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## Listening to the Transhumanists

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**Friday, June 30, 2006**

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Bioethicist Wesley J. Smith, Senior Fellow at the Discovery Institute and Special Consultant for the Center for Bioethics and Culture, attended the sessions and has offered this summary analysis: “If you want to know what it feels like to wander into a Salvador Dali painting, try attending a conference of transhumanists.”

Smith offers a rather comprehensive report on the conference in “The Catman Cometh – Among the Transhumanists,” published in the June 26, 2006 edition of *The Weekly Standard*. As he explains, “Transhumanism is a radical movement emanating from the universities that seeks to enhance human capacities via technology. The ultimate goal is a utopian world of ‘post-humans,’ such as human/robot hybrids and human consciousness downloaded into computers that will live for thousands of years.”

Consider some of the ideas that were floating around at the conference. Smith cites James Hughes, a professor of health policy at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, who argues that human beings must eradicate “human racism,” defined as the belief that humans should be accorded a special moral status just because they are human. Hughes is the author of *Citizen Cyborg*, a book that offers his vision of a transhumanist future. He argues that we must replace the notion of humanity with the concept of “personhood.” As Smith explains, “Under personhood theory, some humans would be excluded, but all self-aware entities – whether human, post-human, machine, chimera, or robot – would qualify for the rights, privileges, and protections of citizenship.”

Smith also reports that Nick Bostrom, cofounder of the World Transhumanists Association, is seeking to maintain some sense of “post-human dignity,” but he also denies that this dignity can be “based on substrata.” In other words, it should not matter whether a “being” is biological, or merely mechanical.

The conference also featured an ideological array including feminists like Annalee Newitz, who called for a transhumanist future in which female biology would be fixed, allowing women “better control over female evolution.” Women should not have to rely upon males for “genetic material” in the making of babies. Newitz, a contributing editor at

*Wired* magazine, also argues that men should be surgically altered so that they can become biological mothers.

As Newitz states in the conference brochure, “For thousands of years, women have been subjected to a genetic engineering program known as patriarchy – from an evolutionary perspective, patriarchy is a system in which men choose mates for women, and it has affected the culture and genetic make up of countless generations. Today many of us live in post-patriarchal societies with fairly advanced reproductive technology. Can we use this technology in the service of a feminist genetic engineering project? I argue that we can.”

Human enhancement is the goal of many, if not all, of the participants. At times, the notion of “enhancement” takes on twisted forms. Susan Stryker, identified as “an internationally recognized independent scholar and filmmaker whose historical research and theoretical writings have helped shape the field of transgender studies,” joined with Nikki Sullivan of Macquarie University in Australia to present a paper entitled “King’s Body, Queen’s Member: State Sovereignty, Transsexual Surgery, and Self-Demand Amputation.”

As the conference program summarized their session: “we demonstrate how a discourse of bodily integrity has been deployed both for and against transsexual surgery and self-demand amputation at various historical moments and in differing social contexts. Drawing on Hobbes’ theory of sovereignty in *Leviathan*, as well as Foucault’s critique of centralized state authority, we argue that ‘integrity’ is not predicated on notions of natural, biologic, organic unity, but rather on the availability of the body as a source of biopower into the State’s projects. We thus arrive at a radically antihumanist understanding of political struggles that structure the occupation of one’s own embodied space, and which ultimately determine whether the body is available as a resource for subjective needs as well as state functions.”

Now you are a brave reader if you have attempted to unpack those last few sentences. Suffice it to say that Stryker and Sullivan are arguing that society treats human bodies as mere sources of “biopower” for the state’s purposes. Using a radical cultural analysis, they then argue that persons ought to be able to demand radical surgery on their bodies, even to the point of amputating healthy limbs, so they can meet their own subjective needs and no longer serve as “biopower” for the state. Got it?

Aubrey De Grey, biogerontologist at the University of Cambridge sought to redefine the right to life. “Humanity has long demonstrated a paradoxical ambivalence concerning the extension of healthy human lifespan,” he said in his catalog statement. “Modest health extension has been universally sought, whereas extreme (even indefinite) health extension has been regarded as a snare and delusion—a dream beyond all others at first blush, but actually something we are better off without.” Aubrey De Grey is not satisfied with that conclusion. Indeed, he calls for “curing aging” in order to expand the human lifespan without limit. He argues that humans “have a right to live as long as they wish to.” Thus, “Once we realize this, our determination to consign human aging to history will be second only to our shame that we took so long to break out of our collective trance.”

In other words, death is an evolutionary accident that should be eradicated by intentional intervention and biomedical advances. But, at least Aubrey De Grey was talking about humans. George Devorsky, on the other hand, argues that human beings must now biologically “uplift” non-human animals. As he explains, “As the potential for enhancement technologies migrates from the theoretical to the practical, a difficult and important decision will be imposed upon human civilization, namely the issue as to whether or not we are morally obligated to biologically enhance non-human animals and bring them along with us into advanced postbiological existence. There will be no middle road that we can take; humanity will either have to leave animals in their current state of nature or bring as many sentient creatures along into a posthuman future. A strong case can be made that life and civilizations on Earth have already been following this general tendency and that animal uplift will be a logical and reasonable developmental stage along this continuum of progress.”

So, even as the transhumanists want to transcend the limits of human existence, some also demand that the same “uplift” be extended to the animal kingdom as well. Why limit transhumanism to humans? Indeed, the other “beings” of concern at the conference were mechanical beings like robots. As Nick Bostram, a philosopher at Oxford University, argued, “we need to expand our concept of dignity to encompass posthuman dignity as well as human dignity. If human dignity is the grounding for human rights, this move directly leads us to consider the question of posthuman rights. I will address the issue of such rights in the context of the creation of artificial minds . . . and discuss some tentative ethical principles for defining our rights and responsibilities relative to our hypothetical future machine progeny, and their rights and responsibilities relative to their creators.”

No kidding. These scientists, theorists, and philosophers, teaching at some of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world, were seriously considering granting recognition of human dignity to machines and robots. Even the language in the making of such proposals appears ludicrous on its face. What does it mean to speak of “hypothetical future machine progeny?” Beyond that, how can we speak of robots having “rights and responsibilities relative to their creators?” Once again, science fiction is treated as the coming reality. Is it?

As Wesley J. Smith argues, “We shouldn’t take all this too seriously, of course. Transhumanism is mostly an intellectual game, a fantasy. The technological breakthroughs necessary to create a true post-humanity will almost surely never come.” So, should we worry?

“But this doesn’t mean that transhumanism is benign – far from it,” Smith advises. “Dismissing the intrinsic value of human life is always dangerous, and presuming to determine which human traits are desirable and which not leads to very dark places.”

As Smith rightly reminds, a “new eugenics” has already arrived, with the abortion of the vast majority of babies diagnosed with Down’s Syndrome and with the genetic screening of human embryos now urged upon us.

Furthermore, Smith notes that the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Commerce have called for spending billions of dollars pursuing the very technologies that the transhumanists envision. The National Institutes of Health granted \$773,000 to Case Law School in order to determine the advisability of “ethically acceptable rules” concerning the use of genetic technologies for human enhancement.

The rise of the transhumanist movement is just one symptom of a primal sin that has affected humanity from Adam onward. Dissatisfied with the limits of our human condition, there is the natural impulse to exceed those limitations. Thus, entire industries have been developed, intended to offer the promise of a longer life, a better life, a different life, and the eclipse of human boundaries.

Yet human dignity rests upon a clear and unambiguous affirmation that we are, after all, creatures uniquely made in God’s image. The very fact that we are creatures reminds us of the fact that our Creator has the right to define and to determine what it means to be human. The problem with transhumanism is not merely in the details, or even in the likelihood that many of these technologies will never see the light of day. Indeed, the real problem is that the very urge and desire to eclipse human limitations is an act of defiance grounded in profound ingratitude. At the core of transhumanism is a basic hatred of humanity. The true humanists are those who accept with gratitude the gift of true humanity.

