

## Humanism and Transhumanism

*Fred Baumann*

The name of the movement known as “transhumanism” may suggest that it arises out of humanism. At the very least, it is a descendant of what was once known as humanism, and could be seen as just one more utopian humanism. But the “trans” is the operative part of the term, and it should be taken seriously. Transhumanism is not simply utopian in the same way as the humanisms of Marx or B. F. Skinner; rather, it is qualitatively different in that it “goes beyond,” avowedly disregarding and leaving behind human beings themselves—the very beings that were the central concern of all previous humanisms.

The history of these humanisms is extraordinarily rich and complex. But because transhumanism cheerfully “transcends” all of it, we can cheerfully omit much of the detail here. In brief, humanism meant looking at the world from the point of view and the interests of the human being, as opposed to the subhuman (that is, the material or natural) or the superhuman (that is, the divine).

In its most utopian forms, inspired by the technical possibilities of applied natural science, humanism sought the utter transformation of the world to fit human needs. Marx’s communism, however much he denied that it was utopian, is a good case in point. Marx understood that human beings would change in the new communist world—but he believed that the change would be of their own choice and in their own power. The world of communism would in fact be a realm of freedom instead of one in which external necessity ruled: a freely developed culture that would put an end to class war.

But once it was taken seriously and developed further, the prospect of fully using human freedom to conquer nature evolved into another, and in some ways opposite, prospect: the perfect accommodation of human beings to nature. Consider the utopian vision of B. F. Skinner, the mid-twentieth century father of behaviorist psychology. In his 1948 novel *Walden Two*, Skinner depicted a community of that name completely controlled by operant conditioning. Everyone in it, without exception, is happy. They have all been conditioned so as to respond perfectly to their constraints, and they only face constraints that are necessary. Living in

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what reminds one of Rabelais's fictional aristocratic abbey of Thélème, they pursue knowledge, art, culture, and leisure in perfectly governed harmony (rule by experts, no democracy here).

There is an unintentional creepiness about *Walden Two*—not just because the universal sunniness of the testimonials makes one wonder about drugs in the water or inquisitorial dungeons beneath the ground, but, above all, because of the apparent absence in any of the happy Waldensians (with the possible exception of the maladjusted founder) of what we might call “inwardness.” For Skinner, it appears that the demands of the body can be met by comfort, and the demands of the soul by interesting things to do and find out about. Not just democracy, but also capitalism, the family, and formal education are considered antiquated. Institutional religion, needless to say, is absent as well. Remarkable also in its absence is the whole realm of reflection about one's self, one's expectations of oneself, one's feelings as they conflict with one's reasonings, and so forth, giving the book and its project an air of the overly bright, overly defined unreality that one finds in some of the stranger genres of animated film and TV.

Perhaps this absence of inwardness is just what you would expect from this exponent of behaviorism—the basic premise of which is to ignore the existence of inwardness. It seems doubtful, however, that this absence in itself played much of a role in the failure of Skinner's particular brand of utopian humanism. Marx's utopianism never got far because the historical process that was to lead to it never materialized: the proletariat just wasn't up to its assigned mission of becoming the salvific, universal class (as Lenin ruefully discovered, its consciousness never got beyond trade unionism). By contrast, the reason that almost nobody attempted Skinner's brand of utopia was perhaps because its unnerving creepiness hinted at a violation of normal notions of freedom and dignity— notions that Skinner considered outmoded, as he argued in his famous 1971 book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Moreover, it seems likely that behavioral conditioning might not have had the power to alter people as deeply as Skinner thought. Stronger tools were needed.

### **A New Science, A New Utopia**

Today, stronger tools than were dreamt of in Skinner's philosophy are not only imagined but in common use. Mind control through chemistry is a commonplace. The infertile bearing children—sometimes genetically their own, sometimes not—raises no eyebrows, and seems to most like

unambiguous good news. Mammals can be cloned, and so, in principle, humans may be too. Some crucial bodily fluids, like insulin, can already be synthetically produced. The possibility of advanced nanotechnological machines going inside human bodies, the possibility of linking human brains and nervous systems to computer networks, the possibility, in short, of the complete overcoming of the distinction between the human and the mechanical—all of these may be on the horizon, and the most enthusiastic proponents of such projects, like the eminent inventor Ray Kurzweil, keep emphasizing how soon it is all coming. After all, as Kurzweil (whose name in German literally means “short time,” seeming to imply not only imminence but impatience and mortality) likes to point out, the rate of technological change keeps increasing; we cannot go by our old timelines.

In one sense, the new science is merely a continuation of the old. It continues the Baconian project of control over nature for human betterment. But at the point that it becomes “transhumanism,” the name indicates that this science has changed its object in the process. When the original humanism allied with science, it did so in order to transform the world to make it suitable for human life. But what if we could, following Skinner, change human beings to fit the world? Even conceiving of this project would, of course, mean treating human beings as material for transformation.

The famous Frankenstein story emerged out of the Romantic, originally Rousseauian, horror at the implications of treating man as mere matter. But the failure of the post-Rousseauian project of “moral freedom,” by which Kant and others sought to overcome the “merely empirical” through the power of the will, ultimately seems to have made possible a new science that accepts reductionist materialism as a matter of course, both as an account of nature and of man. Its followers are remarkably free of the kinds of concerns that plagued those who, from the eighteenth century on, were horrified by the notion of *L’homme Machine* (man as a machine), popularized by a 1748 book of that title by La Mettrie.

A bit of the flavor of the clash between the older view and the new reductionism can be found in an exchange in *Commentary* magazine. As part of an April 2007 essay called “Science, Religion, and the Human Future,” Leon R. Kass, a University of Chicago professor and former chairman of the President’s Council on Bioethics, challenged the materialist conception of the human being that denies the immateriality of the soul. One of those criticized, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, replied in a letter published in the July/August 2007 issue alongside a rebuttal

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from Kass. Pinker denies Kass's charge that he reduces mind to brain; mind is, however, "what the brain *does*" (his emphasis). Therefore, on Pinker's account, what needs to be studied is the brain, and so is material. Nothing is gained by emotive talk of the "soul," he says; if all that archaic term refers to is "the software of the brain," then why not say so and be done with it? If we are computers, then so be it.

This reductionism is not in and of itself transhumanism, but it paves the way for it. The new science isn't squeamish about man as machine; transhumanism goes a step further and embraces man's becoming a different machine, or any number of kinds of machines. If that were to come to pass, even if only among elites, it would be a change of world-historical proportions, because it would mean that the new science was no longer merely seeking to transform the world to suit human beings, but rather transforming human beings into whatever they chose.

### **Liberty and Limitation**

Contemporary libertarians, viewing society as composed of transactions between autonomous actors, seem to expect that these transformational choices will be individual in nature. But as has been cogently argued by a number of critics, individual choice will probably not be decisive. Once the enhanced set the standards, it will pretty much be impossible for the unenhanced not to have to try to keep up, if only because their life chances, and ultimately even their continuing recognition as members of society, will be at stake. So rather than choices made by independent rational actors, the decisions about radical enhancement are more likely to be either collective or to be imposed from above by an elite, as predicted by Aldous Huxley and C. S. Lewis, among others. Or it may be that the choice will not be made intentionally at all, but simply imposed by realized technological possibility—a progression hinted at by the spread of steroid use among athletes today.

The attachment of some libertarians to transhumanism is deeply misguided, for at least two reasons. First, the phenomenon that Richard J. Herrnstein got so much grief for pointing out in his 1973 book *I.Q. in the Meritocracy*—namely, that true egalitarianism and meritocracy tend to produce, through the marriage of the smart with the smart, a genetic aristocracy, almost a genetic caste—would likely deepen dramatically in the future the transhumanists desire, with consequences for the liberty of the unenhanced. At some point, those who celebrate the liberty of human beings will have to face the fact that liberty will look very different when

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we are no longer merely human. Second, our enhanced offspring might have to confront novel existential threats, such as the problem of an artificial intelligence bent on the destruction of humanity, or of self-replicating nanobots run amuck—guarding against which would likely require the governance of some massively powerful and intrusive entity like the World Controller in Huxley’s *Brave New World*. The rule of bureaucrats and experts, which has already started small in Europe and which elites seem to be pushing for throughout the West, would probably evolve apace with the rapidly expanding new science into the rule of experts at all levels.

Still, however one reacts to the transhumanist project—and it is probably only a technical question as to how far it can go and how fast—it means that the most powerful weapon in the traditional anti-utopian arsenal may no longer have much power. Every utopia that came before was a “no-place” (the literal meaning of the word “utopia”) because it abstracted to some degree from human nature as it had always been, and so the perfect world it imagined could not exist. Thus, utopias could be divided, as Leo Strauss has suggested, into two kinds. There were the philosophical and theological utopias, those which knowingly described an impossible world but nevertheless used the narrative to focus on certain aspects of humanity in order to clarify goals and to offer moral encouragement to improve. And then there were the ones like Skinner’s, modern utopias of social engineering that naïvely bought into the possibility of radically changing human life by simply ignoring crucial aspects of it as it exists now. Both of these kinds of utopias could be reliably predicted to fail (were they to be tried in practice) because they were contrary to human nature.

Given that limitation, the Baconian scientific project in its liberal form can be considered the most successful of the latter kind of utopia, perhaps because it did not emphasize its potentially utopian ends, but also in large part because it was satisfied with incremental (though unending) gain. Indeed, its dependence on the gradual progress of science required concentrating on the next step rather than the end of the road. But quantitative change can become qualitative, and now the Baconian project offers us the serious prospect of changing humanity in ways that can be seen as beneficial to the beings we are now, but that would likely turn us into quite different beings over time—and not necessarily such a long time.

Why not, then? Why not be the best we can be? The reply to this question used to be that the notion of “the best human being,” by definition, implies limits to what one can seek—the limits of the human. But that reply is increasingly regarded as meaningless. The new answer is

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that the best we can be means the best at doing what we want to do. And what we want will itself be a mixture of what our restless desires want and what the wanting of others compels us to want.

So it is worth looking at the kinds of things that the transhumanists are anticipating us being able to do. For Kurzweil, posthumanity is about extending power and control to the point where we merge into everything non-human. He says, in his 2005 book *The Singularity Is Near*, that “the essence of being human is not our limitations—although we do have many—it’s our ability to reach beyond our limitations.” Along the way to the realm outside our limitations, this will mean things like being able to participate in a business meeting in one place while simultaneously participating in group sex in another. But Kurzweil’s true interest lies in his conviction that the pace of technological growth will explode so rapidly that it will bring about a transformation dubbed the “Singularity” (after the mathematical point at which a function quickly shoots up to infinity). In this unbounded future, we will increase our power “until the entire universe is at our fingertips”:

the matter and energy in our vicinity will become infused with the intelligence, knowledge, creativity, beauty, and emotional intelligence (the ability to love, for example) of our human-machine civilization. Our civilization will then expand outward, turning all the dumb matter and energy we encounter into sublimely intelligent—transcendent—matter and energy. So in a sense, we can say that the Singularity will ultimately infuse the energy with spirit.

Kurzweil’s fantastical vision may in fact belong less to science than to a kind of humanistic theology, reminiscent of the last act of George Bernard Shaw’s 1921 play *Back to Methuselah*, where humans become mere vortices of pure thought. But the goals of power and of knowledge—understood, in a Faustian way, as a *means* to power—are common to the general forecasts of technological evolution. Infertile people want to have babies, unattractive people want to be loved by attractive ones, old people want to live longer and be youthful, sick people want to be cured; all limitations are to be overcome. And this is not to be thought a problem, because it is just our nature to overcome any and all limitations.

Again, as with Skinner, there is in Kurzweil’s ideology precious little of “inwardness.” This claim might seem quizzical, given Kurzweil’s obsession with maximizing the pleasures available to consciousness, and his rhetorical overtures to “intelligence, knowledge, creativity, beauty, and emotional intelligence,” not to mention “spirit.” Yet inwardness arises

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from reflection on the self; from struggling with the challenges the world presents to you and you present to yourself; from meeting those challenges or failing to meet them; from working to make sense of them; and from the result of all these things: the progressive unfolding of the self over time. Inwardness, then, requires *necessities*, and arises in no small part from accepting them and reflecting on the difficulties inherent in them. Even the outward push to change the terms of a problem so that it no longer exists as a problem requires accepting that the change will produce new problems. This lesson underlies the latent utopianism of the good-old American pragmatism that directs us forever outward, solving ever new problems. This sort of utopianism can thus present itself as—and can indeed mostly just *be*—ordinary, sensible, practice.

And it is just this fact, that a latent utopianism is already a matter of ordinary practice in American society, that makes the intellectual argument about preserving the soul, or the self, or inwardness, or something about us that is more than just control of the outside, so very difficult to make today. If one can no longer insist on the necessity of certain limits, then dialogue over such matters invariably begins to look like a rehash of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, with the transhumanists as the sensible, enlightened Yankee, and the traditionalists as the superstitious, cowardly Merlin. (Indeed, it is striking that in C. S. Lewis's 1945 novel *That Hideous Strength*, his polemic against the transhumanists of his day—whom he identifies as agents of the Devil, and to whose think tank he gives the wonderful acronym of N.I.C.E., the National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments—he brings Merlin back from the dead as the wrecker of divine vengeance, as though he were refuting and reversing Twain.)

### **The Challenges That Shape Us**

The incremental character of the changes moving us towards the transhumanist horizon is not a reason for relief but for greater concern. It may seem to be all very well and good to say that we don't want to go to Kurzweilian extremes but would just like to improve man's lot concretely. But it is nearly impossible to stop short when every further step promises convenience, pleasure, and greater physical well-being. Once you say, "What's wrong with curing diseases?," you will be tempted to add, "Anyway, isn't a man with a hearing aid already a cyborg?" That is, you will have taken the stance of transhumanism while defending some humane application. Moreover, there are always prices to be paid that,

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however justifiable, nonetheless become increasingly invisible as technologies grow and spread, even as that growth means the prices become ever greater. Thus it is hard to oppose anything that may result in curing diseases, and techniques that once seemed very novel and strange, such as replacing defective organs, become the new normal.

But, again, following Marx, at some point quantitative change becomes qualitative—and qualitative change is the professed goal of the self-proclaimed transhumanists, who want us to change into beings entirely different from what we are now. What is the likely nature of this change? And what is the price to be paid for technological growth? Among other things, as our lives become more free and less determined by nature, there is a certain cost that gets paid in terms of the value necessity has for us. (As James Boswell purported Samuel Johnson to have said, if perhaps more pointedly than quite needed for this discussion: “When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”) At a certain point, the relation one has to one’s self—which is certainly in large part a matter of one’s vulnerable, mortal, finite body, its moods and appetites and physical capacities, and these things as they come into harmony and conflict with our reasons and longings—would necessarily change if it became a consumer option, one that could be ordered up like a car from a dealer. Our progress would loosen that relation and ultimately our sense of our own identity.

Virtual reality and neuroelectronics likewise involve eliminating the limitations that shape our selves. Aside from the narrow therapeutic case for virtual reality and brain implants to help the disabled, the case for these technologies is mainly based on the satisfaction of desires, the overcoming of boredom, and maybe even, once our nervous systems are hooked into computers, increased calculating powers and the ability to multitask like crazy (in perhaps both senses of the word). We may someday approach becoming what George Orwell called, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a “brain in a bottle,” a being that can ever more control all its feelings and outcomes. Today’s video gamers aren’t there yet, but for those of them who spend most of their waking hours immobile and immersed in their screens, it’s not for lack of trying.

Today, of course, it is still the case that students need to get away from video games and get to class, and adults need to head off to work, at least if they want to graduate or keep their jobs. But if those requirements can become optional, if reality and virtual reality become increasingly indistinguishable, then that Orwellian dreamlike state will become real—long before such Kurzweilian fantasies as a single self inhabiting multiple bodies,

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or multiple selves inhabiting one body, become real (or virtually real: by that point there will be no difference). It seems certain that this indistinguishability would involve a flattening out, or a relaxation of the tension—to use Nietzsche’s image of the bow—that constitutes peculiarly human existence. To be sure, there are challenges in virtual reality, as there are in video games. But they all have the quality that the late sociologist Philip Rieff already notes as present in modern culture: they are heroic myths enacted as diversions, ironically. They divert boredom from itself and thereby paradoxically increase it. And while they do, through this hasty pattern of boredom and distraction, they simultaneously make it almost impossible to transform the time on your hands into the leisure required for serious reflection about the world or the self. This is not only because distraction has an addictive character, but also because—as anyone familiar with the phenomenon probably knows—it creates a kind of feeling of helplessness and despair.

As an example, I am struck by the enthusiastic descriptions of devotees of the computer game *World of Warcraft*. Underneath all the Tolkienesque, quasi-feudal adventure fantasy apparently lies an utterly mind-numbing program of bourgeois accumulation of commercial credits, made all the more tedious by the fact that there are apparently no meaningful risks in the game: death itself just means starting to accumulate all over again, and so amounts to less than bankruptcy. Here is another of the ironies of the transhumanist tomorrow: we are promised that vaunted ability of *multitasking*, but many of the tasks we will be engaging in will be empty of any meaningful purpose.

The contrast between what we are and what the world around us demands of us, rightly or wrongly, and the question of what we are from moment to moment as we act and fulfill and betray ourselves—these make up much of the intellectual life of the human being. That inner life depends on a fairly clear sense of the separation between self and world. The absence of this inwardness, the lack of the capacity for serious self-reflection, characterizes many of the symptoms of what psychologists call narcissistic personality disorder. So it is perhaps not so hard to understand why the incapacity for serious self-reflection is so often accompanied by a lack of consideration for others. If the success of transhumanism means the perpetual expulsion of the self into ever further immersion into the world, then inwardness would be in peril. However great our powers could become, would it really be an improvement for humanity to lose that inwardness, to become narcissistic? Would that really amount to progress? We would be very good at doing things to ourselves and to the world—but ultimately in the name of what, other than the doing of them?

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### Four Arguments (And Why They Don't Connect)

For various reasons, the case against these new utopians has had little effect; few people seem to see that our technological motion ought to have some sensible guidance rather than continuing its relentless and blind inertia forward. In order to strengthen that case, let us first examine four of the kinds of arguments often leveled by critics of the transhumanist project—and why each of those arguments has less effect than it might deserve. First there is what we might call *the practical argument*, which seeks to highlight inconsistencies, contradictions, and other failings in the transhumanists' vision. For example, reviewing in these pages John Harris's book *Enhancing Evolution* (see "Beyond Mankind," Fall 2008), Charles T. Rubin argues that enhancement will not remain a free choice; or that, if it does, it will lead to a stratification of society between the enhanced and the unenhanced that will make the gulf between Brahmin and untouchable seem like an Elks picnic. Then, he cautions about Harris's claim that we have a moral obligation to participate in enhancement research, showing the opening that Harris allows for experimentation on the non-consenting. Finally, he examines with some psychological care the likely consequences of the extension of the lifespan to millennia, which Harris calls "the Holy Grail of enhancement." What would bodily continuity of "multiple personalities over time" really mean? And if it came down to choosing some arbitrary limit to our lifespan, which Harris calls "fair innings" and suggests might be in the realm of 5,000 years, would we be any readier to go after 4,990 years than after 70?

Rubin's approach of asking the reader to bring the specific consequences to mind has the great merit of slowing down the sense of inevitability for some of the goals of the transhumanist movement. But it faces the classic pragmatist response: "We can fix that." The transhumanist will confidently assert that we will somehow work out the practical problems of near-immortality—after all, if we're smart enough to make those problems, surely we'll be able to fix them. The effect of this response is to reinstate the sense of inevitability, pushing the hard questions further off toward the bright horizon.

The critics' second approach is the *appeal to orthodoxy*. Here my example comes from political science professor Robert Kraynak of Colgate University. In a volume entitled *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, published in 2008 by the President's Council on Bioethics, Professor Kraynak has an exchange with Daniel Dennett, the Tufts University philosophy professor known for his writings about evolution, the mind, and atheism. (This book

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is available online at [TheNewAtlantis.com/PCBE](http://TheNewAtlantis.com/PCBE).) In the essay kicking off the exchange, Dennett attempts to deal with the problem that the purely scientific understanding of human beings tends to loosen our grip on our understanding of and adherence to morality. And while Dennett is firm in his contempt for belief in the immortal soul, arguing that there is no more scientific justification for believing in it “than there is for believing that each of your kidneys has a tap-dancing poltergeist living in it,” he grants that our “belief environment” is important for human morale and shouldn’t just be shattered. Thus he is willing to try to understand what human nature is. Ours is, Dennett writes, “the only species with language, and art, and music, and religion, and humor, and the ability to imagine the time before our birth and after our death, and the ability to plan projects that take centuries to unfold, and the ability to create, defend, revise, and live by codes of conduct, and—sad to say—to wage war on a global scale.” Somehow, those qualities, when affirmed reassuringly by “life sciences,” are supposed to establish the basis for a humane morality that science needs to respect.

Professor Kraynak begins his response by contrasting Dennett’s scientific materialism with his idealistic moral principles. Dennett claims that “the universe has no purpose, but [that] man still has a moral purpose”; if only Dennett had the “humility” to recognize that he is actually assuming something like a “rational soul.” Then Kraynak draws out, with great clarity and erudition, the classical Greek account of the rational soul, and updates it by referring to a contemporary scientist, Paul Davies, who thinks that “nature is directed toward intelligent life.” He then goes on to outline the Biblical account of “man as a rational creature made in the image of God.” His conclusion points to a preference for that account. “Philosophy tells us about the rational soul united to the body; but religion takes us into the mysterious realm of the divine image of eternal destiny in each human being.”

In his rejoinder, Dennett says that his acceptance of the “rational soul” is, *contra* Kraynak, “no problem.” Aristotle is just fine by him, it appears. And then Dennett, with a certain glee, launches into a familiar attack on religion, using Kraynak’s introduction of the concept of mystery to claim that Kraynak must believe that freedom “cannot be natural, *must* be a sort of magical abridgement of the laws of nature” (his emphasis). Dennett here seems to be misunderstanding Kraynak by conflating his separate accounts of Aristotelian thought and the Bible into one, and one might expect that Kraynak would correct this in his final rebuttal. Instead, Kraynak offers the very insightful point that Dennett’s “materialist humanism is...a residue of Christian humanism.” And he gets later to

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what it seems that he really wants to ask: “Why is [Dennett] so sure that belief in the human soul is discredited? And what alternative does Dennett offer?” It seems that Kraynak chooses to pursue the discussion in terms of the soul, rather than by taking up Dennett’s claim that we can base morality in the “life sciences,” because he agrees with Leo Strauss that between reason and revelation, philosophy and faith, “*tertium non datur*”: that is, there is no third possibility. To take the clear stand for faith is a position of great intellectual clarity and integrity. In fact, it may well preserve the seriousness of a faith which otherwise becomes diluted to the point of unrecognizability by those who seek to engage in dialogue with hardline atheists.

This choice of revelation over reason was what historically always characterized orthodoxy. The effect of this choice, as Strauss observed in *Philosophy and Law*, was to create impregnable fortresses that withstood the tide of the Enlightenment. But if they withstood the tide, they did not much impede it. In fact, by a polemic against those silent fortresses, which could by design hardly be answered by those who were within, members of the Enlightenment were able to make their cause appear victimized and heroic. Indeed, as Strauss also said, the mockery of orthodoxy did not follow upon its refutation; it *was* its refutation. And it seems likely that some of the tart tone of Professor Kraynak’s responses to Dennett, a mocker if ever there was one, is because Kraynak knows that full well.

When it comes to the prospect of transhumanism, however, the maintenance of a saving remnant in the fortress may not either be sufficient to answer its attackers, or even be possible. If the orthodox refuse to accept “enhancement,” they may simply become the slaves—or, perhaps worse, the pets—of their (avowedly) soulless, enhanced former fellows.

Dennett’s apparent openness to classical views might appear to provide an opportunity for finding common ground with those critics of transhumanism who contest philosophically with the moderns *by means of the ancients*. This is, in fact, the third line of argument some critics take up. These are powerful and compelling Aristotelian arguments on behalf of the human—and yet there is a worrisome sense that these arguments are not having the effect they should. One example is Leon Kass’s case for “the wisdom of repugnance,” the famous “yuck factor” argument. It is an attempt to appeal to that substrate of our humanity that is easily ignored because, as substrate, it is simply taken for granted, never paid attention to. The trouble is twofold, however, as Kass and others have themselves acknowledged from the outset. First, the “wisdom of repugnance” is heavily culturally conditioned. It is easy for its progressive opponents to

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show, with some moral indignation, that in previous generations people found interracial marriage or the eating of raw fish yucky. Why should we, they ask, be in the least bothered by the fact that certain things offend our tastes now? We'll get used to them. The second problem is that these critics are in a sense right about that last point—after all, if we couldn't overcome our innate horror of human cloning (the focus of Kass's original essay) then there wouldn't be much need to *invoke* the "yuck factor."

Properly understood, what the "wisdom of repugnance" is getting at is that there is some inarticulate wisdom in our tastes and that if we reason them away or habituate ourselves against them, we may well lose what we are. The problem is that this will have no effect on people who say (to borrow a line from one of Bertolt Brecht's characters), "I don't want to be a human being!" Furthermore, the Aristotelian language which classical philosophy uses is qualitative and as such has a hard time getting through to people who have absorbed—if not with their mother's milk, then at least from their high school science classes—scorn for qualitative language. Such language, the average educated Westerner thinks, is superstitious, unscientific, and even embarrassing. It is hard for him to give the very form of such talk a serious hearing. Yet the whole argument is precisely about the importance of qualities, so that mere incremental, quantitatively increased control over nature can be seen at some point to pose a qualitative and fundamental problem. It is precisely the power of Aristotelian thought that it makes us aware of quality, not just quantity. But it is hard to get past Cartesian prejudices in making the case that way. Arguments like the wisdom of repugnance will only persuade—indeed, will only be intelligible to—those people not scornful of qualitative language, but they probably don't need convincing anyway.

A fourth line of argument, which also has its difficulties, is the appeal to human dignity. And here, paradoxically, the problem is one of apparent agreement. It isn't exactly as if the transhumanists and their critics are arguing about whether or not there is such a thing as human dignity. In fact, in the view of the transhumanists, they are advocating enhancing not just human capabilities but thereby dignity of a sort that many would still consider human. Taken to its most extreme conclusion, as in the vision of Kurzweil, man will morph into the whole of the universe, now made intelligent. That is, our mission is to become God—whether the Biblical one before He creates the world or some Platonic deity that moves in a perfect motion while thinking itself. What greater dignity could one imagine?

Even aside from Kurzweil's far-out idea, it is striking that even at the level of contemporary technology, advocates of the new science seem to

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speak as if they believe they are promoting human dignity. To do this, however, they have to alter older views of human dignity. For Kant, human dignity meant the capacity to transcend the merely empirical by the force of moral will—as when Schiller sees the moral “sublime” depicted in the statue of Laocoön, maintaining his poise even while being torn apart by a sea monster. But for the Euthanasia Societies of Great Britain and America, relief is required from “the indignity of deterioration, dependence, and hopeless pain.” The demand for a dignified death of the body, understood as a death without suffering, is actually predicated on an understanding of man that makes the true dignity of “suffering accepted” impossible. This is a point made eloquently by Paul Ramsey in his 1974 essay “The Indignity of ‘Death with Dignity.’” Ramsey shows that indignity has come to mean the suffering of the body rather than the defamation of the spirit. There is a concomitant rise of talk of death as “a natural part of life,” along with the proviso that it be as little unpleasant as possible—the same talk parents give their children when the family dog is put down—indicating that our understanding of dignity is becoming more about ourselves as bodies and less about what is essentially human. Arguments appealing to older conceptions of human dignity will fail to convince transhumanists, and may sound archaic even to non-transhumanists.

### **Remembering the Human Being**

If these four approaches to criticizing the transhumanist project are likely to have little effect, perhaps there may be another way in, via the apparent contradiction pointed out by Robert Kraynak—namely that scientific materialists like Daniel Dennett who wish us to think of ourselves as mere potential for transformation still somehow cling to a certain moral idealism, at once denying and affirming human dignity. To draw out this point, we may reflect on the thought of Michel de Montaigne, a non-utopian humanist. As David Lewis Schaefer has shown, Montaigne was very sympathetic to modern science, especially biology and medicine. But he was also deeply interested in understanding what it is to be human. Of course, Montaigne is a notoriously cryptic writer whose *Essays* can be read in widely differing ways, and so what follows is but one possible (but hopefully useful) interpretation of him.

In the third essay of his first book, “Our Feelings Reach Out Beyond Us,” Montaigne points out that we human beings are never simply present with ourselves. We are always elsewhere: thinking about the future, about how we look to others, about our past and what it means for our future.

We are never “in the moment” the way an animal is. (We need self-help gurus to *teach* us to live in the moment; dogs *always* do.) Montaigne’s first book of essays explores the implications of the fact that we self-conscious beings are always both *what we are* and *what we are not*—because in formulating what we are to ourselves, we are also the formulator and as such not formulated in the formulation. The main implication of this idea is for our mortality. Montaigne engages in what seems to be a spoof of the Stoic opinion that we can take a rational view of our own death. Even as one seeks to conceive of the point in time when one no longer exists, one still implicitly imagines the conceiver as the thing in the future grasping at its own nonexistence; the conceiver continues to exist as a given in the mind, and so we fail, and all the Stoic consolations fail to console.

Yet, by the beginning of Montaigne’s third book, he says that while he is never *at* home, he is never far from it. We may understand the Montaignean project to be about learning how to come back, to return to the home base of the human situation, while acknowledging that we cannot stay there entirely—that we will always, through reason and imagination, go outwards from it. That is, Montaigne acknowledges the inevitability of that pressing eternally outwards that we find in the new science, but he teaches how to return as well. That this is a life’s project, that it is possible for very few, and that it is in many ways dependent on an aristocratic life devoted to contemplation rather than labor, are all true. Nor can or should we all aspire to become Montaignes. His is a version, and a rather Socratic one at that, of the philosophic life, and it is not for most of us. But in Montaigne’s understanding that we are always, as human, double—that we are always problematic in ways that no other being, subhuman or superhuman, is—there is a starting point for pushing back against transhumanism.

Like the Aristotelian approach, Montaigne’s also seeks to reveal and describe the substrate, the part of us that is essentially human, which we all know about because we are human. Yet it does so not by using the sort of qualitative language that Aristotle found appropriate for addressing noble Athenians, but through psychological observation and specific examples that are graspable by contemporaries without much translation from one rhetoric to another.

Moreover, Montaigne’s approach gives an initial answer to that cheerful historicism of scientific progress which denies there is such a thing as human nature, and which is happy for us to transform ourselves in any way that “works.” That answer is that, yes, human beings are in part about pushing outwards and struggling with limits, but we are also inward

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beings that reflect on, worry about, imagine about, and at root understand ourselves in relation to those limits. Indeed, Montaigne enables us to comprehend at least the bare minimums of limitation that are necessary for us to function in the world as humans. Without necessities like death, being one person rather than another, and doing one thing rather than anything, life becomes truly dreamlike: a state of being where all reality is virtual, capable of being changed at will, but where nothing really tells the will what to change. One student of mine said that such a prospect caused him vertigo. It is a different form of nausea than “yuck,” but it will perhaps do for starters.

In addition, Montaigne’s teaching about the duality of human beings perhaps provides a clue as to how to take advantage of the scientific materialists’ lingering high-minded moral idealism. It is one thing to show that their moral idealism contradicts their materialism. But it might be altogether more productive to encourage them to think seriously about their ideals—to ask those who still believe in dignity why they are so eager to assure us that we are not simply machines for the accumulation of pleasurable experiences. Perhaps if one could get past the simplistic Enlightenment propaganda about freedom of choice and maximization of control, it might be possible to begin to show how the overcoming of limits is indeed one element of human dignity, but that therefore they themselves in the end really want there to be limits.

It is worth juxtaposing Montaigne’s humanism with Leo Strauss’s argument, in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, that humanism is impossible because man is the being that transcends himself or falls below himself. Montaigne’s humanism seems to begin where Strauss’s rejection of humanism is at its most decisive. It is as though he were to say to Strauss, “Your remark makes a wonderful photograph, but an inadequate movie. You are right; man is the being who always transcends, so man cannot be the measure. But man is also the being who always comes back to the original situation of being in-between, semi-determined, of seeking through knowledge or control to free himself from control. Humanism as traditionally conceived—the remaking of the world to suit man—is, as you say, an impossibility. Pursued in full seriousness, it will actually produce the opposite: It will transform man to suit the world, thereby taking us away from that equivocal, double position that is characteristically human. But humanism properly understood is not a project of world transformation but of human self-understanding.”

Montaignean humanism is Socratic but differs from Plato’s humanism. Montaigne says that, whereas Plato feared our hard bondage to pain

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and pleasure because it attaches the soul too much to the body, Montaigne himself fears it “because it detaches and unbinds it.” That is, Montaigne wanted to bring body and soul together into a whole being: the human being. Such a humanism can seemingly be (as it traditionally was) directed against the excesses of spirituality—against a Christianity that went further even than Plato in denying the body for the sake of the soul. But it also may be useful against the excesses of the body, the body theorized and mutated, the body seeking to transform the world and thereby transforming itself into mere world.

Curiously, from the point of view of the original humanism, the project of *transhumanism* looks remarkably theological. After all, Kurzweil’s ultimate dream is of men made into gods. In this it shares much with the modern, stridently secular humanism that followed Hegel’s discovery of God in history. And, perhaps more than any of its predecessors, the transhumanist vision makes clear what is at least implicit in all those earlier utopias, even in Marx’s apparent celebration of human emancipation and possibility: namely, how profoundly hostile such ambitions are to human life—even when they present themselves as liberating, improving, or merely assisting it. Human beings, by their very nature, are never entirely at home in a world of things, much less in a world ruled by gods. To make the world wholly safe for man, as the earlier utopian humanisms sought, turns out to be impossible because man is not univocal and, as Montaigne says, isn’t where he is and doesn’t believe what he believes. To make human beings wholly suitable to the world, and ultimately to make them merge into each other, all in the name of human liberation, is in fact to reduce man into a beastly godhead. To clearly see that transformation for what it is—to see the degradation in the divinization—we need to remind ourselves of who we really are and what we really need.