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A Philosophical Look at Transhumanism

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Abstract: In the past few decades, technology has been transforming human life at a faster pace than ever before. Through technological developments, we are gifted with unlimited and unprecedented advancements as never before. Although humanity rejoices in being empowered by these technological developments, it is also worried about where they may be leading to. These technological advancements are supported by a movement which is known as Transhumanism. Transhumanism is considered to be both dehumanizing and superhumanising. It is super humanizing because there are many possibilities through which humankind can overcome many difficulties. On the other hand, it is considered to be dehumanizing because it also poses many threats and considerations to human nature and values.

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In the past few decades, human beings have been trying to transform the human nature with a view of overcoming all the limitations. This discloses our yearning to become better than we are, better than human (*homo sapiens*), to become *homo superior*. There is a tendency in all, or at least in some individuals, always to search for a way around every obstacle and limitation, and to make one's life happier and better in this world (Hansell and Grassie, 2010: 13).

Transhumanism is a movement that has gradually evolved over the past decade. It can be defined as a movement which advocates the transformation of the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing technologies and making them widely available (Hays, 2019: 1). This movement promotes research into areas such as life-extension projects (becoming immortal), cryonics, molecular nanotechnology, Human Enhancement (HE) projects, Artificial Intelligence (AI), uploading human consciousness into computers and Designer Babies (DB) (Samuelson, 2010: 19). The chief objective of Transhumanism is to make our body live forever.

Transhumanism is considered to be both dehumanizing (Fukuyama, 2003: 6 & 8) as well as superhumanizing. These different views about this movement provoke us to question what exactly Transhumanism is. Before embarking on an investigation of such an ethically loaded issue, let us delineate the 'what', the 'division', the 'when,' and the 'how' of this phenomenon called Transhumanism.

1 What is Transhumanism?

Transhumanism is loosely defined as a movement which gradually evolved over the past two decades, promoting the cause of posthumanity. However, different thinkers and transhumanistic advocates have different ways of understanding—this particular movement. The term, Transhumanism, was coined in 1957 (Livingstone, 2015: 16) by Julian Huxley. For Huxley,

Transhumanism is considered to be both dehumanizing as well as superhumanizing. These different views about this movement provoke us to question what exactly Transhumanism is!

Transhumanism is another word for ‘evolutionary humanism’ in which a human being makes a deliberate effort to “[t]ranscend itself – not just sporadically...but in its entirety, as humanity” (Huxley, 1957: 17). Max More, another proponent of Transhumanism, defines it, “[a]s a class of philosophy of life that seeks the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by the life-promoting principles and values” (Cohen & Hanson, 2009: 95). “Transhumanism,” writes Nick Bostrom “is ... an outgrowth of secular humanism and the enlightenment. It holds that the current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our mental states and moods” (Bostrom, 2010: 55).

The enhancement of human beings is seen as the regulative notion of Transhumanism. Science and technology occupy the central places in Transhumanism, and they are considered to be the two great assets of Transhumanism. Thus, the contemporary literature on Transhumanism encompasses not only science and

technology, but various discourses with distinct purposes; hence, we cannot consider Transhumanism as one movement, but as multiple movements (Transhumanisms), with distinct purposes. Some of the most discussed and debated Transhumanisms are: (i) Democratic Transhumanism, (ii) Libertarian Transhumanism, (iii) Extropianism and (iv) Singularitarianism. Without dealing with these movements and their purpose, it is difficult to formulate the working definition of Transhumanism.

a. Democratic Transhumanism

Democratic Transhumanism, which is chiefly propagated by James Hughes, encourages the state to embrace Transhumanistic projects and proposes that these kinds of technology and scientific enhancements should be accessible to everyone rather than only to the few rich people (Hughes, 2009). Along these lines, the proponents of this approach are critical of the way in which power is distributed unequally based on gender, race, class, religion, and so on. They also insist that people should not be discriminated from being enhanced on the basis of their class, economic powers, sex and gender, and everyone should have access to transhumanistic projects in a democratic way. Hughes also strongly emphasizes the importance of having strong guarantors of these things. This thought of Hughes can be seen in his writings, “Techno- progressives, like social democrat transhumanists in general, believe democracy requires strong guarantors of civil liberties and minority rights, a relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth and power, a strong state accountable and transparent to its citizens, and a process for deliberation and decision making open to all competent persons” (Hughes, 2009).

b. Libertarian Transhumanism

Zoltan Istvan, one of the world’s most influential transhumanists and the US presidential candidate in 2016, is an important proponent of this ideology. Libertarian Transhumanism is a political ideology and theory which is the synthesisation of libertarianism and Transhumanism (Istvan, 2017). Libertarian Transhumanism

thinkers accept that all transhumanistic projects aim at the good of a person's life, that is, his 'well being'. Hence, the principles of self-ownership and the free market have to be the guarantors of the right to enhancement, and they believe that it will produce greater prosperity, development, and the best outcome in the society (Istvan, 2017). In addition, they strongly assert that any attempt to limit the right to go for transhumanistic projects is a violation of civil rights and civil liberties (Ferrando, 2013: 27). They also reject public policies and government regulated policies which are advocated by democratic transhumanists because they fear that the state will steer or limit the choices of individuals (Livingstone, 2015: 318).

c. Extropianism

Extropianism is directly concerned with the framework of values and standards for the improvement of the human condition. More, the main proponent of this approach, describes perpetual progress, self-transformation, practical optimism, intelligent technology, open society, self-direction and rational thinking as the principles of Extropianism (Ferrando, 2013: 27). 'Extropy' or 'Extropianism' is not a meticulously defined technical term in philosophy. Extropy is used metaphorically as an antonym to entropy (Science, Technology & the Future, 2013). Diane Duane was the first to use this term to declare that it is possible to obtain an optimistic future through technological and enhancement interventions (More, 2019). The main belief of extropians is that advances in science and technology will someday allow people to live indefinitely; an extropian shares in this belief by doing research and development or by voluntarily allowing testing the new technology on his/her body (More, 2010: 136). Extropist is considered to be a modern derivation of the transhumanist philosophy of Extropianism. The Extropist Manifesto sums up Extropianism in the following five phrases, "Endless

eXtension, Transcending Restriction, Overcoming Property, Intelligence, Smart Machines” (More, 2010: 137).

d. Singularitarianism

Singularitarianism is a movement which bases itself on the belief that the technological singularity and the creation of superintelligence will likely happen in the future (Livingstone, 2015: 334). Hence, this movement claims that deliberate action ought to be taken to ensure that the singularity benefits all human beings (Livingstone, 2015: 334).

The discussion of these movements makes it evident that to arrive at a consensus regarding the understanding of Transhumanism is not easy. Nevertheless, the studies on these movements have given us a general understanding of what Transhumanism is. The common thread that runs through these movements is developing humanity with the help of technology and science. Based on our expositions, the working definition of Transhumanism can be formulated as an “Intellectual, social, cultural, philosophical movement that affirms the possibility of improving the human condition through advancements in the field of applied sciences, such as neurosciences, genomics, robotics, nanotechnology, computer science, artificial intelligence, etc., especially by developing and promoting research in the aforementioned fields..”

2 The Distinction between Transhumanism and Posthumanity

The two terms that are inevitably associated with this research work are Transhumanism and posthumanity. Before arguing this distinction, it has to be acknowledged that the term ‘transhuman’ is distinct from Transhumanism. Transhumanism is a movement; while, ‘transhuman’ can be described as an intermediary form, somewhere between human and posthuman (Irudhayadhasan, 2017: 7). Transhumans are humans in transition who are striving to become posthuman (Irudhayadhasan, 2017: 8). Against this background, posthumanity can be understood as a category of

beings who radically and categorically transformed themselves from humans with the help of advanced technologies. Hence, it is clear that posthumans are beings who have reached a state that is beyond the conventional definitions and attributes of contemporary humans and transhumans are trying to achieve the state.

3 A Brief History of Transhumanism

In one sense, one can broadly say that the story of humanity is the history of Transhumanism (Harrison & Wolyniak, 2015: 465). Some even note that the use of the word Transhumanism has its roots in Dante's *Paradiso* and in the Pauline epistles (Harrison & Wolyniak, 2015: 466). However, as a movement, Transhumanism has its roots in rational humanism and in the Age of Enlightenment (Bostrom, 2005: 2). The Age of Enlightenment is often said to have started with the publication of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, (*The New Tool*) in the year 1620. In his *magnum opus*, Bacon proposes and stresses the importance of scientific methodology based on empirical investigation rather than on a priori reasoning (Bacon,

2000: 7). Bacon also advocated the project of 'effecting all things possible,' by which he meant using science to achieve mastery over nature in order to improve the living condition of human beings (Bostrom, 2005: 2). In the year 1784, Immanuel Kant in his famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" sums up enlightenment as follows:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (*Sapere aude.*) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment! (Kant, 1784).

This heritage of Enlightenment in combination with the influences of Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Kant, Marquis de Condorcet, and others form the basis for rational humanism (Bostrom, 2005: 2). Rational humanism emphasizes empirical science and critical reasoning rather than religious authority and revelation. This rational humanism serves as the intellectual basis for Transhumanism (Bostrom, 2005: 4). The second major inspiration for transhumanist thought is drawn from Fredrick Nietzsche (1844-1900) (Bostrom, 2005: 5). Nietzsche in his masterpiece *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* explains his famous doctrine of *der Übermensch* (the superman):

I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man. What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment (Nietzsche, 1972: 41-42).

Though the thought of Nietzsche does not refer directly to technological transformation, there are surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision and the transhumanistic vision. The very term ‘transhuman’ seems to have been used in 1957 by Huxley in his book *New Bottles for New Wine*. He used this word to describe the concept of ‘evolutionary humanism’. Huxley and his friends, John Burdon, Sanderson Haldane, and John Desmond Bernal have played important roles in the development of Transhumanism. In 1920, these three expressed their views which became prominent views in contemporary Transhumanism. They highlighted the evolving nature of human beings and encouraged the deliberate use of eugenics which now serves as the basis for designer babies. Hence, these three are considered to be the prophets of Transhumanism (Bostrom, 2005: 4). In the 1930s, these ideas were further developed by the Red scientists of Cambridge University

(Samuelson, 2010: 20-21). They had a deep faith in the capacity of science and technology to improve the human condition. However, the Nazis' malicious use of eugenics and the horrors of the Second World War invalidated the goal of these transhumanists and scientists (Livingstone, 2015: 113).

In the 1940s cybernetics and computer science were developed by English mathematicians and pioneering scientists. In the 1960s, new optimistic scenarios about humanity and AI were articulated by science fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, etc., and their articulations can be seen as the starting points for all the science fictions in literature (Samuelson, 2010: 23). In the 1960s, various organizations began to advocate life extension, cryonics, space colonization and advances in biotechnology, neuroscience, and neurotechnology which are important projects in Transhumanism (Livingstone, 2015: 208). In the 1980s, More brought Transhumanism to the academic field and formalized it as a transhumanist thought by advocating the principle of extropy. More considers the human stage as “the transitional stage standing between our animal stage and our posthuman future, and these posthuman stages will be reached,” according to More, “through genetic engineering, life-extending biosciences, intelligence intensifiers, smarter interfaces to smart computers, neural-computer integration, worldwide data networks, virtual reality, intelligent agencies, swift electronics communication, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, neural networks, artificial life, off-planet migration and molecular nanotechnology” (More, 2009). In 1998, Nick Bostrom and David Pearce founded the World Transhumanist Association (WTA) (Samuelson, 2010: 24) and in the same year, a group of transhumanist activists including Bostrom, Pearce, More and others, authored the Transhumanist Declaration (Samuelson, 2010: 24). This Transhumanist Declaration expresses the various ethical stands that can be taken by transhumanists

especially when ethical dilemmas arise from technological advances.

Bostrom sums up his reasons for founding WTA in three points: (i) “To support discussion on transhumanist thought and to create a public awareness of technology advancements,” (ii) “To propose solutions for the potential consequences (threats) of emerging technologies,” and (iii) “To create a novel platform for transhumanist thought in the field of academic science” (Science, Technology & the Future, 2013). The Extropy Institute, the Foresight Institute, the Immortality Institute, the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technology and the Singularity Institute for AI are other contemporary organizations and associations which play vital roles in the promotion of Transhumanism and its projects. In 2004, Bostrom and Hughes established the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technology (Samuelson, 2010: 26). In the same year, the prominent bioconservative – Francis Fukuyama, after foreseeing the potential risks of transhumanistic projects, labeled Transhumanism as ‘the world’s most dangerous idea’. In the year 2005, Bostrom in association with Anders Sandberg and Eric Dressler established the Future of Life Institute to support and to promote Transhumanism. In 2008, the WTA changed its name to Humanity+ (Sandberg, 2010: 1). The Singularity University was also founded in the same year in America by Peter Diamand, Ray Kurzweil, along with Google, Nokia, eplanet Capital, NASA, the X Prize Foundation, and other leading companies. In 2013, Istvan published the dystopian science fiction novel ‘*The Transhumanist Wager*’ which explains a future war between transhumans and the US government. In 2014, on reading Bostrom’s *Superintelligence*, Elon Musk tweeted that AI could pose a threat to humanity, and he also joined the WTA in order to support responsible technological development (Amami, 2016). In 2015, Elon Musk donated \$10 million dollars to the Future Life Institute (FLI) for the creation of friendly AI. Istvan campaigned for the presidential election of the US with the agenda of promoting Transhumanism. From our reading of the history of

Transhumanism, it is clear that Transhumanism is not merely a utopian vision by techno optimists, but a movement that receives substantial funding from different organizations and different people, which is the factual truth of our time.

4 Categories of Transhumanism

Transhumanism, in general, is a broad umbrella movement which advocates the transformation of humanity by embracing technology. Transhumanistic thinkers opine that our normal state of life can, and should be, enhanced by all available emerging technologies. AI, bio-enhancements, life-span extension, cryonics, cybernetics, and designer children are some of the prominent projects of Transhumanism.

5 Salient Prudential and Ethical Concerns

From the common understanding of the notion of Transhumanism, it is evident that this movement is likely to raise several prudential and ethical apprehensions and dilemmas. Among these apprehensions, though some are common to many transhumanist categories, others are very specific and particular to some fields only. The advocates of transhumanist projects criticize these concerns as exaggerations of the hypothetical risks; these concerns also pay less attention to the potential benefits of the technological advancements. However, the fact has to be accepted that the potential advancements by technological development which were put forth by these advocates of Transhumanism are also hypothetical. Therefore, these ethical and prudential concerns have to be taken into consideration.

a. Precautionary Principle Based Concern

The most prominent science-based principle that influences international law today is the Precautionary Principle. In general, the proponents of the precautionary principle encourage promoting those policies which have relatively lesser harms in future for human beings. It can be compared to taking precaution before anything bad happens. The proponents of the precautionary principle hold the opinion that consequences of actions often result in unpredictable and irreversible dangers. Hence, they conclude that such actions should generally be opposed. We should be cautious before experimenting with any transhumanistic projects (Irudhayadhasan, 2017: 7). For example, tampering with the genetic structure through transhumanistic projects may result in severe genetic disorders. Hence, they argue that we should not encourage the transhumanistic projects. The proponents of Transhumanism, especially Bostrom and More are constantly answering the prudential concerns of the Precautionary Principle.

Libertarian Transhumanism thinkers accept that all transhumanistic projects aim at the good of a person's life, that is, his 'well being'.

b. Consequentialist Concerns

Consequentialism is an ethical theory that judges whether something is right or wrong by its consequences. For instance, most people in the world would agree that stealing is wrong. But if stealing would help to save a person's life, consequentialists argue that stealing is the right thing to do. These consequentialists have brought forth various ethically conflicting concerns surrounding Transhumanism in general (Ethical Issues in Transhumanism, 2019). Their concerns are mainly related to three major phenomenon: (i) safety, (ii) positional good, and (iii) diversity in society (Irudhayadhasan, 2017: 21). Since many transhumanist projects seem to harm the individuals, their safeties are doubted.

Many researchers also believe that there is a significant chance to create an AI that can outperform human beings in all relevant fields. If an AI machine is invented to automate all jobs, will it not be a threat to human beings who are working in those fields? In DB, the modification of an embryo harms the safety of the child. It can be seen in these individuals cases, the safety of transhumanistic projects is not always assured. Thus, there is a disquiet surrounding Transhumanism whether the benefits are always greater than the probable risks (Ethical Issues in Transhumanism, 2019).

c. Concern Related to Positional Good

Another prudential concern regarding transhumanist projects is related to positional good. A positional good is the good which is valued by the others because of a limited supply of a good in society. Some advocates of positional good express the idea that if everyone is enhanced, the competitive advantage might be erased, with the result that everyone will be performing at a higher level (Irudhayadhasan, 2017: 21). This is also known as the ‘looping effects’ which stresses the point that there won’t be any productivity and creativity in society.

d. Concerns Related to the Diversity in the Society

The main focus of the proponents of this concern is the importance of diversity in society (Bostrom and Sandberg, 2004: 329). For instance, the concept of designer babies possibly erodes the tolerance of inherent differences among human beings; (Sandel, 2004: 73) hence, there won’t be any diversity in society. These measures also generate a kind of disrespect for the uniqueness of the individual and there won’t be any difference in our uniqueness. ‘The diversity in society is at stake due to transhumanistic projects’ is another concern that is put forward by the consequentialists (Ethical Issues in Transhumanism, 2019).

e. Concerns Related to Human Nature

The prominent ethical concern of the majority is the concern that is related to our very nature. The main argument that is raised by the proponents of this concern holds the point that ageing, death, and delivery of a human baby with limitations are natural end results in the lives of multicellular organisms (Irudhayadhasan, 2017: 22). In a deeper sense, ageing, death, and children are the inevitable outcome of our very nature. They consider that thinking of death and ageing as symptoms of diseases is farfetched and absurd. This is the most fundamental concern of the campaigners of natural argument (Juengst, 2009: 328).

f. Concerns from Anti-Play-God Argument

Another most prominent concern can be named as ‘Playing-God’ argument. This concern is mainly raised by anti-play-God bioethicists, theologians and believers. This concern contends that transhumanistic projects such as gestating genetically modified children in artificial wombs, becoming immortal and living forever in a community of immortal, beings creating hyper-organic super beings or designer children interfere with the creational processes, which are presumed to be under the domain of God (Bostrom and Sandberg, 2004: 327). Hence, these things should not be encouraged by anyone and anti-play-God bioethicists fear that transhumans will play a god role and precipitate a backlash from nature which could be devastating (Irudhayadhasan, 2017: 19).

g. Concerns Related to Freedom and Autonomy

Transhumanism, the belief that technology can transcend the limitations of the human body and brain, generates ethical concerns related to freedom, autonomy, and identity. The proponents of the autonomy and freedom argument criticize Transhumanism, especially the project of designer babies, for compromising the child’s right to an open future (Sandel, 2004: 51). Freedom is one of the most important characteristics of human beings. Transhumanism, especially bio enhancement projects, involves the

modification and alteration of the individuals which entails the risk of depriving the individuals of their autonomy. For example, morally enhanced beings no longer have autonomy over their own person and actions since they are programmed to carry out only moral actions. Hence, transhumanist projects raise the question of the autonomy and freedom of the individual.

Conclusion

To conclude, Transhumanism is a movement supported by some scientists and philosophers who believe that there is a solution to the ‘problems’ (as they see it) of human imperfections and limitations such as death, ageing, etc. Transhumanism and its literature are quite extensive. This movement is heavily funded to promote some technological developments and some projects. Currently, this has become the intellectual interest of many scientists and philosophers. Transhumanism predicts an optimistic, unparalleled and a utopian vision of the future in the eyes of techno-optimists. However, there are some serious ethical concerns we need to address.

By addressing the ethical concerns, we are not rejecting all technological developments. All technological developments are not necessarily bad. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* writes, “Technology is highly attractive because it draws us out of our physical limitations and broadens our horizon” (Benedict, 2009: 70). Through his writings, he encouraged the technological developments which are ethically responsible. This is confirmed in the same article, “Human freedom is authentic only when it responds to the fascination of technology with decisions that are the fruit of moral responsibility” (Benedict, 2009: 70) Here, by ethical and responsible we mean that technological developments should be, “[a]t the service of the human person, of his inalienable

right, and his true and integral good according to the design and will of God” (CCC, 2258) We must acknowledge that when science and technology are placed at the service of human beings, they are precious resources to promote the integral development of a person.

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