

The Rhetoric of Extinction

Charles T. Rubin

When reading of the wonders being prepared for us by researchers in the fields of robotics, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology, it is hard not to conclude that invention has become the mother of necessity. For short of some destructive Luddite reaction, we are told, the promise of these scientific and technological developments will impel us beyond the “relief of man’s estate.” Our growing capacities to manipulate matter will produce a complete re-engineering of human life, casting us out altogether from our present domain. Occupying its newfound lands, intelligence will eventually be embodied in machines rather than man. Any lingering doubts about our impotence to stop this increase in power over man’s given nature should be submerged by pride in leading the way to something better.

Selling human extinction is still not quite this easy. Leave aside the natural propensity to favor our own species, a propensity not yet entirely subdued by ecological consciousness or animal rights. More immediately, the twentieth century was filled with historical inevitabilities that weren’t, and with technological developments that turned out to have costs as well as benefits, or that otherwise failed to live up to their utopian potentials. And who can ignore the ongoing role that disease, scarcity, and suffering play around the world; isn’t the gap between haves and have-nots wide enough as it is, without adding spectacular new dimensions like telepathy or practical immortality? Isn’t there more to be done to allow people to live healthier, more productive, and happier lives without giving up on being human altogether?

Four recent books demonstrate how those who rally around the banner of post-humanity seek to answer such doubts, and how they seek to advance a cause that, absent some tragically irrational “step backward,” they believe has already won. These books are very different from each other in style and tone, ranging from the polemical to the confessional. But they all converge on certain ways of focusing the issues, embracing or employing what I will call a “rhetoric of extinction.” By understanding this style of argument, we can understand its deep flaws.

Charles T. Rubin is an associate professor of political science at Duquesne University.

Life Without Limits

Ramez Naam's *More Than Human: Embracing the Promise of Biological Enhancement* is the most conventional book of the bunch. It is interesting in the way that a symptom is interesting to a doctor, i.e., less for its own sake than for what it reveals about underlying problems. Naam, onetime software developer for Microsoft, has put together a catalog of cutting-edge research in order to explore what it foreshadows for future technologies that would radically modify human nature. As indicated by the subtitle, most of the book focuses on biological enhancements through genetic engineering, and all the usual promises about the control of disease, unhappiness, and death are clearly laid out. As he moves toward his concluding chapter titled "Life Without Limits"—not quite a fair summary of the book's essential promise, but almost—Naam also touches on what is coming in the way of direct interfaces between mind and machine.

Next up the scale of quality is James Hughes's *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future*. Hughes teaches health policy at Trinity College in Connecticut, but his more impressive credential in this context is that he is founder and executive director of the World Transhumanist Association. Clearly, he is interested in movement-building. To that end, the book contains myriad polemics against "BioLuddites," at least acknowledging that his opponents have arguments, although usually not taking them very seriously. But the critique is secondary to a detailed examination of the various, somewhat fractious, and occasionally loony (not his judgment) factions that Hughes would like to see combined into a growing party of transhumanism. We learn how the transhumanists are split between libertarians and progressives (just as the "BioLuddites" have left-wing and right-wing versions). We learn of F.M. Esfandiary, supposedly the first person to use the term "transhumanism," who later changed his name to FM-2030. We find out that his former lover, Nancie Clark, is married to Max More (originally Max O'Connor), "one of the pioneers of cryonics in England" and a co-founder of the Extropian variant of transhumanism. All in all, we are treated to an instructive picture of some of the main organizational players and internal debates among transhumanists, along with the development of their positions. Hughes attempts to provide something of a theoretical framework around which a united transhumanism could grow, suggesting that "personhood," a concept whose vagueness he acknowledges, replace "human" as the touchstone of democratic citizenship in order to maximize "diversity and compassionate solidarity" with a wider variety of beings.

He also has some ideas about appropriate policies and institutions, ranging from vague visions of a “global” order of “evolutionary governance” to strangely specific plans for a “Quality of Adjusted Life Year” calculation that can be used to ration the value of medical and enhancement services and provide some basis for the healthcare/enhancement vouchers he would like to see created.

With *Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies—And What It Means to Be Human*, Joel Garreau, a *Washington Post* reporter and the author of *Edge City* and *The Nine Nations of North America*, has written yet another lively and intelligent book. It is built around interviews with key thinkers, advocates, and critics such as Vernor Vinge, Ray Kurzweil, Francis Fukuyama, Bill Joy, and Jaron Lanier, along with a pretty fair minded reading of their works. Garreau, who has a good eye for intriguing technological developments, is mightily impressed by “The Curve,” the apparently exponential increase in the capacities of information technology, which in turn could lead to similar increases in the capabilities of other technologies. He uses his subjects to illuminate three scenarios for the outcome of The Curve, which he calls “Heaven,” “Hell,” and “Prevail.” In the first, we necessarily get “life without limits,” and biotech, nanotech, and computers change everything. In the second, these same technologies necessarily bring us to disaster. In the third, technology is not powerful enough to predetermine the future, and people can still make practical choices about what does and does not get developed. A fourth possibility, “Transcend,” concludes the book; here it seems we gain a kind of spiritual transcendence by perfecting our humanity through the conquest of nature. Garreau seeks to be rigorous in his development of the three scenarios, and professes to be reporting on them and not advocating any one. But it is pretty clear by the end of the book that he is on the side of enhancement—about which, more below.

Michael Chorost’s *Rebuilt: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human* is surely the most intriguing of all these books. Born with a severe hearing impairment, over the space of a few hours at age 36 Chorost finds himself losing what little hearing he had. As a result, he gets a cochlear implant, a computer that processes sound and sends signals directly to the auditory nerves, bypassing the hair cells in the ear that would normally do this job. In Chorost’s view, becoming this combination of man and machine makes him a cyborg, and he insists that being a cyborg means more than having an artificial joint or an implanted chip. “Real cyborg technology exerts control of some kind over the body,” he says. The software “makes if-then-else decisions and acts on the body to carry them out.”

The book chronicles his experiences learning how to use the hardware/software that allows him to hear, and how to re-learn it when the system is upgraded. Along the way, he deftly conveys a great deal of information about hearing, deafness, and the technology behind the implant. But even more tellingly, Chorost describes the intellectual and emotional changes wrought by seeing himself as a cyborg, particularly in relationship to his rather fragile love life. If, in the process, some readers may learn more than they wish to know about this wistful tale, there are rewards in Chorost's gentle wit and honest introspection.

Yet honest introspection is not necessarily the same as deep introspection. While he has a strong sense of the richness of human experience and the limits of the capabilities of computers, there remains something troubling about Chorost's insistence that the emotional changes he undergoes post-implant are the result of his new cyborg status. For example, when a woman to whom he is very attracted admits she doesn't "feel the chemistry," he is proud of himself for not kicking her out of his house, getting angry, or trying to make her feel guilty. He gives three different explanations for this new self-control. First, he had learned in a previous relationship, which he had broken off resentfully, that "love is like grace. It's not something you can demand or even earn." Second, while a man's pressuring a woman to get what he wants could have survival value, as a cyborg "perhaps I am so new that the species just doesn't know what to do with me. . . . I just do not know what the universe thinks my survival value is." Finally, therefore, he should be "willing to lose with honor" because one day he may "win with honor."

Chorost's mention of honor suggests that his life experience is teaching him to behave like a gentleman in the face of rejection. One could also say that he is learning something of the nature of love—a theme that is important to the book. But Chorost reflects far less on these perennial aspects of being human than he does on the arcane and ideologically driven debates over what it means to be a cyborg. Even as he tellingly describes the human workings of his psyche, he cannot break free of the ideological lens—"I am a cyborg"—through which he sees and understands all his experiences. At an early stage of his implant experience, Chorost is unable to decide whether Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" is "postmodernist bullshit, socialist rant, manic Nietzschean poetry, sly parody, brilliant cultural theory, or (quite possibly) all of the above." But later he sees it as a "straightforward description of my life," because of its postmodern emphasis on the abandonment of "master narratives" and "unitary identity." "It is not that I had acquired a postmodern

way of thinking. It was that I had acquired a postmodern *body*.” His story is a powerful example of how a technological mindset, not just the technologies themselves, can transform the experience of being human.

Of course, Chorost is entitled to his self-understanding. But he has put it before the public in a book. Given his sensible inclinations and the fact that life crises (such as his suddenly worsened deafness) can alter the shape of anyone’s life, we are entitled to wonder why it is so important for him to see himself as a cyborg rather than as a human being whose life is enriched by a new tool. Is this really the deepest reservoir of self-knowledge and moral wisdom available to him in modern times? Or does the self-creation and open-endedness he associates with being a cyborg appeal to him precisely because he lacks the intellectual tools to reflect on the constraining elements of a moral life?

This moral thinness lies at the center of the rhetoric of extinction, the thread that ties together all these books. Faced with the inadequacies of human life, we are promised something better—and told that resistance is probably futile. And faced with an inadequate understanding of what is good about human life, we accept these prophecies with either an ignorant shrug or an excessive enthusiasm.

A Disabled Species

The case for extinction begins by focusing our attention on the miseries of disability. Disability is at the core of Chorost’s story, the beginning of most of Naam’s chapters, throughout Hughes’s polemic, and the frame for Garreau’s book. Stories about how cutting-edge research can help disabled people lead fuller lives, or help sick people survive, engage our sympathy not only for the individuals who need help, but for those who are trying to help them. Garreau makes a point, for example, of how a one-time director of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) was motivated to advance research on direct man/machine interfaces out of a desire to help his daughter with cerebral palsy. As he says in the last line of his book, “Who could argue with that?”

Leading with disability not only appears to give transhumanism the moral high ground of compassion; it offers a preemptive defense against the “giggle” and “yuck” factors, or the man-on-the-street reaction that some of this research is too “far out” or too unpleasant to contemplate. Who would really want to have a port in his head to plug in a computer? People who otherwise couldn’t move or communicate, that’s who. Naam says bluntly that the cost/benefit ratio for new procedures is quite

different for someone who is ill or disabled than it is for a healthy person, and he finds that a comforting thought in relation to the great risks being run by experimental subjects. Likewise, Hughes is quite confident that the first candidates for brain-control implants will be criminals—though “we will have to carefully balance liberty against the public good,” he says piously. There is a great utilitarian convergence between the needs of scientific and technical advancement, the hopes of the ill, and the availability of the criminal. And if things don’t work out quite as planned, we can be comforted by the words of Jesse Gelsinger, a victim of experimental gene-therapy: “What’s the worst that can happen to me? I die, and it’s for the babies.”

But concern for the ill and disabled is really only an entry point for the real arguments of the transhumanists, who of course seek a world where there will be no such people to be concerned for. One of their key premises is that anything that can be used to treat an illness or overcome a disability is likely to be equally useful for the creation of enhancements. If, as Naam points out, it is possible to create computer-assisted sight for the blind, then it will also be possible to extend the capacities of sight for the healthy, allowing anyone to see parts of the spectrum now invisible to us. The knowledge we get by treating disease gives us the power to improve minds, enhance bodies, and reconstruct human beings. For Hughes, the only thing that can explain public resistance to plunging enthusiastically “beyond therapy” is a “deep Puritan strain that runs through the emerging BioLuddite movement... Puritan anxiety that control over the body will facilitate sin.” (Of course, he does not bother to ask whether there is a grain of truth in this—that too much control of our bodies, treating them as mere objects of the will, might in fact facilitate something once called sin.)

But the advocates of post-humanity have a larger problem within the framework of their own argument. By beginning with disability and illness, they tacitly posit the existence of a norm of health and wholeness. Even Chorost, who professes to delight in the un-limitedness of his cyborg identity, is happy to achieve hearing that is closer to *normal* than he ever had before; he does not lament that his implant does not allow him to hear dog highs or whale lows. Yet if there is indeed such a norm that governs our embrace of technology, then it could also be the basis for saying no to uses of knowledge which transcend or violate it.

When Naam or Hughes come to some problem in the deployment of enhancement technologies that they are willing to acknowledge—such as issues of safety or equality of access—they are only too happy to posit

that “we as a society” will somehow have to deal with it. As Hughes points out, transhumanists may disagree about the best mechanisms for solving these problems: Naam is a great believer in the marketplace, and expects that inequalities of access will be moderated over time as the cost of enhancement technologies declines. Hughes seems to find government intervention more to his progressive tastes. But these solutions miss or ignore the real problems we will face if our emerging enhancement technologies are as radical as the transhumanists believe.

Will we be able to separate those technological advances that serve good ends from those that do not? How will we try to ensure that beneficial advances are used only for beneficial purposes? Will fulfilling some desires make us worse, not better? Are some powers with good uses so potentially destructive that a wise society might choose not to develop them in the first place? Will the inequalities between the enhanced and unenhanced lead to new forms of political tyranny or political unrest? By reducing the challenges we face to issues of safety and distribution, the transhumanists reveal their underlying lack of moral and political seriousness. And even on these narrow issues, the transhumanists seem naïve. It is one thing to note, as Naam does, how the price of LASIK eye surgery has declined steeply as the supply of providers has increased. But when some life-prolongation technique comes along, availability will be a matter of life and death—or stand as a dividing line between the still human and the post-human. Who will be satisfied to be told: “Wait awhile and the price will come down?” At the same time, providing “safe” enhancements to everybody could involve a good deal of saying “no,” if current regulatory practices are any indication. Yet thinking about limits is not really part of the transhumanist project.

Blind Optimism and Cheap Liberty

The rhetoric of extinction has many clever ways of avoiding these deeper issues. The first is an optimism that would make Pollyanna blush, an optimism only highlighted by the lip-service given to the problems that might arise in the post-human future. Such downsides are mentioned, usually in passing, only to provide further assurance that unmolested and uninhibited science can surmount them. The great depth of this false optimism is seen in one of the few loud false notes of Garreau’s book. His “Hell” scenario is derived from the belief that the interrelated “GRIN” technologies (genetics, robotics, information- and nano-technology) will not work right or not work as expected or get out of control. Hell is a result of fail-

ure. Yet Heaven (much like the Prevail scenario and his Transcend speculations that come to resemble it) is a result of success; GRIN technologies fulfill all of their advocates' hopes. Garreau gives scant attention to the possibility that such success could, from some points of view, be hellish. Surely it is the height of folly to think that things will work out for the best if everybody gets what he wants.

But by presenting a Hell scenario at all, Garreau is a model of probity compared with Hughes or Naam. One looks in vain in their books for any systematic consideration of what a bad person might do with the remarkable technological abilities that they see coming. In the rhetoric of extinction, it seems that the only bad people are those who would prohibit the development of these new technologies. Yet if there is a slippery slope between treatment and enhancement, then surely there is one between enhancement and manipulation. Extolling the virtues of mood alteration at the touch of a button, Naam does not pause to consider the commercial possibilities that pimps might appreciate in an implant that could turn sexual desire on and off, or the military uses of inducing rage. Speaking of the development of cybernetic super-egos, it is all one to Hughes whether it has "settings for Kohlberg's Stage Six, Islamic Sharia, or Ayn Randian selfishness." Death Camp Guard apparently escapes his notice.

Mindless optimism of this sort is vital to the rhetoric of extinction, intimately bound up as it is with the effort to define the issue of the future of science and technology as entirely a question of individual choice. It starts with something that sounds so sensible: who would not want a longer, healthier, happier life? The modern world has long been committed to this goal. But then we're off to the enhancement races. If you don't want an implant that allows you to feel the feelings of your sexual partner, or that gives you a direct feed to your brain of whatever the Internet will become, or if you don't want to design children with a genetic leg up in the world, fine—nobody is going to make you. But don't try to tell me that if I do want it, I can't have it. Don't tell me that the longer, healthier, happier life being promised is nothing more than a hedonic treadmill. And, as Garreau gently suggests at the beginning of his book, if you choose to remain a "Natural," don't expect much consideration from the ranks of the "Enhanced."

To the rhetoric of extinction, questioning the results of free choice is a rejection of liberty. But it is an old observation that liberty degenerates into license if it means anything goes. Transhumanists did not create our contemporary forgetfulness of virtues and vices, our eroded standards of comportment, our debunking of moral excellence, and our culture of

immediate gratification. The rhetoric of extinction did not create the conditions of our society that help turn liberty into license. But its relentless focus on individually defined satisfaction depends on and accelerates these moral and cultural trends.

Of course, liberty is a crucial element of any decent human life. But the more one observes the extreme libertarianism at the heart of the rhetoric of extinction, the harder it is to take seriously. As we saw in Chorost's account of himself, the free play of choice is what is left when the ability to think seriously about what is choiceworthy is lost. The rhetoric of extinction makes it seem as if we will no longer have to make choices based on scarcity of time or resources; it casts out faith and reason alike as grounds for universal norms that might direct choice; and it can hardly adduce tradition or human nature as compelling guides in the remanufactured world it imagines. When natural constraints are increasingly non-existent and moral constraints are entirely up to the individual, what can liberty be but choice for the sake of choice, or mere willfulness? Transhumanism is really just relativism of a hyper-modern sort, and being a card-carrying transhumanist, a renegade against all moral norms, is just as important as (and perhaps more important than) transhumanist science.

Triumph of the Will

In the real world, knowing that you can't always get what you want is a sign of maturity. In the real world, the power we already have from modern science and technology has shown ample evidence of creating dangers along with opportunities, of strengthening some of the fragile foundations of everyday decency even as it weakens others. Yet the rhetoric of extinction would have us believe that the restraints and controls of the past are of no value in relation to the post-human future. For if "we" let them stop us, if "we" don't develop the latest possible enhancement, somebody else will; if "we" make these technologies illegal, they will just be forced underground. Better "we" have them, and that they be in the open. The promises of more life and more autonomy are just too great for constraint. The power of necessity stands behind our drive to overcome necessity.

The end result is, to say the least, curious. We are told that nothing should stand in the way of satisfying our most powerful desires by our most powerful technologies—not government, not religion, not custom, not even our common humanity. We are told that all decisions about these technologies should be left to individuals. It is useless to say that "of course people will not be allowed to harm others," because this proviso assumes

a human equality and solidarity that will no longer exist in practice and that will have fallen prey to post-human relativism in theory. It adds nothing to speak of the decisions “society” will have to make, or the rituals that will make our choices meaningful, when the fundamental decisions are in principle completely private. On the basis of this uninhibited willfulness, power is the only common currency—not justice, not decency, not anything that is binding on human beings as such. Hughes and Naam opine that as people get more technology they will become freer and smarter. They better hope that our rising IQs correlate with greater wisdom and decency—for if they have their way, people will have more power and less direction than ever before.

But of course, the dream may also prove to be a nightmare. Under such circumstances, in which the mere fact of a desire legitimates that desire, is it not more reasonable to believe that unconstrained wills will often come into conflict? Even in a world that looks to us to have nothing but plenty and promise, will its inhabitants not have unsatisfied desires, relative deprivation, and the ability to create new desires for the pleasure of satisfying them? Even in a world where we can all be tyrants in our own little virtual realities, will there not be those who prefer to dominate real bodies—and gain some advantage thereby? Whether the power of enhancement is distributed by a progressive government, or held by a small handful of “Controllers,” or left entirely to the libertarian marketplace, what else but power will govern human relationships in this world of post-human demigods?

In the end, the rhetoric of extinction proves to be a classic example of “bait and switch.” Lured by a compassionate drive to assist those in need, we find ourselves switched to a morality of “me, me, me!” Promised that technology will satisfy our desires and free us of “master narratives,” we find ourselves at the mercy of our own unconstrained desires and potentially subject to our neighbors’ more powerfully restless wills. An enchanting picture of the technologically possible gives way, in the apotheosis of choice, to an impoverished understanding of the human. The party of post-humanity gives up on mankind, which it barely understands.