Cyborg Liberation Front

Inside the Movement for Posthuman Rights

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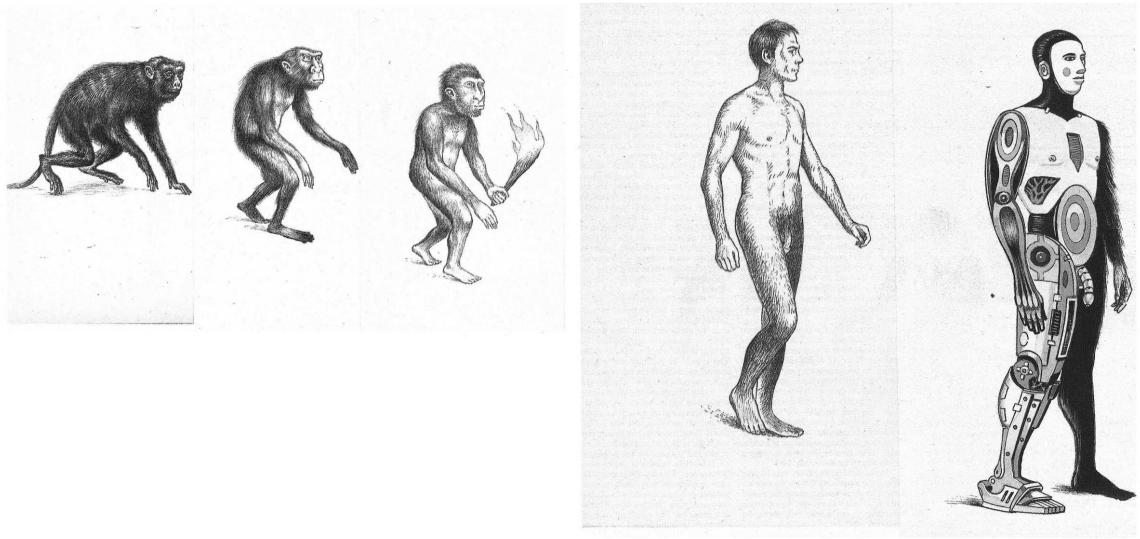

Illustration by Anthony Freda

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling

Yeats's wish, expressed in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium," was a governing principle for those attending the World Transhumanist Association conference at Yale University in late June. International academics and activists, they met to lay the groundwork for a society that would admit as citizens and companions intelligent robots, cyborgs made from a free mixing of human and machine parts, and fully organic, genetically engineered people who aren't necessarily human at all. A good many of these 160 thinkers aspire to immortality and omniscience through uploading human consciousness into ever evolving machines.

The three-day gathering was hosted by an entity no less reputable than the Yale Interdisciplinary Bioethics Project's Working Research Group on Technology and Ethics; the World Transhumanist Association chairman and co-founder is Oxford University philosopher Nick Bostrom. Dismiss it as a *Star Trek* convention by another name, and you could miss out on the culmination of the Western experiment in rights and reason.

The opening debate, "Should Humans Welcome or Resist Becoming Posthuman?," raised a question that seems impossibly far over the horizon in an era when the idea of reproductive cloning remains controversial. Yet the back-and-forth felt oddly perfunctory. Boston University bioethicist George Annas denounced the urge to alter the species, but the response from the audience revealed a community of people who feel the inevitability of revolution in their bones.

"It's like arguing in favor of the plough. You know some people are going to argue against it, but you also know it's going to exist," says James Hughes, secretary of the Transhumanist Association and a sociologist teaching at Trinity College in Connecticut. "We used to be a subculture and now we're becoming a movement."

A movement taken seriously enough that it's already under attack. Hughes cites the anti-technologist Unabomber as a member of the "bio-Luddite" camp, though an extremist one. "I think that if, in the future, the technology of human enhancement is forbidden by bio-Luddites through government legislation, or if they terrorize people into having no access to those technologies, that becomes a fundamental civil rights struggle. Then there might come a time for the legitimate use of violence in self-defense," he says. "But long before that there will be a black market and underground network in place."

Should a fully realized form of artificial intelligence become in some manner enslaved, Hughes adds, "that would call for liberation acts—not breaking into labs, but whatever we can do."

But beyond the violent zealots, who are these supposed bio-Luddites? From the right, Leon Kass, chair of the President's Council on Bioethics, rails against transhumanism in his book *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, and Francis Fukuyama weighs in with his fearful exploration, *Our Posthuman Future*. From the left, environmentalist Bill McKibben fires *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*, a book that reads like a 227-page-long helpless screech of brakes on a train steaming ahead at full power.

They have a case for being somewhat apocalyptic about the convergence of genetics, computer science, nanotechnology, and bioengineering. The outcome is almost guaranteed to strain our ancient sensibilities and definitions of personhood.

For now, though, the dialogue sounds like a space-age parlor game. Why should the noodlings of a relative handful of futurists matter? The easy answer, and that's not to say it isn't a true one: As with science fiction, the scenarios we imagine reflect and reveal who we are as a society today. For example, how can we continue to exploit animals when we fear the same treatment from some imagined superior race in the future?

But the purpose of the Yale conference was direct, with no feinting at other agendas. The crowd there wanted to shape what they see as a coming reality. From the first walking stick to bionic eyes, neural chips, and Stephen Hawking's synthesized voice, they would argue we've long been in the process of becoming cyborgs. A "hybrot," a robot governed by neurons from a rat brain, is now drawing pictures. Dolly the sheep broke the barrier on cloning, and new transgenic organisms are routinely created. The transhumanists gathered because supercomputers are besting human chess masters, and they expect a new intelligence to pole-vault over humanity—in this century.

"All one has to do is read the science journals to know these issues are on the table today," says Australian High Court Justice Michael Kirby, who serves as a bioethics adviser to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and has, along with other

dignitaries, discussed the posthuman prospect with French president Jacques Chirac. "One thing I can say with certainty from my experience is that the wheels of law, of the legislative process, grind very slowly within nations and slower still internationally. The progress of science, on the other hand, is ever accelerating. If anything, we've been surprised at how quickly technology has progressed. It's worth taking on these issues intellectually now, rather than in crisis later."

Inventor and author Ray Kurzweil argues we should clean our ethical house so our technologically derived descendants inherit compassionate values, but he predicts the transition to posthumanity will be smooth. "We already have neural implants for things like Parkinson's disease," he says. "By the time machines make a case for themselves in a convincing way and have all the subtle cues indicative of emotional reaction, there won't be a clear distinction between machine and human."

Natasha Vita-More, a founder of the trans-humanist movement, says there's cause for vigilance now. "To relinquish the rights of a future being merely because he, she, or it has a higher percentage of machine parts than biological cell structure would be racist toward all humans who have prosthetic parts," argues the activist, whose adopted name reflects her aspirations. She has already laid out a conceptual design for an optimized human, called Primo, featuring add-ons like sonar, a fiber-optic cable down the spine, and a head crammed with nanotech data storage.

But progress toward these new beings is often overestimated by the transhumanist crowd, applied scientists caution. "Some of these transhumanists are pretty far out of touch with what's going on in the labs. When I tell them that, I feel like I'm smashing their dreams," says Steve Potter, the Georgia Tech neuroscientist behind the hybrot.

A leading creator of "sociable robots," Cynthia Breazeal of M.I.T., says a chief worry is that we might try to extend rights to beings who aren't prepared for them. Breazeal assiduously avoids calling her robots by gendered pronouns. That even she occasionally slips when faced with the large, beseeching eyes of one of her creations means nothing, she says. But it must mean something. No one accidentally calls a toaster "he" or "she."
Two news stories from the past month offer a window into the bizarre inconsistencies of human empathy. In one instance, Sinafasi Makelo, who represents Mbuti Pygmies, appealed to the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to save his people from cannibalism during the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Soldiers on both sides of the war are said to view that ethnic group as "subhuman." Meanwhile, the iRobot company reported that more than half of the owners of its Roomba vacuum-cleaning robots name their machines, and some even take them on vacation.

Indeed, a good many of the transhumanists and extropians (a libertarian subset concerned with improving human nature through technology) are feverishly anticipating what they call the Singularity, the moment when technologies meld and an exponentially advancing intelligence is unleashed. To critics, that millennialism can seem like irrational religiosity.

"I go straight to the question of why on earth we would want to do this in first place. I've been unable to come up with an answer," McKibben says. "All of this enhancing and souping up presupposes a goal or an aim. What is that goal? What is it we're not intelligent enough to do now? It's not to feed the hungry—that has to do with how we share things. Fighting disease? We're making steady progress in conventional medical science with the brains that we have right now. There are a thousand reasons not to trade in people, as we have known them throughout human history, for something else."

Except that human history may be brief without the Singularity. This is the core argument for the entire movement, the reason that hall at Yale was packed: A posthuman future may be our species' only chance for any legacy at all.

Talk to transhumanists about the nightmares of a blitzkrieg of nanites turning the world into "gray goo," the dark vision of human mutants in rebellion, or the specter of killer robots on the loose, and they'll calmly remind you the earth has an expiration date. Climate change, natural or not, could break civilization in mere thousands of years; cosmic catastrophes will snuff out the survivors later. If anything is to remain of us, we'll need to settle around other stars.

Us. We. Here's where vanity finds its end. The humanity—the us, we—that strode out of Africa and braved the Pacific Ocean in outrigger canoes and the Arctic in longboats cannot and never will be able to make that final journey. We're too delicate and too dumb. But new forms of being might be able to stake out an interstellar future. They could view us as kin, carrying some essence of our ideals, a memory of Shakespeare secure in their vast webs of intelligence. Transhumanists are asking whether we'll embrace the kinds of life that come next as a necessary extension of ourselves or shun them as monstrosities.

Simply deciding against their existence—willing them into a shadowy corner of the imagination or legislating against them—won't work. Every law ever made has been broken, observes Kirby. "Detailed regulation is not possible and probably not desirable," asserts Kirby. "This is not defeatism or resignation. It is realism."

If he's right, we can't afford to renounce a role in a new intelligence's emergence or cede the chance to imprint it with cultural values. One day, that first cybernetic, genetically spliced, or wholly artificially created being will step into the town square of democracy. What then of the seminal words of our society: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

"Men," or even "human beings," won't be adequate labels anymore. Life will have been radically redefined, along with the fundamental events of birth and death that bracket it. Equality will be moot, and enforcing it could reasonably be seen as unjust to beings with categorically different or greater abilities. Blake's words ring here: "One Law for the Lion & the Ox is Oppression."

The potential great unifier, however, is Thomas Jefferson's notion of "happiness." For the Enlightenment thinker, the concept hardly equated to sanguinity. Instead, he was echoing Aristotle's term *eudaimonia*, for which "happiness" is merely a common translation. But the Sinclair version of *The Politics* makes clear that what we now hold as a synonym for contentment, in fact refers to the fulfillment of potential—"the state of well-being which consists in living in the exercise of all, especially the highest (i.e., rational and ethical) faculties of man."

If anything, the newcomers envisioned by transhumanists will be better equipped to pursue that kind of happiness. Kurzweil argues the newcomers will likely protect our rights by grandfathering into their society those of us who'd prefer not to be enhanced. Those people, the MOSH (Mostly Original Substrate Humans), would be free to live and love as before, to the best of their limited abilities.

Today, though, we're still in control, so posthuman rights depend on us, on how freely we let researchers work and how freely we can use and even alter our bodies and minds. Transhumanists look for inspiration to civil rights battles, most recently to the transgender and gay push for self-determination.

"The whole thrust of the liberal democratic movement of the last 400 years has been to allow people to use reason and science to control their own lives, free from the authority of church and state," Hughes says. "That insight and thrust has had ramifications in movements all across the world."

But transhumanists' embrace of other minorities isn't always returned. Hughes says rights groups traditionally keep a narrow focus on immediate goals and sometimes resent any cause they fear will dilute their resources. With abortion clinic workers still under siege, he says, some who advocate reproductive freedom shun the transhumanists. Gay couples who simply want to start families have already been demonized by Senator Rick Santorum as opening the way to legalized bestiality. They might not particularly like being associated with imagined cyborgs and human-animal hybrids.

One operative of the Institute for Applied Autonomy, a secretive technology group that provides robots and other gear to protesters, eyes the civil rights landscape and doesn't see many friends for the newcomers. "Most of the folks you'd normally go to are really suspicious of a lot of this technology," says this person, noting that much of the cutting-edge development in artificial intelligence has been for military and law-enforcement purposes. "You're writing this against the backdrop of a growing police-surveillance state, so it's not surprising that many folks are a bit skittish."

The key to building allies, to making the cause too important to be ignored, might be to differentiate between the relatively narrow category of humanity and the more sweeping status of personhood. But a vague mantra like "sentience freedom" won't easily supplant the primacy of "human rights."

For another approach, a metaphor drawn from Judaism may be instructive. The Torah requires that Jews carry nothing in a public place on the Sabbath. However, the Talmud allows a shared symbolic home for the Jewish community to be constructed

by stringing a wire or thread around a neighborhood. Might we now expand just such an *eruv* for the house of humanity and human rights?

Here again, transhumanists run up against present-day obstacles, for religion itself could be used to bar the recognition of the newcomers' humanity. The language of soulfulness isn't predisposed to accepting machines. It's sensual and organic, fluid and global—ghost, spirit, *waug*, *piuts*, *nephesh*, *nefs*—all deriving from words for "breath."

More practically, the memory of the role of religious leaders in the civil rights movement of the last century has faded. The Yale event, the Transhumanist Association's first North American gathering, was overwhelmingly secular. Moreover, the biotech needed for posthuman advancement runs afoul of prohibitions against destroying fetuses. Yet there's surprising receptiveness among the religious intelligentsia.

"I would say if a creature is both sentient and intelligent, and has a moral sense, then that creature should be considered a human being irrespective of the genesis of that person," says Rabbi Norman Lamm, chancellor of Yeshiva University.

He finds agreement at the Catholic-run Georgetown Medical Center. "To err on the side of inclusion is the loving thing to do," concludes Kevin FitzGerald, a Jesuit priest who happens to be a molecular geneticist and bioethicist.

But they, along with an Islamic scholar interviewed for this article, hold strong reservations about the necessity and good of the transhumanist aims. Such qualms are natural. The transhumanists are forcing, with microchips and DNA, a debate on ancient and unanswerable questions, says Bonnie Kaplan, chair of Yale's Technology and Ethics Working Group, co-sponsor of the conference.

"My gut says we'll never have the answer to that question we first raised thousands of years ago: Who are we?"

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