

Technological Convergence and Transhumanism

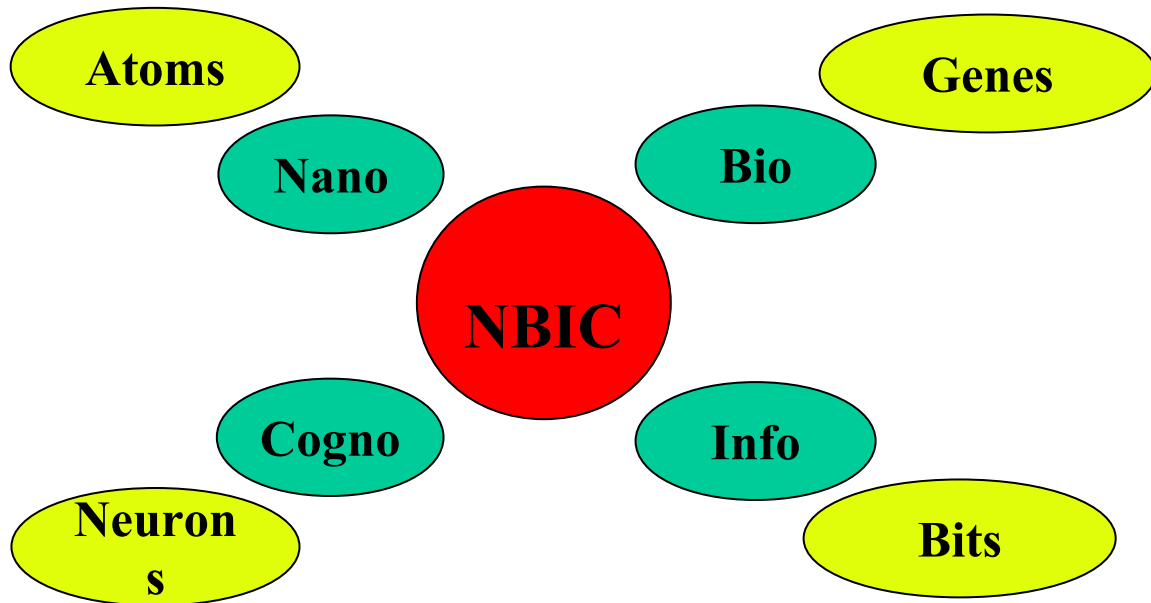
Many futurists today have diverging views about a possible “technological singularity:” some see it as a very likely scenario, while others do not believe that there will be any very sudden and dramatic changes due to progress in artificial intelligence. However, most futurists, as well as scientists and engineers, agree that there is an increasing rate of technological change. In fact, the rapid emergence of new technologies has generated scientific developments never dreamed of before.

The expression “emerging technologies” is used to cover such new and potentially powerful technologies as genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology. Although the exact denotation of the expression is vague, various writers have identified clusters of such technologies that they consider critical to humanity’s future. These proposed technology clusters are typically abbreviated by such combinations of letters as NBIC, which stands for Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information technology and Cognitive science. Various other acronyms have been offered for essentially the same concept, such as GNR (Genetics, Nanotechnology and Robotics) used by futurist Ray Kurzweil, while others prefer NRG because it sounds similar to “energy.” Journalist Joel Garreau in *Radical Evolution* uses GRIN, for Genetic, Robotic, Information, and Nano processes, while author Douglas Mulhall in *Our Molecular Future* uses GRAIN, for Genetics, Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Nanotechnology. Another acronym is BANG for Bits, Atoms, Neurons, and Genes.

The first NBIC Conference for Improving Human Performance was organized by the NSF (National Science Foundation) and the DOC (Department of Commerce) in 2003. Since then, there have been many similar gatherings, in the USA and overseas. The European Union has been working on its own strategy towards converging technologies, and so have been other countries in Asia, starting with Japan.

The idea of technological convergence is based on the merger of different scientific disciplines thanks to the acceleration of change on all NBIC fields. Nanotechnology deals with atoms and molecules, biotechnology with genes and cells, infotechnology with bits and bytes, and cognitive science with neurons and brains. These four fields are converging thanks to the larger and faster information processing of ever more powerful computers.

Technological Convergence NBIC



Experts from the four NBIC fields agree about the incredible potential of technological evolution finally overtaking and directing biological evolution. From nanotechnology to biotechnology, from information technology to cognitive science, different authorities have expressed their opinions. For example, Microsoft's Bill Gates has stated that:

I expect to see breathtaking advances in medicine over the next two decades, and biotechnology researchers and companies will be at the center of that progress. I'm a big believer in information technology... but it is hard to argue that the emerging medical revolution, spearheaded by the biotechnology industry, is any less important to the future of humankind. It, too, will empower people and raise the standard of living.

Larry Ellison of Oracle, Gates' rival in the software industry, agrees: "If I were 21 years old, I probably wouldn't go into computing. The computing industry is about to become boring". He explains that: "I would go into genetic engineering." Biologist Craig Venter has said that he spent 10 years reading the human genome, and now he is planning to write new genomes. He wants to create completely new forms of life, from scratch. Scientist and writer Gregory Stock also believes that cloning, even though a fundamental step in biotechnology, is just too simple and unexciting: "why copy old life forms when we can now create new ones?"

Biological evolution allowed the appearance of human beings, and many other species, through millions of years of natural selection based on trials and errors. Now we can control biological evolution, direct it and go beyond it. In fact, why stop evolution with

carbon-based life forms? Why not move into silicon-based life, among many other possibilities? Robotics and artificial intelligence will allow us to do just that.

Scientist Marvin Minsky, one of the fathers of artificial intelligence at MIT, wrote a very famous 1994 article “Will robots inherit the Earth?” in *Scientific American*, where he concludes: “Yes, but they will be our children. We owe our minds to the deaths and lives of all the creatures that were ever engaged in the struggle called Evolution. Our job is to see that all this work shall not end up in meaningless waste.” Robotics expert Hans Moravec has written two books about robots and our (their) future: *Mind Children* in 1988 and *Robot* in 1998. Moravec argues that robots will be our rightful descendants and he explains several ways to “upload” a mind into a robot. In England, cybernetics professor Kevin Warwick has been implanting his own body with several microchip devices and published in 2003 a book explaining his experiments: *I, Cyborg*. Warwick is a cybernetics pioneer who claims that: “I was born human. But this was an accident of fate – a condition merely of time and place. I believe it’s something we have the power to change... The future is out there; I am eager to see what it holds. I want to do something with my life: I want to be a cyborg.”

As these authors and thinkers suggest, we need to start preparing ourselves for the coming NBIC realities of technological convergence, including robotics and artificial intelligence. Thanks to technological evolution, humans will transcend our biological limitations to become transhumans and eventually posthumans. To ease this transition into a posthuman condition, we must ready ourselves for the distinct possibility that the Earth, and other planets, will be inherited by not just one but several forms of highly intelligent and sentient life forms. Thus, the philosophy of humanism is not enough for a world, and a universe, where future life forms will continue evolving.

From Humanism to Transhumanism

Transhumanism is a new philosophy has been proposed to continue the ideas of humanism in a new world where science and technology are the major drivers of change. Julian Huxley, the English evolutionary biologist and humanist that became the first director-general of UNESCO and founder of the World Wildlife Fund, wrote that:

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.

"I believe in transhumanism": once there are enough people who can truly say that, the human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence, as different from ours as ours is from that of Peking man. It will at last be consciously fulfilling its real destiny.

Huxley originally published those words in his essay *Religion Without Revelation* (1927), which was later reprinted in his book *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957). Other scientists and philosophers discussed similar ideas in the first half of the 20th century, and these ideas slowly helped to create new philosophical movements considering nature and humanity in a continuous state of flux and evolution. English scientist John Burdon Sanderson Haldane and French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin helped to identify new trends in the future evolution of humanity. Thanks to them and many others, the philosophy of transhumanism has greatly advanced since Huxley first used that word. The philosophy of Extropy (see Appendix 1) and Transhumanism (see Appendix 2) explore the boundless possibilities for future generations, while we approach a possible technological singularity.

"Humans" can no longer be regarded as a stable category let alone one which occupies a privileged position in relation to all that is subsumed under the category of the non-human. On the contrary, humans must be understood as a tenuous entity which is related to the animal, the "natural" and indeed other humans as well. Humans are at a crossroads like other natural species that are reclassified in the face of new relational dynamics and shifting epistemological paradigms. Moreover, such dynamics and interpolation serve to reveal the boundaries of humans as a corporal, cognitive, and agency-laden construct. Discovering such boundaries, one may glean where humans end, where humans are called into question, and where humans stand to augment themselves or become more than human.

Our understanding about ourselves and about our relationships with nature around us has increased significantly due to the continuous advances in science and technology. Reality is not static since humans and the rest of nature are dynamic, indeed, and both are changing constantly. Transhumanism transcends such static ideas of humanism as humans themselves evolve at an accelerating rate. In the beginning of the 21st century, it is now clear that humans are not the end of evolution, but just the beginning of a conscious and technological evolution.

The Human Seed

Since English naturalist Charles Darwin first published his ideas about evolution on *The Origin of Species* in 1859, it has become clear to the scientific community that species evolve according to interactions among them and with their environment. Species are not static entities but dynamic biological systems in constant evolution. Humans are not the end of evolution in any way, but just the beginning of a better, conscious and technological evolution. The human body is a good beginning, but we can certainly improve it, upgrade it, and transcend it. Biological evolution through natural selection might be ending, but technological evolution is only accelerating now. Technology, which started to show dominance over biological processes some years ago, is finally overtaking biology as the science of life.

As fuzzy logic theorist Bart Kosko has said: “biology is not destiny. It was never more than tendency. It was just nature’s first quick and dirty way to compute with meat. Chips are destiny.” Photo-qubits might also come after standard silicon-based chips, but even that is only an intermediate means for augmented intelligent life in the universe.

Homo sapiens sapiens is the first species in our planet which is conscious of its own evolution and limitations, and humans will eventually transcend these constraints to become enhanced humans, transhumans and posthumans. It might be a rapid process like caterpillars becoming butterflies, as opposed to the slow evolutionary passage from apes to humans. Future intelligent life forms might not even resemble human beings at all, and carbon-based organisms will mix with a plethora of other organisms. These posthumans will depend not only on carbon-based systems but also on silicon and other “platforms” which might be more convenient for different environments, like traveling in outer space.

Eventually, all these new sentient life forms might be connected to become a global brain, a large interplanetary brain, and even a larger intergalactic brain. The ultimate scientific and philosophical queries will continue to be tackled by these posthuman life forms. Intelligence will keep on evolving and will try to answer the old-age questions of life, the universe and everything. With ethics and wisdom, humans will become posthumans, as science fiction writer David Zindell suggested:

“What is a human being, then?”

“A seed.”

“A... seed?”

“An acorn that is unafraid to destroy itself in growing into a tree.”

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