

## PART 4

# Transhumanism, Utopia and Self

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Transhumanism

### INTRODUCTION

The post-object economy will, in the medium term future, produce self-actuating and probably individually reproducing intelligent post-humans. In other words augmented humans: like us, only better! But how? It seems that this augmentation through genetic and other technologies must overcome the profoundly significant division between what we call objects and what we describe as persons or subjects. Of course persons have many representations. I add what we view as objects is not quite as easy as that might seem, either. For example, we have changed and now are very conscious of not representing animals as objects as some scientists and philosophers have. In the disputes about 'who are we?' In this part I seek to locate Transhumanism especially about self or subject and society.

### Why bother?

Why does it matter? I can't point to my subjectivity nor easily to the separation of self and society. Further, much study of, not only humans and machines but also humans and animals show parallels in their operation. I think we recognise object in many senses as in 'mechanical' 'hard', 'foreign' and perhaps 'uncontrolled'. Rightly in modern political and other parlance we might say we feel like an object, which is a challenging metaphor in itself! What if you want to say, 'well the G.F.C. shows the economy works like a machine with one thing mechanistically leading to the next' or 'politics is run by billionaires'. Viewed this way, as they are to a significant extent by students and passive recipients of them, such systems we might say, have then a type of object status.

Yet it is a status different from a car or computer. I believe despite these complexities about the subject or person and object the division between them remains in this section a worthwhile way of looking at Transhumanism. I add, this division has a type of intuitive rationality about it, in its capacity to focus our fears rightly or wrongly. On the surface Transhumanism presents a contradiction in the notion and practice that says we can make ourselves better by enveloping material processes. Ones which are then permanent and significant and broadly effecting objects, within our being and modes of understanding ...that is not a marriage but an extension, at best, and possibly a diminution.

While this section is not about the Transhumanist society as stated other than the issue of Utopia, I think it important to make this point. In democratic traditions, retaining the subject and object distinction means defining a negotiated but ultimately non-diminishable individuality or self. This operates in ordinary views of self, as an agreement about; knowledge, society, others, and rights, infused with our individuality – partly projections of self.

Yet, that given, what I want to explore is what happens when we transgress deep values in our traditions by these assumptions, including those operating in Transhumanism. We should at least understand the implications. The fiction of a fully separate self and society and objective world allows us to conceptualise rights to free expression no matter how we might qualify that separation

and should. Self and technology divide much more obviously. However Transhumanism dispenses with that barrier too.

Here we see science and technology accused of being infused with the subjectivity or social values at this very moment in the debate about climate changes. Although I think scientists may reflect bias and funding inducements, processes of robust peer review operate as counters and filters to the idea scientists work like science fiction writers do, by ensuring essentially the continuation of the status quo. However science and technology may be subjected to broad scrutiny as with indications that scientist stay within paradigms until someone makes a major reconstitution of understanding. Further I think significant the assumption, science and technology have an immunity from fundamental criticism – a neutrality, or pure knowledge – whereas, in fact, there may be underlying views of nature hidden in methodologies. Essentially here I am thinking of the tendency to reductionism where all life is assumed to be materialistic and available to a neutral science’s spell.

Yet it is a different operation from parenting for instance which is not in the least free of values and emotions but hopefully an appropriate rationality still applies but a quite different one. I raise this because if science is to understand us then these are some of the hurdles in its way but a minor hurdle is to lump it in with favourite chocolates as a matter of whimsy which some in the climate change debate have portrayed it. We might have to say science is, least infused with immediate human emotion, most with objectivity, yet rich with intent to understand *and* control (Heidegger).

We need both the fiction and the reality because self is always present but its presence changes in the construction of different knowledges. Other knowledges are more evidently subjective. In our deepest recesses we can only know self if that is a great and never fulfilled struggle. This uniqueness is recognised in democratic theory affording us rights, privacy and freedom, if this too is qualified. Therefore whether subject and object are two different entities in the construction of knowledge lies at the heart of our modern way of life. It is at the heart of the construction of democracy. Transhumanism intends to transcend this.

In this Part 4, I first explore this division in a less society focused manner except for some consideration of Transhumanism’s Utopian orientation. Nevertheless Utopianism presses out our thoughts in two directions. One certainly about the ideal society but another references the perfect being as the Utopian focus. I then look at the idea of mind speeded up in the Transhumanist vision and body which has various treatments by Transhumanist writers.

Secondly I look at self, mind body and identity issues. I want to address ideas about mind a little more specifically since though very connected to the idea of rationality or its lack it is a critical focus for Transhumanism. Further it is perhaps evident that self is body, emotions and culture. How these connect to Transhumanism is worthy also of our attention if we are to properly explore whether Transhumanism bodes well for us or skirts the problems we already have with self understanding. These simply are just inherently difficult problem, we many never solve. Who will say that with equanimity?

### **Self, Society, And Utopia**

Transhumanism has strong quotients of utopianism. Democracy is rather very pragmatic if utopian elements were historically present in say, Voltaire, Marx or Rousseau. Yet practicality predominates – now days it is that alone skewed to corporate interests and consumerism that rules our political

discourse. With Transhumanism utopianism escapes from societal impracticality of change, the evident blockages we face about dealing with our problems, however it also escapes science's own precariousness, its link to us – its creator – into a technological miasma of a fully-fledged utopianism.

### **Transhumanist Utopianism**

Transhumanist Utopianism appears through Transhumanism's strong technological optimism. Steeped in the ideology of unending progress following scientific insights, reductionist views of the body, and brain, where we only have a brain not reason or mind. We are really constructed parts of matter. No clear or whole or substantive "I" exists.

The concept of Utopia dispenses with the relationship between subject and object. In Utopian society or self is dispensable. In the view of the desirability of the Utopian self, society is dispensed with or at one with self or transcended by self. In the utopian society self is transcended. That is why utopias have strange connections to dystopias. For this very dislodging of the separation of self from society, others, culture politics and language let alone economics and technology. That is despite the way self and these objects deeply interact. What is wrong is that these Utopians' connection to the world they reject, proves far greater than they suspect. A concept of self may be a bulwark against this.

Eric Steinhart argues in the *Journal of Evolution and Technology* that the modern Transhumanist utopians, such as Kutzweil and Tipler a time will come in many of our lifetimes when a perfect symphony of person and machine occurs. Teilhard de Chardin an unlikely candidate as a theologian, argues this, calling it Omega Point Theory (OPT).

He found Christ alive in technology. For him the universe is evolving to a godlike final state. Such a view was later refined by Barrow and Tipler (1988) and Tipler alone (1988;1995) and Moravec (1988;2000) and Dewdney (1998)'. Kurtzweil also believes in this OPT, if his is less utopian. For him, evolution moves inexorably towards our conception of God, albeit never reaching this ideal (2005:476; see also 389-390). Yet '[most] transhumanists work within the conceptual architecture of Teilhard's OPT without being aware of its origins'. 'Teilhard de Chardin and Transhumanism' December 2008 pgs 1-22.

Utopians are common enough. More than 400 utopian works were published prior to the year 1900 in the English language alone, with more than a thousand others during the twentieth century. Sargent, Lyman Tower. "Themes in Utopian Fiction in English before Wells.", pp. 275-76, *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 10, No. 3, pt. 3 (November 1976); pp. 275-82 . What of course is more readily demonstrated is that utopia turns to dystopia. Strong beliefs often create strong lines of inflexible authority as part of such a connection.

Let me digress. Reflecting on William Lane's epic 19<sup>th</sup> century journey from Australia to Paraguay where sharing, loving and well being began at the commune of 'New Australia', we would ask how was it washed up, spit out and split up all within a few short years? Spare talk of just communism that other dystopia because there are arguments that capitalism's utopia was really a racist dystopia. In it the white would save the backward black world. What was worse the 20 million in Africa dying, post- colonialism equating to the 20 million deaths under Stalin? Utopias are easy to believe except with hindsight. These are stories not of simplistic blame but of the intended and unintended consequences of radically transforming cultures and societies from the top to bottom

without accountability, reflection, nor checks and balances. Utopians exclude that option in their simplistic logics and remain determined and largely unpersuaded yet not un-persuading (of potential converts so to speak).

Tipler and Kurzweil say the Singularity is at hand. Through the notion of the **Singularity**, **Transhumanism** is **utopianism** and as such faces the same problems that any who seek deep and total change do. They are often awestruck rather by the beautiful design in what they propose. Such Utopians with whom I confess an old, and somewhat odd, affinity, have in their political manifestation, as found in social movements, a particular and peculiar absence of individuality's place. They include the individual in the cause while producing the most dictatorial leaders. The subject submits to the group becoming object.

Nor therefore do Utopians augment their own accountability mechanisms in their revolutionary or countercultural practices. Apparently the purity, global and novel aspects of their intentions and ideas by definition do not need accounting. It's all going to be wonderful - grand phrases, strong emotions, and those designated catastrophes which loom, avoided. Such utopian ideas usually lack a method of accountability. They seem to lead to all kinds of total about-turns and abominations, well demonstrated in the last century in Communism. I suspect the same potential exists in Transhumanism for such unpredictable convolutions.

Utopianism has always had its appeal more so in bad times. I want to suggest that utopianism comes with crises and desperation or as political theorist prefer with political blockage. Dreams of utopia grew with industrialism and the failure of the Great Strikes as in Australia and the Paragan commune emerged. Communes abounded again in the 1960s with a societal crisis born of inequality and war. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a triple crisis is upon us – environmental, technological and political.

The Transhumanist Utopians see that humans and technology will fall into each other with any seams soon disappearing. "We" post humans will be qualitatively lifted into ideal and idyllic proportions. Good bye the disease of old age and all that ails us even unhappiness. The Singularity is their catchphrase. Here human/machine at last united, and nature reengineered. This is definitely a model whose advocates believe in profound transformation - Transhumanism - something that parallels the rate at which we transform our own world.

In the utopian ideal, we can see the articulation of subject and object reconstituted as that between self and society and eventually obliterated. In democracy, society is not an object. It is a set of relationships in which one is immersed in, but also separate from. Therefore against these relationships we can seek change. Utopian Transhumanism severs this connection by seeing technology as the perfecting environment and somehow neutral. On the other extreme self and society are one as American libertarians uphold by dismissing the value of society other than as a vehicle for the liberation of self. Here democracy works through the power of the individual now aided or augmented by technology with apparently no social consequences. The individual is defined by a view of one of complex building blocks with special capacities provided by society or production not through the randomness of nature.

Of course, such natural and randomly selected idiosyncrasy within environments significantly reacting on this selection gives us these special capacities. These allow us to connect yet preserve

the individual, society and democracy in ways needing constant examination, but attending still to this idiosyncrasy. Yet they remain separated processes of life, matter and culture with clusters of rules for example about privacy and public good and limitations in understanding. These dense structures where we seem not to fully extract ourselves from understanding force our society to respect democratic methods. If we were organising atoms where our own standpoint is less obvious, such niceties of democracy need not apply.

### **Private Utopias**

We know the interior private or subjective world does not present itself to measurement so readily. Do you feel the same as me? It's hard to know. Yet if we look to certain more measurable competencies like speed in computation again the dilemma pops up as to whether we can enhance machine capacities like computation without changing subjective characteristics – win, win? Perhaps we could enhance the emotional non-computational self, too which sounds like double win-win. How this is decided and by whom is a profound question assumed to be sorted in the market place. Well that might work were it not that we provide great opportunities to dominate and exploit each other. This is a societal problem Transhumanism presents us, but how will 'society' adjudicate and should it? We have to imagine living with people with no emotional capacities.

And what of designer babies? Can I afford 10 kb of ram 'extra' intelligence and tall stature –cheaper of course with two modifications. Yes but only for the first child while other children are getting 500 kb of ram -sorry. A remarkable apparently democratic moment in biology means intelligence evens out in conventional human 'breeding'. We are going to upset such biological processes utterly. Advocates of Transhumanism tend to couch it in the framework of individual happiness. This private utopia of the perfect baby in Transhumanist contexts is as a private experience, an individual experience of longevity, freedom from pain, enhancement of powers bigger, stronger faster smarter. It is less about empathy, happiness and especially less about sociability and moral intelligence. That is a fantasy. What about a more aggressive, less empathetic but very fast thinking post human made out of shards of glass? Thus the new underclass emerges that is 'unaugmented' for whatever reason.

If we were to imagine a conversation or debate about such matters, I think we could see clearly just where this private utopian versus a more community oriented one might lead us. A privatised utopia that ends in dystopian war is certainly possible. If we are to get community benefits given all these apparently far-fetched possibilities grow, then we need to know what we want to enhance. We should have a societal debate about it no matter how odd that seems in our principle-denuded democracies. A quotient of empathy in the debate and our post-human is essential.

### **Mind and Body**

In 'Brains, Selves, and Spirituality in the History of Cybernetics', Andrew Pickering describes the Transhumanist position as 'cybernetic immortality (I would describe it as cybernetic immorality)...the idea that we can download our consciousness' as subject to another error, not just the distinction between subject and object. Transhumanists contemplate digitally downloading our minds. In so doing, he argues "the essence of humanity is the mind not the body nor in unconsciousness", he argues. Rather it is "a freezing or narrowing of humanity or a splitting off of consciousness and materiality' (Hansell and Grassie ed., 2011 p189-90). This is not unlike the subject and object argument recast as a simplified division within humans. In this division of mind and body, body is

object therefore body is dispensable. Yet the mind too is a technology, just a more important one in the reductionist paradigm. Therefore both mind and body are separable but ongoing. 'We' could just be pleasurable bodies! Why not digitise the body alone if it comes to that and program a life of pleasure in a pleasantly warm test tube, with room for some other activities as bodies need variation –a day out perchance!

This is a long way from Pickering and Duprey who reject the completely the correspondence between mind and machine, subject and object, as do feminists and phenomenologists, who also see mind in body and body in mind (Merleau-Ponty)<sup>1</sup> as part of a deeper identity. For Merleau-Ponty humans sense the world, and science is but an inferior subset of this sensing: one that removes life, just as some see in science an intention to dominate: all too human. Pickering opposes Transhumanism. Rather he calls for a post humanist view of mind, but not the post-humans of Transhumanism. Rather a view, inclusive of the human and nonhuman, and temporal emergence, 'the continuing bubbling up of irreducible novelty in the world'.<sup>2</sup> He opts for a model of the brain as an opaque and emergent, open-ended and performative (p193).

In his account Transhumanists and humanists have objectified mind by giving it a fixed quality. Rene Duprey in 'Cybernetics as antihumanism' revisits cybernetics minus its correspondence to machines. The mind changes and evolves and cannot therefore rightfully be statically harnessed. This makes the Transhumanist intent to transform the human brain at a certain point of time a pre-emptive objectification (Hansell and Grassie ed. 229). If we look past Humanism there is much that dissuades us from adopting Transhumanism. **There are other options.** These are ones that appear no threat to democracy even if I stipulated that assumption requires extreme caution.

Yet I think the new humanism of Habermas described in the two volumes of *Theory of Communicative Action 1984*, while defining freedom as essential to mind function and language, otherwise recognises the truth as an historical and endlessly evolving character with these few essential underpinnings (e.g. absence of totalitarianism). Certainly language is the key to this unfolding. Communication is another essential quality of this thinking. I believe that Transhumanism is too restrictive in its dislike of the body/incarnation. Its attention to the narrowly concrete world of science and maths permits no abstraction. It becomes limiting. If Habermas' view is restrictive, it remains much broader than the Transhumanist view.

Both Habermas and Duprey are resistant to machines as worthy of a marriage to humans. We need to recognise that unconscious processes are at work. Our thinking is mysterious in the sense that we are not totally conscious of the impulse of neither our thoughts nor our speaking but rather they flow organically from us. There is much we don't understand and much that science can teach us. However we cannot assume it tells us everything, and what it doesn't is of no value, but rather we must also look to protecting the preconditions for free thinking rather than mimicking parts of our minds with machines. If mind is machine it's a machine that needs freedom to work and so a society

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.biolingugem.com/biolingugem\\_antropologia/merleauponty\\_1964\\_eyeandmind.pdf](http://www.biolingugem.com/biolingugem_antropologia/merleauponty_1964_eyeandmind.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> One such post-human performative view is potentially I suggest a pre-human one where we look to the archaic for guidance today. This idea of archaic renaissance of deep wisdom, archetypes and chiro driving cogno, sauvage etc. is explored in depth in this issue of CRAFT. This is an Eastern/Indigenous/Sauvage cyclical metaphor rather than the Western arrow of progress one that moves only one way and always upward to bigger and better social arrangements.

and a body to develop an identity to do so. That's not like a machine I think. It is more subject than object.

## **CONCLUSION**

The whole idea of Transhumanism demonstrates that we now inhabit societies where we can transform life and world beyond our imaginations. Because of that these ideas are apparently beyond accountability. Activist intervention must make them transparent in implication, experimental possibility and indicate their service or lack thereof to interested parties. These are debates that democracies uphold, if they are now tarnished by info entertainment and soap opera shenanigans.

Ignorance becomes the greatest weapon of the Transhumanists and yet ironically they portend our mental augmentation. That is the contradictory dialectic<sup>3</sup>, in which we must immerse ourselves. It masks the subject and object debate sitting underneath it but the point of practical engagement is to build a countervailing movement demanding transparency in cultural meanings and definitions of self which allows for inclusivity and challenges models that reduce humans to objects.

I think the Transhumanist agenda requires robust responses from the formally educated practitioners in the many relevant fields. These should be done through rejoinders which ultimately need debate at all levels.

I encourage in my own work and associated projects and involvements, a major refocus of democracy as well making it more inclusive, amenable to deepened debate and recognise the necessity of an investment of considerably greater resources in democracy. Arguing about the importance of these dovetails with my various attempts to maintain an activist view of politics and one open to challenging of mainstream assumptions. I think we all consciously or unconsciously choose our points of (dis)agreement with the world. The vehicle to communicate that is the democratic process flawed and in need of change as it is. It's not always pleasant and it doesn't attract the most empathetic people, but it's the major lever that we have<sup>4</sup>.

**Readers Note:** References for all of Dr Jim Prentice's articles are included in one document under the tile 'references'.

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<sup>3</sup> This relates to Pickering, and Merleau-Ponty's call for a performative, hands on type antithesis to our present modernity thesis as explored earlier in this part and in footnote 2 above. We also see echoes of this antithesis in techno-social movements such as steampunk, Hackers and Makers although these, in focusing on the object that is their works of craft, and not on the subject that is the artificer/maker/shaper/hand worker they miss the deeper connections and systems implications as we seek to explore in this issue of CRAFT.

<sup>4</sup> I am active in the Greens for this reason.