A Moral Vision for Transhumanism

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Abstract

All worldviews have some sort of moral vision for why and how they pursue their goals, though these moral visions may be more or less explicitly stated. Transhumanism is no different, though sometimes people forget that transhumanism is not the alien dream of a posthuman mind but is instead a very human ideology driven by very human interests and moral ideals. In this paper, I lay out some of those ideals in very general terms, advocating a high-minded moral vision for transhumanism that is born of and extends the desire for human flourishing. Though taken to new heights, transhumanism coheres with age-old views of ourselves as our own projects. What the end and direction and scope of those projects can be, however, is generated by, but not limited to, human nature.

Changing ourselves.

Transforming ourselves.

Becoming something so different, the word "human" no longer clearly satisfies.

Why do this? Why think this? What are we running towards? What are we running from?

There is a tendency to forget that transhumanism is a human ideology, a human movement motivated by human desires, hopes, and dreams. There are as of yet, no significantly enough transformed humans to count as having a constitutionally different moral perspective than humans. So when we ask the question, What is the moral vision of transhumanism?, we are not asking, What is the moral vision of transhumans?, and certainly not, What is the moral vision of posthumans? Rather, we are asking, What is the moral vision of humans who have imagined transforming themselves?

I. What we begin with then, in thinking clearly about transhumanism and posthumanity is, ironically, human nature and the natural world and the natural history in which we are embedded. Numerous ideas of what makes humans special have been proffered: the presence of souls, the use of language, the use of

technology, the existence of self-consciousness, the existence of second order thought. All these have been criticized, some disproved, some rendered incoherent. What they tend to share in the motivation for setting them forth however, is a desire to show that humans are unique, to guarantee us some singular place in the world, or in the telos of the universe, or in the mind of God. I think however, that the important thing in thinking about human nature is not to find out what makes us unique, because we may not be unique, but rather just to find out what makes us the kind of creatures that we are (including perhaps our intense desire for uniqueness). What makes us, us, rather than something else? Irrespective of whether there are other organisms that share some or all of our traits in part or in whole, what is it about humans that gives us our specific place in the world, our sense of self, our particular existential experience? No doubt there are many things in our evolutionary, cultural and cognitive history that contribute to our species nature, and even though something must be lost in coming up with pithy summaries of what human nature is, there is also sometimes wisdom to be gained by condensing our observations into a slogan. Therefore I give you my preferred summary of what makes humans psychologically interesting, metaphysically curious, and culturally conflicted beings. *Humans are creatures that can imagine themselves to be other than what they are.*

So if we can and do imagine ourselves to be other than what we are, what are we? We are specific things, in ways that are fundamental if not final and which can be variably, yet truthfully described. We are bipedal, binocular, sexually dimorphic, story-telling, hypothesis-generating, resource-exchanging, opposable-thumbed social primates jockeying for social position, searching for nutrition and reproduction. We are short-lived, thinking bags of saltwater. We are partially conscious, feeling sheaths of cellular organisms.

But these dispassionate ways of describing human beings, though crucial, do not do much to describe our resulting subjectivity, our experienced life. For the thinking and feeling and social parts of the descriptions are the phenomena that humans actually experience and which actually motivate us to act. They generate our values. They generate the conditions under which we can be said to flourish or fail. For example, we are social animals, so sociality and relationships with others are crucial for our flourishing. We are curious beings that rely on accumulating information and generating and testing everyday hypotheses, so the pursuit of knowledge is valuable for us. We are creatures that can feel pain and pleasure and be motivated to pursue relief, happiness, and satisfaction, so the pursuit of happiness and the removal of unnecessary suffering is an everpresent goal. We are creatures that can feel anxiety and weakness, so we seek security and empowerment and freedom. Many have claimed that we are also somehow spiritually damaged creatures, so we seek healing and unity with God.

While these are the things that we seek, however, obviously we often do not find them. Our lived lives, then, are filled with frustration—seeking what we value, trying to hold on to what we value, losing what we value. We are then, also, fundamentally beings that suffer and want. We experience loss, death, unnecessary pain, a life too short and too powerless to achieve what we *can* desire. These are the things that make us who we are; these are the things we want to run away from; these are the things we want to confront. This is the human condition. And what humans want most of all is to cope with the human condition, to cope with the conflicts that the kind of creatures we are experience in the kind of world in which we live.

So the initial motivation of transhumanist morality, being a human ideology and a human project, will be to address the human condition and human problems – to solve or to alleviate ignorance, insecurity, isolation, suffering, and despair – perhaps not just for ourselves but for all sentient beings. Improve the world. Improve ourselves. This is nothing new. What is new is how transhumanists respond to the fact that many of these problems are not merely the result of environmental or cultural situations, but are grounded in the biological and psychological limitations of the human creature itself. For transhumanists, solving these problems involves changing the human body, the ground of the human condition. We fear

death? Then eliminate it. We want more knowledge? Increase our cognitive capacity and processing speed. We want security? Make us invulnerable to disease and injury. We need social connection? Make us capable of directly sharing information, emotion, cognition. We want wisdom? Engineer the faculties for producing and reflecting on radically wider and nobler experiences. We want to grow through challenges and to better ourselves? Then let us really, truly, and deeply magnify our very capacity for self-improvement.

In this sense, the <u>first</u> element of a transhumanist moral vision is that the effort to address the human condition requires that we change the physical facts that in part generate the human condition. Curing the human condition requires altering the "human" part of the equation.

II. But humans do not only want to alter the basic frustrations of the human condition. For we are imaginers and the things we can imagine often lie beyond merely the mitigation of suffering. We not only imagine ourselves not dying, or learning far more of the secrets of the universe, we imagine ourselves pursuing creative projects that require more radical changes. From antiquity to the 21st century we have imagined ourselves breathing under water, walking through walls, exploring hidden worlds, flying through the heavens, contemplating pure wisdom. We have imagined ourselves as gods, hero-fools, wizards, monsters, demons, angels, and cyborgs living in heavens and in hells, in Hogwarts and hyperreality. We experience constraints laid on us by nature that interfere with the kinds of beings we would like to be, the kinds of projects we want to pursue. Though always limited by our cognitive capacities and often merely resulting in dull exaggerations of our ordinary selves, we can imagine being creatures that permit us to engage in these humanly-desired-but-more-than-human projects. In short, many desire, crave, or yearn to resolve the anxiety between our actual selves and our conceivable selves – and perhaps to some extent even our currently inconceivable selves.

Once, when I was rambling on about my utopian hopes for the perfectibility of humanity, a philosopher friend said to me, "your ontological eyes are bigger than your ontological stomach" –a metaphor that meant I wanted more than what was possible and that *that want* was the cause of my discontent. An incisive diagnosis that suggests pruning back desire rather than scaling up ability – and a diagnosis relevant to myriad outlooks. For many worldviews have dealt with this conflict between the actual and the ideal, directly or indirectly – some by offering us fulfillment in an afterlife realm, some by offering us distraction in the dizzying pleasures of the mundane world, some by offering stern recognition and acceptance of limits, some by offering a way to extinguish desire itself. But what if we dealt with the conflict by revolutionizing our actual selves to be able to more closely pursue our ideal selves? What if we could reengineer our ontological stomachs to be able to hold what our ontological eyes can already see? This is the fundamental approach of the transhumanist worldview. Transhumanism teaches that we can solve, or at least address, our existential anxiety, our discontent over our imaginable and actual selves, by changing the constraints of our selves.

In this sense, the <u>second</u> element of a reflective transhumanist moral vision is to permit human bodies and brains to catch up with the human mind's projects, to fulfill the human desire for its own idealized construction and pursuits.

III. In seeking technological solutions to human predicaments however, we run into a paradoxical problem – as paradoxical as the definition of human beings as creatures that can imagine themselves as other than what they are. Our transhumanist approaches to alleviating the human condition are shaped by human visions of perfection, of utopia. In envisioning of what life could be like, humans have imagined heavens, or dreamworlds, or states of mind that count as perfection – places or conditions with no pain, no suffering, no adversity, no ignorance, nothing lacking at all. This is largely the ideal that informs our hesitant and incremental work in politics and science and morality. However, humans are creatures that evolved in an ancestral environment in which our bodies, our psychologies, our very cognitive natures

were directly shaped by adversity. We lived surrounded by struggle, and in the process of natural and sexual selection, our species was organized and structured to deal with adversity, to learn from adversity, and in an ironic twist of a side effect, to be bored and restless and itchy without adversity. What a strange but understandable existential place we find ourselves. Driven to escape struggle and driven to need it. Look at what our species does when it is not *actually* fighting battles or struggling to survive. We spend our leisure time participating in or observing simulated battles and struggles to survive – sports, literature, theatre, movies, television, games, contests. We are a species that spends the time it has not struggling, pretending to struggle. It seems as though we are trapped by our evolutionary histories. We imagine ending struggle, but we are addicted to it.

This means we can long for what we are not actually any good at – existing in a perfect state. We are not adapted to live in our very own ideal world. We are not suited for heaven. So what does this mean for our moral vision? Perfection is not for us, but perhaps we can change ourselves into something that perfection (or at least a closer approximation) suits. Perhaps we can, or should, change our own natures so that we do not crave conflict or violence or struggle. It may not be enough to change the world because that is only one part of the equation. It may be necessary to alter our own cognitions in order to flourish in a world that ironically meets with our human ideals. This can be a terrifying thought. What are we defying and what are we risking and what are we inviting when we talk about changing ourselves so? But it also makes sense. Is this not something of a common strain of thought in religion and philosophy and psychology – that we must in some respect shed our old natures in order to become a new man, a free spirit, a true philosopher, an enlightened one, an actualized, healthy self? The extent to which we should or could do this must certainly be debated, but what is the alternative? If in the presence of body-changing biotechnology, we seek to keep our old human cognitive natures, with all its primate impulses, we will become not transhumans, but only superhumans. Human psychologies with the added traits of superhuman abilities – intelligence, lifespan, strength. Supermen. Superprimates. Still angry, lustful, hierarchical, but with greater capacity to effect our desires and play out our conflicts. Without changing the self, without changing or at least nurturing certain aspects of character and will, we will not change the human condition, but only magnify it – bad elements as well as good.

In this sense, the <u>third</u> element of a reflective transhumanist moral vision is that our very psyches themselves, our very moral natures, are not finished projects but can be altered as well. As we are, we are not suited to be as good as we can be. Our characters and wills themselves, as age-old religions and philosophies have taught, are to be transformed into something better.

IV. But all this talk about changing or transforming ourselves has a conceptually problematic element to it. If you "change" your "self", does your "self" continue? Have you not altered what the self was to start with? If we use technology (or perhaps even ordinary psychological techniques) to transform ourselves, have we simply created something new or is there enough of ourselves left to think "we" still exist? This is an important question of motivation. What motive could I have to change myself if there were not enough of my self left to experience the new as a change? While this problem of personal identity is a serious one, it is not of a different kind (though perhaps of a different magnitude) than the question of identity that arises between our adult selves and our children selves, or between old and wise selves and our young and foolish selves. While exact identity is not preserved in any of these cases (thank goodness or we would never grow and develop) there is generally enough memory, enough of a psychological trace, enough of a causal history for us to think that more or less "we" exist as continuing phenomena.

There is eventually however, a limit in what we can imagine that we might know, hold dear, learn, or desire in "our" future. The three-year old child cannot imagine that in the future, the man he will become will be fascinated with questions such as, What is truth? Similarly, we as humans cannot now conclusively say what the posthumans we might become will find it good to pursue. Of course, human nature is fascinating in this regard as well because human history is replete with examples of hoping for,

praying for, and working toward literally ineffable states that we think will be far more rewarding than the ones in which we live now. Whether it is Plato's form of the good, heaven, the beatific vision, or nirvana, we talk about modes of existence (though usually through the *via negativa*) in which we are changed, but somehow have perfect knowledge, achieve the ultimate good, and have perfected experience. In this way, we have human moral and ontological ideals that speak to an existence so different from our mundane ones that we quite literally lack the cognitive or linguistic tools to understand those states – and yet we hope for them. In this way, even human nature lets us talk about changing human nature so much that an analog to posthumanity may be conceived. And what do we think is the nature of the posthuman state? We do not know, but the human hope for a posthuman state is driven by the assumption that greater knowledge of the truth will lead to greater clarity and more accurate pursuit of the good. In its highest expression, what human nature has pursued historically is the ideal of a mode of existence in which our transformed selves see truth, know truth, are freed from bondage to mere appearances, and attain the good. There is no reason why transhumanism, as a human ideology, cannot have and share this goal. What a greater understanding of Truth will do to us cannot yet be known, but it is only in knowing this truth that we can find out whether it will help us to pursue that which is worth pursuing or not.

In this sense, the <u>fourth</u> element of a reflective transhumanist moral vision is to seek Truth and pursue the Good – using technology as a tool to change ourselves in such ways that we can learn more, see more, experience more, and understand more, including even more radical ways to change ourselves to seek truth and pursue the good.

V. Of course, these elements of a transhumanist moral vision – namely that we alter ourselves in order to pursue the humanly imagined and unimagined good that we cannot achieve given our current limitations, only speaks to the grander picture, the ultimate motivation, the search for the *summum bonum* of the fully sapient creature. It does not address the dirty and daily details of the transition from human to posthuman and especially the complicated and distressing issues of how transhumans are to relate to humans. Remember that transhumanism is a human ideology and motivated by human concerns and values. As such, the person who transforms themself using technology may have a variety of moral visions of the good life, from the high philosophical and transcendent (which I've announced my allegiance to above) to the low and sybaritic. So, we should expect an unsettling array of relationships between transhumans and humans. Some transhumans will be nothing more than superhuman warlords, seeking to magnify their own power in a poisonous failure of vision. Some transhumans will be bodhisattvas, seeking transcendence for all sapient beings. Some transhumans will be mystic ascetics, seeking truth and leaving the world and its other beings to their own devices. And no doubt there will be many more variations.

All this will be worked out in fear and trembling as the relevant technology begins to arrive. There is neither space nor need here to begin the detailed work of adjudication between the H+ and the H, between the H+ ideology (which is a human one) and the anti-H+ ideology (which is also a human one). I merely want to add to the discourse of transhumanism in this venue. To be present at the beginning of a movement that promises and threatens to change so much. To recognize transhumanism as fully human, and to offer a version of it that seeks out the noblest ideals of transcendence.

So this is my moral vision of transhumanism. An emphatic resistance to the notion that transhumanism is completely new. An emphatic adoption of the notion that transhumanism in its best form is an approach to the age-old human desire to know the truth and pursue the good.

Is this vision fanciful, utopian, outrageous, premature, arrogant? Probably.

And that is precisely what makes it so quintessentially human.