations of new evolutionary beings. They are like those earliest hominids who many millions of years ago came down from the trees and began to look around. Transhumans are not necessarily committed to accelerating the evolution to higher life forms. Many of them are not even aware of their bridging role in evolution.

As the 1970s and 1980s progressive advocates of cryonics, alternative health regimes, space exploration, radical libertarian politics, and the new field of nanotechnology began to mix and cross-breed. But it wasn't until the emergence of the Internet in the early 1990s that the transhumanist movement really discovered itself and began to spread. The young British philosopher Max O'Connor renamed himself Max More while studying at the University of California, and founded the Extropy Institute with friends to promote the idea of a limitless expansion of human intelligence. Thousands of netizens began to participate in the Extropy online forum, and hundreds gathered with prominent artificial intelligence visionaries at Extro conferences in California to plan for the coming abrupt revolution in world affairs they expected to follow on the creation of greater than human intelligence, an event they called the Singularity.

The Singularitarians argue that AI will emerge from computers that can perform as many calculations as a human brain. Such computers exist now and will be on every desktop in ten or twenty years, linked in a global web of intelligence trillions of times more powerful than any human brain. If the artificial intelligence that emerges then doubles in intelligence every eighteen months, which is at the same rate as computer power in general – and its rate of self-improvement might actually accelerate – then in very short order every desktop computer would be self-aware, self-willed and more intelligent than all existing human beings. The only way to ensure that the outcome of this abrupt development was positive would be to try to ensure that human beings become as intelligent as our tools, by genetically tweaking our brains and adding enhancing them with cybernetic and nanotechnological upgrades. In some sense we can beat the super-intelligent machines by incorporating them into ourselves

European transhumanists were just as enthusiastic about life extension, genetic and intelligence enhancement, nanotechnology and AI as Max More's Extropians, but they couldn't stomach the selfish ethos of Southern California libertarianism. So the World Transhumanist Association was born as an effort to define a broader ideological base for transhumanism, affirming the core idea of the use of reason to transcend the human condition, but broadening the political parameters to include moderates, leftists, Greens and the apolitical. The founder and chair of the WTA is the Swedish philosopher, now Oxford professor, Nick Bostrom. In 2001 I became the Secretary and principal organizer of the WTA. We now have about two dozen chapters around the world, including Toronto, Montreal, NYC, Nigeria, San Francisco, London, Caracas, Atlanta and most European countries.

Our goals are to promote the idea that we each should have a right to use technologies to achieve radical life extension, intelligence enhancement and control over our emotions, and that it is possible to construct a society in which humans, posthumans, AIs and enhanced animals live together in peace. If we create the institutions and values to sustain progress and defend diversity, transhumanists believe our children may be able to enjoy a world of plenty, with indefinite lifespan, and the elimination of mental and physical disability.

Of course, these ideas are meeting with stiff resistance, which is increasingly directed at transhumanism by name. On one side are the religious conservatives who see transhuman ambitions as hubris, “playing god.” Tampering with intelligence, human nature or mortality, they believe, will rob us spiritually. In 2001 President Bush appeased anxious religious conservatives by appointing one the staunchest opponents of human enhancement technology, Leon Kass, to chair the President’s Council on Bioethics. Kass in turn has loaded the PCB with opponents of stem cell cloning, reproductive technology, psychiatric drugs and genetic engineering. For instance Kass appointed conservative intellectual Francis Fukuyama, author of *Our Posthuman Future*, which argues that everything from Ritalin and Prozac to genetic engineering are a threat to human nature, and thereby to democracy. Two weeks ago the PCB issued its report calling for strict regulation and limitation of access to technologies that could be used to enhance life, rather than simply treat disease. The report acknowledges, however, that this line will be very difficult to defend since many genetic treatments, for instance, will both cure disease and enhance the body beyond ordinary specs.

From another direction there is a growing left-wing bioLuddite movement growing out of anti-technology deep ecologists, feminist opponents of reproductive medicine, leftist critics of corporate control of biotechnology, and so on. These left bioLuddites are reaching out to build alliances with the religious right to promote bans on surrogate motherhood, genetically modified food, stem cell cloning and human genetic enhancement.

Clearly there are and will be Unitarian Universalists on both sides of transhumanism/bioLuddism clashes. I think as the issues emerge with increasing frequency UUs will increasingly see that their sympathies lie toward transhumanism. Transhumanism is a natural extension of the humanism that most UUs embrace. The opponents of life extension and these other technologies are generally expressing one version or another of the “It’s not god’s plan” or “It’s not natural” argument. And yet we UUs believe human beings should be able to create our own future on the basis of our human powers of reason and compassion, regardless of these supposed sacred boundaries. That’s why we embrace gays and lesbians and transgender folks, and have been staunch opponents of the forms of racism and sexism and their supposed religious rationales.

UUs are also unlikely to affirm the central dogma of the bioLuddites, a dogma I call “human-racism” – that the only form of intelligence that is of value is homo sapiens, and that all homo sapiens are full citizens from conception to heart death, regardless of whether they ever wake up or not. One of the reasons bioLuddites oppose the creation of

posthumans is that they believe it will be impossible for humans and posthumans to live together in mutual respect, and that acknowledging our continuity with animals threatens to degrade our respect for human beings. This is of course the central issue in the struggle over abortion rights, and the use of embryonic stem cells, and we see this issue being played out this week in the effort to force the husband of the brain dead Florida woman Teri Schiavo to keep her body alive despite her clearly expressed wishes to the contrary. Rather than seeking for the value of a life in the humanness of its DNA and if it has a pulse, transhumanists and I think most UUs look for the value of life in the quality and capacity for experience, thought and communication. We will welcome technologies which expand our capacities for high-quality experience, thought and communication, and we will work to ensure a respect for a diversity of intelligent life rather than fear of the other.

Toward the end of creating a dialogue about transhumanism in the UUA John Davis, a San Diego Unitarian, has started the Transhumanist UU Network, and we plan to have a transhumanist event or two at next year's General Assembly.

But UUs also will bring distinctive concerns to the table, some of which are concerns of the left-wing bioLuddites, concerns about equal access to the benefits of technology, their safety, and their effects on the quality of life and values of the people who use them. So I expect UUs to be highly critical supporters of the transhumanist cause, pushing techno-utopians to focus on the real needs of people around the world, many of whom don't have clean water, shelter or a decent wage. While many techno-utopians may be comfortable with the prospect of people in the developed world having 500 year life spans while people in the developing world remain poor and sick, I'm sure UU transhumanists will not. My own passion about the issues of equality and democracy in a posthuman future led to this book I'm publishing in the spring, *Cyborg Democracy*.

Perhaps more fundamentally, I expect that Unitarians will engage with and be critical of the religious dimension of the transhumanist idea: the promise of immortality, of superhuman or even magical abilities, of a coming time of apocalyptic change and possible TechnoRapture. These are themes, wrapped this time in science and reason, to which we are uniquely tuned to respond, but of which we are also uniquely tuned to be critical because we see them in their pancultural context, and the excesses they have led to in other faiths.

So I look forward to the transhumanist-UU dialogue, and I close with this reflection from George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*

I tell you, as long as I can conceive something better than myself I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing the way for it. This is the law of my life. That is the working within me of Life's incessant aspiration to higher organization, wider, deeper, intense self-consciousness and clearer self-understanding.
