

Chapter 28

Why I Am a Transhumanist

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28.1 Definition of Transhumanism

Let's begin with (almost) the most basic definition of Transhumanism, from Max More, circa 1990:

Transhumanism is a class of philosophies of life that seek 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 life-promoting principles and values.

I say “almost” because like subsequent definitions and declarations it attempts to tack on extra baggage in the form of ethical or political caveats. Of course I would like it to be “*guided by life-promoting principles and values*” but it does not have to be. Those addenda are at best conscious attempts to guide the use of Transhumanist technologies, and at worst just wishful thinking.

This is not really the place for an exposition of the technologies which are enablers of Transhumanist ambitions, which can be easily found online. However, I will deal with some of them in due course as they affected my choice to call myself a “Transhumanist”. So, let's go back to my childhood where much of this had its origins.

28.2 Childhood

I grew up in a village in England in the 1950s as the son of a South African immigrant father and English mother. It was still reasonably “traditional” in that squalid Medieval sense of outside toilets and where people kept pigs and chickens

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in their back garden, everyone knew everyone else's business, conformity was next to divinity, and anyone whose family had not lived there for the past 200 years was one of the "new people". In the immediate post-war period dressing your uber-Aryan looking son with the white/blond hair in lederhosen was probably not a popular choice among the locals. So, off to a running start with triple points on "outsider" status.

Our neighbors were also people who might charitably be described as "characters". The ugly old woman who in earlier times would probably have been hanged as a witch and who enjoyed a touch of thieving from the next door shop in her spare time. "Old Cossy" and her fat lazy husband who kept a pig in the garden and did not want to be disturbed by the sound of children playing as he slept off his Sunday lunch. Deaf Pete, who would later be killed crossing the road because he did not hear the traffic. Old Jack, blinded in the First World War by mustard gas. Some people further up the road that "had something wrong with them", whatever that meant. The woman who had being dying of cancer, for years (the word "cancer" being said in a whispered voice as if saying the name out loud might act as an invitation). And Old Juddy. Yes, everybody over 30 was "Old" in those days, and looked it.

It was he who first introduced us, me and my younger brother and sister, to the notion of pointless cruelty to animals. One day the three of us were in the garden and to entertain us he grabbed one of his hens by the legs and plucked it to death in front of us. Being rather young at the time (all of us under 6 years old) we were not quite sure what to make of it. I know that I did not like it and neither did my father when I told him. But these were the times and these were the people around us.

Can you imagine the mentality of someone who believes that casual animal torture is a suitable way to entertain children? It was not even dressed up as "sport". Like I said—Medieval.

Then it was off to primary school, where I learned other interesting lessons concerning pecking orders, violence, bullying and stupidity. And that was just from the teachers. Another scene, from when I was nine years old and had misheard which exercise to do from the textbook. The teacher comes up to me and asks in an annoyed voice why I was doing the wrong work. I started to reply: "I thought..." whereupon he hit me round the head and shouted: "You are not here to think!" The irony of that escaped me for quite a number of years, but I got there in the end.

As for the other kids, well in the space of a couple of years I had been in numerous fights, none of which I started, and had been off school twice due to the extent of my injuries. Of course, nothing was done about the situation by either parents or teachers—it was "normal". As was seeing kids covered in blood from such fights, including me when my nose was broken. That one was not serious enough for time off school.

Much of that I put down to various pieces of advice my parents had given me. Probably the thing that got me into the most trouble was a sense of justice and the belief I should stand up when other people were being bullied—"protecting the weak". From my father. Not to mention injunctions to always tell the truth, which he neglected to say never made one popular.

A close second was not acquiescing to the pecking order games which were, and probably still are, a part of the barbarism of childhood and which only become more subtle as people become adults. Back then, the local “top dog” would pick on someone at random and just painfully punch their shoulder. If they did not fight back it meant, in modern slang, that you were “their bitch”. If you did fight back, it got ugly.

Which is where my mother’s piece of counterproductive advice played its part: “Violence never solves anything”. In effect it meant that even if I won the fight I would be “reasonable” and not push my advantage to total victory, having hoped that the other kid had “learned his lesson”. Wrong—mercy equals weakness among such people.

This cycle of violence only ended when I changed schools, and not because new kids appeared but because the first time it started up again I lost my temper and threw the bully across a desk. I pushed the advantage, and from that point on it all ceased. It was like a cartoon light bulb switching on in my head—*insufficient* violence never solves anything.

Meanwhile, my life outside of school was one of obsession with science. Here I had facts, theories and opinions that were not accompanied by physical violence or fear. There were no gangs to run away from in the library. By the time I was ten I was reading graduate level inorganic chemistry textbooks and everything I could find on other sciences. The stupidity of those around me I found appalling. Too bad about that honesty thing...

I sailed through school, getting top marks without putting in more than minimal effort. And that was bad in itself, because it developed in me a laziness that has taken most of a lifetime to shake off.

Through all of this was a factor that I would not discover for another thirty years or so. It was that almost certainly I was suffering from what is now termed “high functioning autism”. Its major symptoms, apart from the physical, were lack of social awareness, obsessive interests (scitech), literal mindedness and a massive insecurity when it came to dealing with people. People were stupid, cruel, vicious, over emotional, weak, pathetic and horribly unpredictable. I viewed ordinary people as ordinary people view the mentally ill.

Most of all though, was that I had a strong sense of “How Things Should Be” and this wasn’t it. I recall one night lying in a field looking at the stars in the clear night sky and just wanting to get off this planet. Ironically, I recently discovered a site for those with Asperger’s is actually named “Wrong Planet”.

While I was reading my books in front of the TV my parents were watching popular soaps, which reinforced my opinions. They are all about stupid people doing stupid things for all the wrong reasons and then suffering pointless consequences that anyone with half a brain could avoid with ease. I found them endlessly frustrating and although I sometimes watch one or two occasionally to check, they are the same now as then. It’s like those reality/documentary TV police shows where the level of imbecility is illustrated when some idiot tries to shoot his way out of getting a parking ticket. Turning a minor fine into a death penalty. Good riddance—the average IQ of the world rises slightly.

I recall my grandmother telling me a story about when she was young, at the outbreak of WW1, when groups of men armed with sticks roamed the streets for Dachshund dogs to beat to death, because “they were German”. Do you really want to live in the same universe as that kind of weapon grade stupidity?

Which led to my having a very elitist and increasingly callous view of people in general. Conversely, the thing that I could not tolerate was cruelty to animals or children. At least in some measure adults deserved whatever horror was visited upon them, and there was no shortage judging from the news reports.

28.3 The Human Condition

One of the things that both annoyed me and propelled me towards the idea of upgrading Humanity wholesale was the once popular catch-all beloved of avant-garde playwrights “The Human Condition”. This was the more intellectualized soap opera where the usual suspects were examining their own suffering in terms of “what it means to be Human”. Again, the aspects of the condition tended to be things like jealousy, anger, rage, greed, stupidity, depression, violence... the list continues. In fact, what they generally describe are all the things that make us sub-Human. Things that stem from our evolutionary ancestry. It has been said that we are a halfway stage between apes and angels. I say it is time to edit out the ape and enhance the angelic qualities, which are the things which truly distinguish us as Human. They include rationality, love, compassion, empathy and intelligence. None of which make for good drama or exciting shoot-outs.

Then, when I was sixteen and on New Year’s Day 1970 my father died early in the morning from a heart attack. It was slow, painful and protracted. My first direct contact with death. So, how did I feel? Answer is, I don’t know. It was only in later years I missed him. What I do know is that in the pre-Internet age people died when they could have lived, for lacking a single piece of knowledge. In his case chewing a couple of aspirin would probably have saved his life. This was known at the time, but not by most doctors.

Less than a year later I was in bed one Christmas morning reading a book whose title escapes me, but one quote hit me right between the eyes. It was by a man named I J Good:

Let an ultra-intelligent machine be defined as a machine that can far surpass all the intellectual activities of any man however clever. Since the design of machines is one of these intellectual activities, an ultra-intelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an ‘intelligence explosion,’ and the intelligence of man would be left far behind.

My reaction was an instant “YES!”
Finally, a way forward or a way out.

28.4 AI Winters

However, in the years that followed there was a lot of what turned out to be misplaced optimism concerning the difficulties involved. The hype and following failures resulted in several rounds of funding cuts known as the “AI Winters” which lasted until the mid-1990s. In my opinion it was always naive to think Human level intelligence could run on machines which obviously had millions of times less processing power than the brain, and the bar was set unreasonably high by the 1968 movie “2001: A Space Odyssey” with HAL. It is only now, in 2015, that serious inroads are being made on machines of suitable power, but there is a lot more to do before true Artificial General Intelligence arrives.

This is also a technology not only whose time is arriving but the warnings also written of by I.J. Good all those years ago are being echoed by the likes of Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking. Namely, if we get it wrong it could prove an extinction event. So ponder a question I asked on a large Transhumanist group, which went something like this:

If you had a choice between us creating an AI that vastly exceeded Human capabilities in all spheres of endeavor but would lead to Human extinction, or no AI ever and Humanity just carrying on as it is, which would you choose?

Most voted for the AI, along with me. Of course, the excluded middle way was the favored one of a Human-AI merger. How realistic that is remains to be seen.

28.5 Transhumanist Moment

My next “Transhumanist moment” was at a Mensa party in the mid-1970s where I was discussing mind uploading (a very Transhumanist meme) with a man whose name stuck with me partly because it was unusual, but also because he was wearing a bow tie. He was Madsen Pirie, later to found the Adam Smith Institute. At the time we called ourselves “Immortalists” because although the word “Transhuman” was used by F.M. Esfandiary in 1972 we had never heard of him, or it. At that point my Transhumanist interests rested for almost two decades.

In the intervening years my problems in dealing with people became apparent even to me, and I started to do something about it. What prompted it was the realization that while technology might be a unique and defining factor in our current civilization, it was still subservient to politics. In other words, people run this planet, not scitech. I suppose it was at this point I ceased to be the archetypal nerd. Re-wiring ones brain is not easy.

I started by forcing myself into situations that I found extremely stressful, but which other people obviously found simple. To give you an example, even at the age of twenty five I would break out into a sweat if I had to answer the telephone. It

was because of the unpredictability of what was to follow. When making a phone call I would first decide what I wanted to say, checked off all the possible responses and then had my reply to them ready to go. An incoming call I could not plan. So I put myself in positions where the interaction with people was both necessary and almost random. I practiced being Human.

I analyzed small talk and discovered how to keep boring conversations, of the type beloved by ordinary people, going. You just repeat various words back at them such as, who how what when where why and always remember that the thing people most like talking about is themselves! I modeled body language and especially the ways people looked at each other. Eventually after enough practice I could pass as “normal”, apart from occasions when I was drunk or tired, whereupon old habits would re-assert themselves and I uttered something “inappropriate” or just started up with the body movements.

I took up martial arts, which I continue to practice to this day. Just talking to people and teaching a class was a big step towards changing my mentality, as was meditation. Then, in my thirties, I tried LSD.

To say it expanded my consciousness would be an immense understatement. If meditation was a candle in the darkness LSD was like a nuclear explosion. The first, and subsequent trips, were the most profound experiences of my life. It’s the closest I have ever come to having Posthuman sensory and introspective capability. To those of you who have never tried it, or similar, you might think that this world and reality are “normal” but they are not. The world is utterly bizarre. It’s amazing and very little of it is what it seems. I went in a hardcore materialist atheist with a contempt for just about everyone and came out... different.

The biggest difference from other people’s point of view was that I came to value the innate goodness of many people as highly as I rate intelligence. No mean feat...

As the decades passed, while there was progress towards Transhumanist technologies, there remained only one which had actually been implemented. That is the enhanced immune system, aka vaccination. Now, some people might be thinking... “what about eye glasses?”. Unfortunately, although we have plenty of add-ons like glasses, writing and iPhones these are external augmentations. The modern “mission statement” is “better than well” using internalized and permanent tech.

Meanwhile, some people including myself settled for the halfway house of DIY biohacking, most commonly via the use of nootropic drugs to enhance memory or intelligence (slightly) or prolong healthy lifespan. All are marginal at present. The future I was looking for has not yet arrived. The older future... maybe... In case you have not encountered the meme, it goes something like this:

Unless you are over sixty you were not promised flying cars – you were promised a cyberpunk dystopia. And you are getting it.

Of course, the popular alternative has always been the Mad Max post-apocalyptic dystopia. The relevant word in all that being “dystopia”. That is the default setting for the future we are heading into unless some considerable

political effort is put into changing course. Greed, high technology, stupidity—we can survive any two out of three but unfortunately all the cherries have come up Jackpot on the Homo Sapiens slot machine. Transhumanism is the attack on stupidity, and indirectly, greed. In my opinion, and I am not alone in this, we either make the jump to the Posthuman or we fail in a horribly spectacular manner—think chimps with machine guns. The future with Homo Sapiens still in charge will look just like the past few thousand years of history, but with increasingly destructive weapons and more effective technologies of oppression.

This is not to dismiss the immensely positive effects that education has on society, or the prosperity created through technological innovation. In the world today people en masse are better off than at any time in history, by any objective measure. Unfortunately, this can be undone within a single generation because it is all external add-ons to Humans. We have not yet changed fundamental Human Nature, nor extended innate capabilities in a permanent manner. It can be undone by all the things we are failing to do, and which may result in everything from dangerous climate change to resource depletion wars. The irony is that we have all the technology we need to fix the world coupled with the stupidity to not apply it.

And that's how it has been, right up until now (2015).

28.6 CRISPR and the Designer Baby

In 2015 something changed that will have major ramifications in the coming years—CRISPR. This is an unbelievably big breakthrough in precision genetic engineering applicable to Humans almost immediately. In tabloid-speak, the whole “designer baby” issue is back on the table as a practical possibility, not to mention tailoring gene therapies to cure specific diseases.

Then came Elizabeth Parrish, CEO of BioViva, who has used CRISPR technology to genetically engineer herself with two forms of gene therapy, outside of United States jurisdiction. In one treatment, she received injections into her muscles containing the gene follistatin, which in animal experiments is shown to increase muscle mass by blocking myostatin. In another she received an intravenous dose of viruses containing genetic material to produce telomerase, a protein that extends telomeres, a component of chromosomes known as the “aging clock.” With this she intends to reverse at least some major aspects of the aging process.

The significance of what she has done is fourfold. She has bypassed what would normally be a decade long multi-billion dollar process by Big Pharma by going straight to Human trials (herself). She has done it outside of the normal regulatory processes by doing it in clinics in Mexico and Colombia. She is a living demonstration that anti-aging technology may well be practical here and now. And last, that almost anyone can use this technology cheaply. DIY Human genetic engineering has arrived.

28.7 Posthuman

Yet we still live in a ludicrously primitive world. People still die of old age, and we don't even have a general fix for when cellular programming goes wrong (cancer). Getting anything done is like wading through mud, it takes so long. On alternate days of the week I tend to feel that this cannot be the real world. Still, for now it's the only game in town and we need to fix the people and the place. That is increasing a political task, not a technological one. Soon all the pieces will be in place for a jump to the Posthuman, and we better start planning it now before we are overwhelmed by events.

Returning to politics, I despise the fashionable pessimism of Western culture—the “we are all doomed”, the “no can do” and all the bullshit reasons politicians trot out to explain why idiocy and greed has to rule. I despise all the lazy Luddite mass media cliches whenever Transhumanist topics are given a hearing—from Frankenstein and Hitler to those “Designer Babies” (as if the having happier, healthier more intelligent children was a bad thing) and the utterly predictable “Playing God”. When it comes to the latter accusation, I am with Craig Venter, one of the founders of the field of synthetic biology—we are not playing.

28.8 Ethics

This latter accusation has a more intellectual wrapping under the catchall term “Ethics”. It is wheeled out as a weapon in the war. Typically, there is a call for an “ethical debate” usually accompanied by calls for a moratorium on the technology and murmurings about the Precautionary Principle and how it must first be proven to be safe. This is, of course, the bad faith use of the concept since nothing can be shown to be safe, not even salt or water, and the problem with any unknown side effects is that they are unknown and will remain so if the Luddites gets their way.

However, even if we take the question of ethics seriously there seems to be no discussion on *whose* ethics. Are we talking about Judeo-Christian? Secular Liberal Humanism? Sharia Islam? Confucian Chinese? Hindu? Japanese Shinto? Buddhist? Coupled with this is the assumption that whichever is chosen it should suddenly become the global consensus. This is because of the influence of the West and in particular the USA with its uneasy political combination of both the Religious Right and Secular Humanism. Unfortunately the thing they have in common is the belief that their way is not only the right way but the only way that must prevail. These beliefs are part of the arrogance of a fading Western culture and power that seeks to continue the imposition of its values on the rest of the world.

This was exemplified recently when a groundbreaking paper from Chinese researchers involving genetically modifying a Human embryo was denied publication in arguably the most prestigious journals in the West—*Science* (USA) and *Nature* (UK) in large part because the publishers did not like the ethics of the

experiment. So they censored it because of their knee-jerk dislike for non-Western mores. So, am I arguing against ethics influencing technological choices? No. I believe that we all need a code of ethics to live by. What I am saying is that I do not believe we should be imposing our views on other peoples, nor letting them impose theirs on us. A very liberal view...

The above naturally carries over into public opinion expressed by readers comments in the mass media, usually selected by editors. These are all the people who write in on articles such as turning the clock back on the aging process with comments like “I don’t want to live forever” and how it’s “unnatural”. Because the hidden subtext is that they don’t want *you* to “cheat death” either. I have often wondered why such a cognitive dissonance exists in people who would have no hesitation going to a doctor if they had a life threatening condition, yet express the desire that they want to die of old age. Except technically nobody dies of old age—they die of the diseases caused by old age. Cancer, heart disease, stroke, dementia...

28.9 Politics

My only conclusion is that perhaps it is a shield against false hope, or maybe Freud was correct and there really is something akin to a death wish in people. Or maybe it is a specific example of a more general case whereby you can always rely on a segment of the oppressed to praise their oppression as being somehow necessary and for their own good. This is in large part where the political battle for hearts and minds must be fought and won by us.

That is why my efforts right now are going towards promoting the various Transhumanist Parties that appeared around the globe in 2015. Do we expect to form governments? No. Our role model is the Green Party in terms of brand recognition, message and influence. In many cases, you can think of us as Hitech Greens—the Bright Greens. What the Greens might have been if they had embraced the future rather than a false romanticized past.

So what’s coming and what can you do?

Well, what’s coming is the end of Humanity this century, one way or another. There is no “business as usual” option. I would prefer it to be a smooth and peaceful transition to a glorious world of freedom and transcendence rather than a terminal apocalyptic nightmare. Which do I think it will be? Well, let me toss this coin...

So, what can you do? Choose one, and make it happen. Choose life over death and love over fear. Or not. There is no bigger issue facing Humanity.

Whatever happens, we are going to get what we deserve.