

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 04
Lec 04: Transhumanism

In this particular session, we'll be looking at transhumanism and what the key features of this particular school of thought within the broad rubric of posthumanism are. So transhumanism is a particular strand within posthumanism, and it foregrounds the human. And as we have already discussed, the posthuman school of thought is divided into people who believe that the human must be enhanced but still foreground the human, and post-humanists who believe that the human as the center of the universe is no longer a tenable, viable proposition because we need to relocate the human within a larger network of other life forms and other non-living species as well. So transhumanists believe that, first and foremost, the human being

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Transhumanism is a strand within posthumanism which foregrounds the human...

Transhumanists believe in the perfectibility of the human.

They see the human body as inherently limiting, weak and therefore must be transcended through technology so that disease-free, long-living human bodies and humans with greater abilities may be created

Transhumanism is 'an intensification of humanism'
Wolfe

'It [transhumanism] holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods'.
Bostrom

Transhumanism



is perfectible and can be improved. It is what Cary Wolfe refers to as the intensification of humanism in one sense. Transhumanists, led by the philosopher Nick Bostrom, argue that the human body is inherently limiting. It's weak, and it's our job, our task, our ethics, in fact, to make sure that the weaknesses of the body are transcended. And how are we supposed to do this?

We are supposed to transcend through technology so that we have longer-living humans, disease-free humans, and humans with much greater abilities. What those abilities are I would point out whether the appreciation of music is a much sought-after ability, whether it's the ability to solve math is a better ability, a more valuable ability is a different debate. But transhumanists believe that the primary focus should be on the perfectibility of the human. Can we improve ourselves? If so, how?

How and on what grounds do we do that? Technological intervention, medical intervention, and pharmacological intervention are acceptable if they enhance our abilities, help us live longer, and reduce our risks such as humanity's risks to illness and other conditions we are prone to. So Nick Bostrom says, and I'm quoting here, Transhumanism holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods. So this is a very well-known definition.

It's one which is more or less widely accepted as standing in as a viable definition for transhumanism as a school of thought. So note what he's saying: that human nature is improvable. By human nature, he means both, of course, corporeal, mental, emotional, etc. And it can be done through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human lifespan, our state of health, and extend our intellectual and physical capacities. It may give us more control over our moods, our mental states, and, of course, our emotional well-being.

Philosophically speaking, transhumanism descends from the European Enlightenment's ideals of humanity, where the European ideal was of humanity that can have triumphant rationality, its own agency, and, of course, that humanity is perfectly improvable. So transhumanism is, in fact, rooted in a certain 18th-century European Enlightenment ethos and way of thinking where they argued that humans are perfectible. They're not perfect, but they are perfectible as a form or ability that can be improved and made perfect. And that...

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Philosophically, transhumanism is in direct line of the Enlightenment ideals of humanity's triumphant rationality, agency and sense of human perfectibility.



Transhumanism

Finally, triumph will be of rational thinking, of rationality, and that rationality is itself the goal of all agency. So transhumanists believe that rather than leave it to nature to select the fittest, which is the Darwinian theory, that instead of waiting for nature to select who among us is better equipped to deal with the world, better fitted to live in this ecosystem, why not do it ourselves? As in, why not let humans determine what our prospects of evolution are? What and how on which trajectory humanity should proceed?

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Transhumanists hope to force a certain *evolution* of the human – not by ‘natural selection’ but through humanity’s own interventions so that an advanced human can emerge.

The term ‘posthuman’ refers to a stage which might evolve after the current transhuman era.

Ferrando

Transhumanism



Which is to say, We do not have to wait for the survival of the fittest to be executed by the natural selection process. Humanity itself can intervene, and an advanced human can emerge at some point. In Federico Ferrando's analytical formulation, the term post-human refers to a stage which might evolve after the current transhuman era. So here the term post-

is a certain temporal marker. So what does this mean? It means very simply that humans must take the evolution of humanity into their own hands. We don't wait for nature to evolve or push us into evolving into certain forms or certain creatures. So the transhumanists believe that humanity's fate

Should be managed by humans. It's our job. It's our agency. It's our responsibility. So for the transhumanists, there is no such thing as natural selection.

No, that's not quite true. There is natural selection, but why wait? So the point is that natural selection takes place over millennia. Our present form and the form of several

other creatures, whether it's the common dog or larger creatures such as the hippopotamus or the rhinoceros, These have evolved over millennia.

As evolutionary biologists will tell us, the human did not one fine morning appear on the scene. The Homo sapiens that we are evolved over a period of time. And it's a very long period of time. So it's not that we can think of the human as appearing. Humans evolved.

The question the transhumanists ask is, Why should we wait for millennia? Why should we think in terms of centuries and centuries of human evolution? Why can't we do this ourselves? Why can't we determine the course of our evolution ourselves?

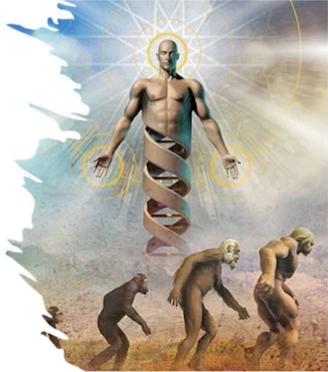
So, for many people like Frederico Ferrando, the post-human comes after the human and will follow the current transhuman era. So, transhumanists aspire to eradicate biological flaws—what we call human weaknesses. They also, in contrast to or supplementing this project of eradicating flaws, hope to enhance specific qualities. Like I said at the beginning, is the ability to appreciate music a very valuable virtue or skill?

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Transhumanists hope to

- Eradicate biological flaws and weaknesses
- Enhance specific qualities and abilities
(cognitive, physiological, intellectual, even moral)



Transhumanism



Is the ability to do math a very valuable skill? Or, more interestingly and challengingly, is the ability to feel compassion toward other creatures a more valuable asset or trait in humans? So, on the one hand, transhumanists want the eradication of weaknesses, disease, aging, and all sorts of syndromes and conditions that we are subject to. As we know, when we grow older, we experience muscle loss, cognitive impairment, failing senses, and all sorts of atrophying processes within our bodies.

We experience cell death, memory loss, and the loss of our teeth, eyes, etc. And many of you might remember those famous lines about the final stage of man: 'sans eyes, sans

teeth, sans everything.' Shakespeare, William. So that's a process, right? Over time, we incur these losses.

Transhumanists ask: why should we? Is there a way to stop it? Is there a way to reverse or potentially stop aging? Is there a way to... slow down our process of deterioration?

Now we know that people take supplements, exercise in various ways, change their diets, and adjust their lifestyles to promote longevity and a relatively disease-free life. Humans who seek longer life also seek good health. So transhumanists ask: why should we have poor health? Why should our teeth fall out, our vision degenerate, or we suffer from muscular dystrophy, back pain, knee pain, weight gain, diabetes, and high cholesterol? Why should we endure all those?

Why, they ask, can we not improve the present model? It's a bit similar to our upgraded phones, laptops, or cars, right? So every year, or maybe less than a year, you have a new model out, and it will be called an upgrade, right? Upgraded or plus. Even detergents have plus, as in the detergent will have a plus version in a couple of years.

So the question is, if detergents can, if... phones, cars, and other devices can, why can't there be an upgraded human? What stops us from thinking that an upgraded human is not worthwhile? Conversely,

If we are setting about to eradicate our flaws, our deep-seated corporeal problems—and remember, as we age, these problems are at the physical level, the emotional level, and the cognitive or intellectual level, right? Our bones weaken, our muscle tone fades, our sensory ability reduces, we become hard of hearing, and our vision deteriorates. Then, of course, there are the emotional instabilities that come in. So, the converse to this is, If you're eradicating some qualities, why can't we enhance others?

Why can't we all be, for example, kinder, gentler people? Why can't we stop flying into murderous rages? Why should we be more intolerant toward people who dress differently, people who speak a different language, or people who have a different cuisine? Why should we not have humans who are more altruistic, compassionate, and caring? So, on the one hand, reduce human weaknesses.

On the other, enhance certain qualities that will make us better humans. Which is to say that we continue to believe, as transhumanists do, that human reason is primary, and humanity is primary. But transhumanists also believe very clearly in the human-animal divide. They believe that the only creatures who have rationality are humans. It's often very contested as an argument, as a fact whether we are unique in these areas or whether other animals also share these qualities.

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Transhumanism continues to believe in

- the Enlightenment ideals of human rationality/reason
- the human/animal divide



Transhumanism

Now, Since we have already mentioned that transhumanists believe in the supremacy of rational thinking and rational thought, we can proceed to examine one particular aspect of transhumanist thinking: the mind-body dichotomy. The mind and body are clearly dichotomous in post-humanist visions. And transhumanists lay particular emphasis on the downloading and uploading of memories, and the cryopreservation of bodies that can be revived later.

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Transhumanism reinforces the complete the mind-body dichotomy in its emphasis on

- Downloading and uploading memories
- Cryopreservation of bodies to be revived later

Where the computer becomes a part of the human in the form of the human's memories and personality traits

In all this, the body is subordinated to the mind as the seat of personality so that the preservation and continuity of memories alone is the focus.



Transhumanism

The first downloading and uploading of memories is the result of an assumption that the mind is the most important component of who we are, of our identities. And if we can preserve our memories, upload them, clean them up. Why not? We should do it.

What stops us from doing that? The other question is, what do we do with the body? Much science fiction deals with body modification, right? Right from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the major novels he wrote. Two contemporary novels about AI and others, not to forget the films of this kind.

The question is not just about longevity, as I said, but longevity with good health. But what about the deferment of death? Cryopreservation is a way of freezing the body now to be revived, say, 200 years later, depending on who wants your body back or who wants you back when the computer has, for example, become a part of the human today. Now, is it possible to think of human traits and personality as distinct from that of the computer? As in, how much of our personality depends on the impression management we do via computers, via Instagram, via the digital world, and how much of what we take in determines who we are and how our identity is shaped by our technological devices? I am taking only computers as one example, but you can multiply that with all other forms of technological utilization within which we lead our lives.

Then of course there is the point in transhumanism that the body is subordinated to the mind. The mind is supreme. The mind is the seat of personality. So preservation of the memories of the mind are far more important than anything else. So the transhumanists, like we began, foreground the human.

They don't argue that humans are part of a network. They don't concede that there's a relationality to our lives, that we lead our lives in conjunction with and embedded within a network. For the transhumanists, the human is supreme. The human is where it is. That's a badly formulated phrase, but you get what I'm trying to say.

So the transhumanists believe essentially in what's called me plus plus. That is the term that W.J. Mitchell used. Me++. Like I said, if detergents can be upgraded, if phones can be upgraded, why not humans?

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In transhumanism there is an overarching emphasis on the machination of humans and the humanization of machines.

Transhumanists believe in Me++

where humans routinely exist in the condition [of] 'man-computer symbiosis', and where they interact with 'sensate, intelligent, interconnected devices scattered throughout [the] environment'

WJ Mitchell

Transhumanism is a *human enhancement project*.

Transhumanism



This upgrade for transhumanists is often called a human enhancement project. In transhumanism, this emphasis on the mechanization process of humans and the humanization of machines is central. So, we believe that humans co-evolve with machines, and there the crossover with posthumanism is very clear somewhere, we have to concede the fact that humans routinely live in a condition of symbiosis with the non-human, the non-living, which is the computer. So, humanity, which tries to enhance itself, is linked to this project of being embedded in and symbiotically connected to other machines.

And the machine is where our progression comes from. As others have described, transhumanism is an ethical claim that the technological enhancement of capacities is a good thing. This is where the ethics of it comes into play. The evolution of humans, the upgrading of humans, is a good thing because it gives us additional advantages. So, due to its insistence on the uniqueness of the human, its autonomy, and rationality, we do not pay much attention the transhumanists do not pay much attention to the questions of the human, the non-human, or the non-living, because we believe the transhumanists believe that the human is at the center of things. That it is the most crucial fulcrum of the universe.

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Transhumanism is described by some critics as 'an ethical claim to the effect that technological enhancement of capacities like intelligence or empathy is a good thing'

Roden



Transhumanism

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Due to its insistence on the uniqueness of the human, its autonomy and rationality – which it believes can be enhanced - transhumanists do not set much store by

- Questions of the nonhuman,
- Questions of the nonliving,
- Possibilities of seeing entangled, mutually dependent lives of the humans and the nonhumans.

“Transhumanisms are therefore somewhat incompatible with “doing” feminist posthumanities and the material-semiotics that support it. Transhumanisms stands as a different species of posthumanism, hinged on human mastery and a thrust away from bodily ecologies and their vulnerability’.

Asberg and Braidotti



Transhumanism

Transhumanists are not very concerned about the non-human. They are not very concerned about the non-living forms. They do believe that the non-human, the

non-living in terms of the machinic and the computers are a part of us. But they are not very keen on considering what people like Rossi Bertocchi and other post-humanists have argued that post-humanists must think in terms of a species cosmopolitanism a term I used years ago in a book on post-humanism that we cannot continue to make a claim for human mastery, human superiority, or human hierarchical location above.

We need, as Braidotti and Cecilia Asberg have said, a thrust away from bodily ecologies and their vulnerability. So we need to consider questions of the non-human, and this is where we move from transhumanism to a critique of transhumanism that we cannot think of in terms of the human as the pinnacle of evolution. We cannot think of humans in exclusive and exclusionary terms. We need to consider that the human race's relations with others have not been quite equitable or equal, and we need to address that.

We cannot think in terms of just human advancements, which may come at the cost of what happens to the non-human and the non-living. So for many of the post-humanists of the second variety, which includes Rossi, Braidotti, and others, the sense of human perfectibility only extends only replicates what humans have always done in history. We have located ourselves at the top of the hierarchy. We have located ourselves at the pinnacle of civilization and have made everybody else secondary. So for the post-humanist, the transhumanist idealization of the perfectible human is an unacceptable proposition for the simple reason that it replicates capitalism, colonialism, and racism.

So to make the statement to make the claim that we should include ourselves is often at the cost of what we are doing to others when we do this. Do we have ethical responsibilities toward the non-human? The transhumanists are not interested. Do we have an ethical responsibility toward, say, the non-living? They are not interested.

Do we think of life as mutually entangled? We are not interested. So, in all these cases, the transhumanists believe that we are at the center, improving ourselves. We erase, destroy, and remove all those flaws, and we will be supreme. We cryopreserve ourselves for the future and shall revive ourselves.

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Transhumanism

So, what we are seeing here is that It's simply a replication of an attitude humans have always had. And the post-humanists are saying it is this attitude that has brought the current environmental crisis that humans have been least bothered about the non-human and the non-living. And as a result, we now have this crisis. So, the transhumanists, as a particular variant of the post-humanists, do create several ethical and other responsibilities.

Thank you.