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# Human Nature from a Transhumanist Perspective

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**Abstract:** There are two very different conceptions of human nature underlying the transhumanist endeavor to pave the way for posthumanity. One understands nature as that which confines us, setting limits to what we can do and be (and which we encounter mostly in form of our own bodies that are fragile and ultimately condemn us to death), while the other understands nature as that which allows and indeed urges us to overcome all limits and boundaries. In a way those two natures are working against each other: one is seen bad as it confines us, the other is good as it frees us. The essay shows the inconsistency of these views.

**Keywords:** Transhumanism; nature; human enhancement; Lewis, C.S.; control; Oxytocin; power; social reality.

> We would like to see the human ideal. We would like to recognize in our thoughts what we ought to be, and what we can be on the basis of our obscure ground. It is as if in the represented image we were to find a certainty of our essence through the clarity of the idea of ideal humanity.
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> But every conceptual and every visible form of being human lacks universal validity. The form is only one aspect of historic Existenz, not Existenz itself. And every form of possible human perfection proves upon reflection to be defective and unachievable in reality. Karl Jaspers[1]

Nowadays, the most vocal proponents of the idea of ideal humanity are transhumanists. Transhumanism is less a philosophy than a *Weltanschauung*, a particular view of the world and our own place in it, according to which we, not as individuals, but as a species, are destined to become far better than we currently are. This is more than just a possibility: it is what is meant to happen. And although it may not be entirely clear what exactly we are meant to be, it is pretty obvious that we are not there yet. Evolution has, as it were, still got plans for us. The general assumption is that what we really are is not what we are now. What we really are is what we can turn ourselves into. We are still growing up. The true human is still to be created. And it is to be created by us. We can, should, and will shape ourselves into what we have always meant to be, but never were. Modern, twenty-first century technology will allow us to accomplish this goal and thus to fulfill our destiny as an ever-expanding, nature-defying, freedom-seeking race. And we don't really have a choice anyway, because, let's face it, the world as it is now is not really a place worth living in, at least not for beings such as us. As it stands, we have got too little control and we experience too much pain, our lives are far too short and generally rather miserable compared to what might be possible, and, worst of all, they will very soon end in death, the

[1] Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard F. Grabau, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1971, pp. 26-7. [Henceforth cited as *PE*]

greatest of all evils. (And this is how we know that we are not where we are meant to be yet: this is so bad, it simply cannot be all there is to life.) In order to make living worth our while, we need to become radically different from what we are. The route to salvation is human bioenhancement, which is the improvement of human beings and ultimately human nature itself through biotechnological means.

This is where transhumanism hits the mainstream. Human bioenhancement is a topic that has become increasingly difficult to ignore. We stumble across it virtually everywhere we go and look. It is as if our whole world is about to turn transhumanist, if it hasn't already. There is hardly a journal or magazine that does not contain some report or at least some advertising presenting us with a new technology that promises to make us better in some way or another. We are constantly asked to treat ourselves with, or support and welcome the development of, various anti-aging devices, from anti-wrinkle creams with seductive names to yet-to-be-developed nanotechnological molecule repair units. We are encouraged to enrich or replace our bodies with various bits of machinery, to use mood enhancers and other feel-good drugs, intelligence enhancers, drugs that increase wakefulness and attention span, drugs that improve our memory and others that help us forget, and even morality pills that will help us not to abuse any of those wonderful new abilities that modern technology has allowed us, or will soon allow us, to acquire. Countless scientists are busy developing and refining the required technologies in order to justify all the hopes fueled by the media, and bioethicists do their professional best to convince us that all this makes perfectly good sense and is desirable and in fact absolutely necessary. Human nature is about to be changed. Of course, transhumanists and other proponents of radical human enhancement, and generally all those who still believe in progress with a capital P, will not be inclined to find this particularly worrying. On the contrary: the change in human nature that will or may occur as a consequence of the expected widespread use of certain enhancement technologies is not just a side product of the desired improvements. It is in fact its primary goal. This is because nature is often understood as a limiting force: it is what we call anything that sets limits to what we can do. According to this view, prevalent among transhumanists, it is not our abilities that determine our nature, but rather the lack of certain abilities: not what we can do, but what we cannot do. We encounter our nature primarily in the form of boundaries, when we realize we can go no further and we simply cannot get what we want, not because the external world puts obstacles in our way, but because of ourselves, our own inability. Nature is not, as it was for Jaspers, the encompassing, the ground of our being, but something very tangible. Nature is the disease that prevents us from going to work and from enjoying life to the full. Nature is old age, which weakens us, and it is death, which puts an end to our life. Nature is the emotions we have, which we cannot fully control, and our relative lack of intelligence, which prevents us from understanding more than just a fraction of the world in which we live. Nature is our inclination towards evil, our moral defects. If that is how we look at it, then nature comes across as the chief enemy, namely as that which cannot be controlled. That is why any improvement of the human condition requires also a change of human nature, or more precisely a restriction and curtailment of human nature, and ultimately its complete dissolution. Thus nature must not only be changed. Rather, the hold that it has got over us must be weakened and if possible brought to an end. The enhanced human will not only have a nature that is different from ours. Ideally, they will have no nature at all, that is nothing that limits them in any way. The radically enhanced, posthuman version of ourselves is envisaged as a natureless being. The nature of the enhanced human is in fact an un-nature.

Yet our nature is very much identified with our body, that is, with the fact that our existence is, at least for the time being, inseparable from that of an organic body. For this reason, the attempt to overcome human nature is realized in practice as the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate our corporality. Thus enhancing the human is often imagined as the merging of the human body with machines, the replacing of its organic and hence perishable parts with more durable and less easily destructible artificial devices, and finally the replacing or rather superseding of the organic body through the uploading of the individual person onto a computer, which would then allow us to lead a post-

organic, digital existence.[2] The nature of the enhanced human is, ideally, a bodiless nature, and for this very reason an unnature, because it is the absence of a body which shows most clearly the absence of nature, or rather our liberation from it.

However, there is another understanding of human nature that is just as important for transhumanism and generally the project of human bioenhancement as the one we have just discussed. On the one hand, as we have seen, the term "nature" is used to refer to anything that limits us in any way (and that, for this reason, needs to be overcome). This understanding of nature has a decidedly negative connotation. Yet there is also a positively connoted concept of (human) nature, according to which nature is not that which needs to be overcome, but rather both that which enables us to go beyond those natural limitations and that for the sake of which we should go beyond them. We turn against nature as limitation, as we not only must, but also have every right to, precisely because it is our nature to do so (as Gregory Stock once put it, stealing fire from the gods "is too characteristically human"[3]) and because we can only protect, or perhaps honor, this nature if we do everything in our power to resist that other, limiting, nature. According to this understanding, man is, as Nietzsche said, the "as yet undetermined animal"[4] but not so much in the sense that we would require another thing to complete ourselves and become fully determined (be it society or technology or something else), but rather both in the sense that we possess possibilities of being that no other animal has, and that perhaps have never been realized by any human yet, and in the sense that we fulfill our human destiny in the pursuit of those possibilities. Our being-as-yet-undetermined is not so much a fact of human existence that we have to cope with in one way or another, as an essential possibility, but then again not merely a possibility either, but also a mission. A long time ago, Pico della Mirandola already described the human as an animal whose nature it is to have no nature, and believed that this was exactly what made the human special, what gave us dignity.[5] Reaching from the lowest to the highest, all spheres of being are open to us, but there is no doubt that in order to fulfill our destiny and become truly human, we need to aspire to the highest. Potentially, we are all gods, and because we are and to the extent that we are, we ought to be gods, so that we fail to be what we are (or meant to be) if we content ourselves with being animals.

A very similar and equally normative understanding of human nature often underlies current demands for a biotechnological enhancement of the human. Nothing seems to prevent us anymore from designing ourselves any way we see fit. That we forego the possibility of bettering ourselves (that is, of overcoming the current limitations of our existence) is hardly imaginable, not only because we are constituted in such a way that we find ourselves pushing ever forward, but also because we would betray our own nature if we did. We can think. We can judge. We can take control of things in accordance with our thoughts and judgment; we can shape the world, and shape and reshape ourselves. This kind of creative engagement with the world, the reshaping of the given, is the true goal of the rational faculties that we possess, and it is this goal that makes us what we are. So in this view it is not the purpose of reason to enable us, as Immanuel Kant suggests, to admiringly contemplate "the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." Rather, we have reason so that we can use it to improve our lives (and ultimately the best way of doing that is by improving ourselves).[6] Thus human reason is primarily not a tool for the construction of theories about the world, but essentially and eminently practice-oriented, and it is our ability to live by this reason and to give it as much room as possible that marks us out as humans and makes us special.

Pico della Mirandola, however, thought that the kind of improvement that reason was to serve was primarily a moral improvement, a realization of man's higher nature. Today, this is no longer the case. On

[2] See Michael Hauskeller, "Messy Bodies. From Cosmetic Enhancement to Mind-Uploading," *Trans-Humanities* 6/1 (2013), pp. 73-88; and Michael Hauskeller, "My Brain, my Mind, and I: Some Philosophical Problems of Mind-Uploading," *International Journal of Machine Consciousness* 4-1 (2012), pp. 187–200.

[3] Gregory Stock, *Redesigning Humans*, London: Profile 2003, p. 2.

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books 1966, p. 62.

[5] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus*, New York: Macmillan 1985, p. 4.

[6] See Michael Hauskeller, "Prometheus Unbound. Transhumanist Arguments from (Human) Nature," *Ethical Perspectives* 16/1 (2009), pp. 3-20.

the contrary: if we take human enhancement to mean any particular improvement that might result from the general dislimitation and the unlocking of new possibilities, then there is no human enhancement, simply because there is no particular improvement that is being sought. The main object seems to be freedom itself, and not necessarily the freedom to reach certain goals that we have identified as desirable, but as yet have not been able to reach because we have been prevented to do so by the limitations of our nature. The real object of desire seems to be, not the possibility to do or be this or that, but rather to do or be anything that we might wish to do or be, whatever it is. Thus freedom from determination is not primarily a necessary means to reach certain ends. It is the end. Even when other, more concrete goals are pursued, they are ultimately seen as means to achieve greater freedom.

By way of an example, let us have a look at radical life extension and the defeat of death (or more precisely the necessity of dying), which appear particularly urgent to some of the most vocal proponents of human enhancement.[7] Countless scientists are busy trying to figure out what exactly makes us age, in the hope that they might find ways to slow down and halt aging, and that one day we may even be able to reverse it. This, however, can only be achieved if we manage to reprogram the human body, without which we cannot yet exist and whose constitution prevents us from attaining those goals. We need to change our bodily processes in such a way that a free space ensues, an, as it were, natureless space, which allows us to live on indefinitely. But if you ask why we should want to live so long, what a radically extended life span is good for, then more often than not you will be told that we need a longer life in order to be able to realize the many possibilities of our existence.[8] Hence what immortality promises is relief from the necessity to commit oneself to a particular way of life, or more precisely to being a particular person who with increasing age finds it more and more difficult to depart from their well-trodden life path and to radically reinvent themselves. It is commonly thought that a potentially unending life would allow us to start all over again whenever we wish to do so. We could shed our old lives like a snake sheds its skin, to emerge rejuvenated both in body and mind. That this is in fact an illusion I have shown elsewhere.[9] The point I am trying to make here is simply that it is ultimately indeterminacy itself, the being-undetermined, that is regarded as intrinsically valuable and as being the normative core of human nature. We are undetermined animals not in actual fact, or at least not sufficiently so, but with respect to our inherent potential and ultimate purpose. In other words, it is not the human as he is today who is undetermined, but it is the radically enhanced human who is, or will be, and it is precisely the expected decrease in determinacy that makes him an enhanced human, that is, a better human. And as we understand determinacy as nature, or nature as determinacy, the nature of the radically enhanced human really is, indeed, his un-nature.

To recapitulate: the transhumanist worldview is supported by two different and in fact diametrically opposed conceptions of nature, namely (a) a nature that limits us as organic-corporeal beings, confines us in particular forms of life and curtails our autonomy, and (b) a nature that expresses itself in our reasoning faculties and our will, is our real essence, cannot but rebel against that other, confining nature, and whose final goal is complete dislimitation, the attainment of perfect autonomy. This opposition reveals a dualistic, almost Manichean idea of the human, according to which the body is to be understood as our evil nature, which we must seek to overcome, and the mind (and hence the will, which is informed by the mind) as our true, good nature, which we need to protect and nourish. In contrast, those who have expressed serious doubts about the possibility and desirability of the proposed radical enhancement of the human, the so-called bioconservative critics such as Leon Kass, Michael Sandel, or Francis Fukuyama, can be recognized by their refusal to accept this basic dichotomization of human nature. Generally, bioconservatives are not particularly worried about the fact that we are limited beings. On the contrary, they are inclined to see our various limitations as a good thing: giving us an identity, creating values, and opening up possibilities. If we are limited in all sorts of ways, then those limitations exactly make us

[7] For instance, to name but few, Max More (in this volume), Nick Bostrom, Aubrey de Grey, or John Harris.

[8] See Alan Harrington, *The Immortalist: An Approach to the Engineering of Man's Divinity*, New York: Random House 1969, p. 182; also, James Stacey Taylor, *Practical Autonomy and Bioethics*, New York: Routledge 2009, p. 109, who regards aging and death as biological constraints of autonomy.

[9] Michael Hauskeller, "Forever Young? Life Extension and the Ageing Mind," *Ethical Perspectives* 18/3 (2011), pp. 385-406.

what we are, not only in terms of our weaknesses, but also in terms of our strengths. All the good that we can ever experience, we can only experience in the context of such limitations. Accordingly, bioconservatives also have an attitude to the body that differs considerably from that of the transhumanists. The human body is part of human nature, and it is precisely its fragility and vulnerability (so abhorred by those who set their hopes on technology to create better humans) that is deemed both intrinsically valuable (for instance because it embeds us in a human community) and simply an integral part of human existence, which cannot be removed without thereby changing various other aspects of our being that we hold dear and that we neither want to lose, nor should lose. For the bioconservatives there is no dichotomy between nature as limitation and nature as (resistance-allowing, dislimitation-seeking) essential core of one's being. Rather, our specific way of being limited is wholly and undividedly our nature, for good and for bad, which is to say that we can do what we can do also because of all the things that we cannot do. Seen from this perspective, the comprehensive control of our own existence that seems to be the goal of the whole enhancement enterprise is not at all desirable, not the least because the reason why we value many aspects of our existence is precisely that they have fallen to us, that we cannot control them, that they elude our power. Love, happiness, friendship, all kinds of experiences, life itself; all this falls to us. We find ourselves in it, and this is an essential part of why we value it.[10]

But even if this were not so, even if comprehensive, all-encompassing control (that is, a complete dislimitation and natureless existence) were indeed desirable, it could be the case that the whole plan must still fail, simply because it is self-contradictory, as the British writer and philosopher C. S. Lewis argued many decades ago against the conditioners of his own time.[11] In *The Abolition of Man*, which is as current today as it was seventy years ago, he analyses the then widely used expression of Man's conquest of Nature, wondering in what sense exactly we can say that man has conquered, or gained more control over, nature. He comes to the conclusion that, first of all, the power that we gain over nature through the use of new technologies is not really our power at all. Rather, the power belongs to the technology itself, which we use, but which we can also lose at any time. We can temporarily control more things, but we also become more dependent. The power that we seem to have gained is in fact only borrowed. It is a power by proxy, and as such can very quickly turn into an even greater powerlessness if the actual source of the power suddenly refuses to collaborate. One single error in the system renders us helpless.

Second, the power that humans possess through technology is never available to all humans. That power lies in fact always in the hands of some people, who can then use that very same power against other people. The power that we have is thus also a power that we are all, at least potentially, victims of. The powerful bomb that I develop can always end up being used against me and thus destroy me. Every increase in power also increases vulnerability.

Third, the idea of total power and control, achieved through science, is self-contradictory. To be consistent, the conditioner also needs to jettison the values and goals that direct his own actions and the use he makes of science and technology, because they, too, can no longer be taken as a given. They, too, must be controlled and become the product of a deliberate act of design: "it is the function of the Conditioners to control, not to obey them. They know how to produce conscience and decide what kind of conscience they will produce" (*AM* 74). Yet on what basis should they decide which values they want to follow? Science itself cannot provide what they need, for, as Jaspers has rightly pointed out, it "can give no answer to the question of its own meaning. The existence of science rests upon impulses for which there is no scientific proof that they are true and legitimate" (*PE* 10). Without such a basis every decision becomes arbitrary and the product of a mere whim. This means, however, that all our decisions are now entirely accidental and cease to be our decisions in any meaningful way. Decisions are being made without reason, which means that they are in fact being made for us. Once our control is complete, we are nothing more than the pawn of our whims, so that paradoxically, as Lewis points out, nature, as it is now freed from all values, controls the conditioners and through them all humankind. "Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man" (*AM* 80).

Fourth, we reduce ourselves to nature by turning ourselves into something controllable. According to

[10] A more detailed justification of this claim I have given in Michael Hauskeller, "Human Enhancement and the Giftedness of Life," *Philosophical Papers* 40/1 (2011), pp. 55-79.

[11] Clive Staples Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, New York: Macmillan, 1955. [Henceforth cited as *AM*].

Lewis, we call nature anything and everything that can in principle be controlled, so that the price that we pay for making ourselves (our emotions, our conscience) an object of control is that we must now see and treat ourselves as just another piece of nature. By completely controlling nature including our own, we give even more room to nature. Everything has become nature, so that by conquering it, it has conquered us. Lewis sees this as a magician's bargain, through which we sacrifice our soul, that is, our self, to gain power. But as in any proper magician's bargain, this power does then not really belong to us at all, but to the one to whom we have sold our soul: "if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be: not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite, that is, mere Nature, in the person of his dehumanized Conditioners" (*AM* 84).

To see how right Lewis was in his assessment, one only has to look at the way new enhancement technologies are actually being used and what kind of use people seem to be interested in. A nice example is the molecule oxytocin, which is a hormone found in mammals that also functions as a neurotransmitter and that has gained celebrity status as love hormone or cuddle hormone. Allegedly it enhances our social competence, makes us nicer and more considerate, more sociable and sympathetic to the plight of others, generally more trusting and at the same time more confident.[12] It is even supposed to boost the male sexual drive. Naturally, all of this makes it seem quite appealing, which has not been lost on the pharmaceutical industry, as it makes the neurotransmitter available in form of nose sprays, which by some is being celebrated as a major achievement, as an important step towards the urgently needed moral improvement of humanity. However, the marketing strategy for those sprays conveys a very different message and shows clearly what is really going on here. The oxytocin spray Liquid Trust Enhanced for instance is advertised as "trust in a bottle" and openly marketed as an extremely efficient means to manipulate other people and to get them to do what I want them to.[13] Under the slogan "trust is power" the company proudly lists the many ways in which the product will make others feel inclined to trust me and will thus help me close deals, impress my employer, or simply improve my standing with desired partners.

The example shows how the enhanced human of the transhumanist imagination becomes better at manipulating social realities, but also, and for the same reason, much more vulnerable to the manipulation of others. The more extensive the control is we have over the world, the more extensive is the control the world has over us. Thus the un-nature of the enhanced human, the attainment of which is the goal of the whole human enhancement project, ultimately coincides with a complete naturalization of the human and precisely for this reason puts an end to our existence as humans.

[12] See Paul J. Zak, *The Moral Molecule: The New Science of What Makes us God or Evil*, London: Bantam, 2012.

[13] https://www.verolabs.com/Default.asp last accessed 12-21-2013.