Transhuman Express
Are we Ethically Required to be Transhumanists?

John P. Sullins

Sonoma State University

john.sullins@sonoma.edu

Abstract: Technology is giving those who possess it the ability to make conscious choices about the next steps in human evolution as a species, especially in terms of radical life extension techniques. Since the choices we make when engineering our future evolution are not entirely forced on us by nature and are freely taken, these decisions come with strong ethical and moral duties that cannot be ignored by those with the power to take us into the transhuman future. This essay uses the philosophical thoughts of Karl Jaspers to critique the claim that we must, as a species, aggressively pursue technologies that will expand our biological capabilities and lead us inevitably to a transhuman future. It is acknowledged here that there are many paths to transhumanity and some of those paths are more ethically palatable than others. Toward this goal the essay demonstrates that some form of transhumanity seems inevitable; and yet, a reading of Karl Jaspers' thoughts on death, deathlessness, and spiritual transcendence can help advance this discussion in determining which path will lead to a more ethically justifiable future. Jaspers' thoughts lead to an argument that suggest that as technology proceeds to occlude one's experience of an authentic human lifeworld, the ability to comprehend spiritual transcendence is lost and replaced entirely by a desire for perfectionment through the coercive force of modern techniques. We find that for Jaspers, what matters is the phenomenological state that transcendence places us in and that a life worth living is not entirely achieved through some form of technologically induced deathlessness.

Keywords: Transhuman ethics; Existenz; human augmentation; posthuman condition; healthspan augmentation; longevity; life extension.

Introduction

The possibility of transcending human frailties and boldly moving into a posthuman future of limitless possibility is a very intoxicating idea. It is also likely that this would not be the first time that technological change has helped bring about a new way of being in the human evolutionary lineage. Certainly part, if not a large part, of the reason Homo sapiens has survived when our close human relative species have not is due to our ability to not only use technology, but also innovate and redesign tools. This has allowed us to survive and mostly flourish as a post-hominid species. I say this, not to challenge my colleagues in anthropology and archeology by coining a new term, but here I wish to point out that we have already seen on this planet a small version of what the post-humanist and transhumanists are claiming is about to happen again. But this time there is a real difference; there will be a moral challenge to this evolutionary event that has never happened before. We post-hominids are in a special predicament. We are the first species on this planet to have some ability to make conscious choices about the next steps in our own evolution. Since these choices are not entirely forced

on us by nature, the choices we make will have ethical and moral implications that will challenge our relations and moral duties to every other human both living and potential, and to all the species and ecosystems we share this planet with. As such, these choices are not to be taken lightly and this work is humble meditation on the moral challenges presented by the birth of the next branch or branches of the human lineage.

Of course, this is a massive topic and therefore we need much more focus or we risk just babbling in the face of the awesome challenge ahead of us. Here I want to rein in the discussion and concentrate on the normative force of the claim that we must, as a species, aggressively pursue technologies that will expand our post-human capabilities and lead us inevitably to a full transcendence of the human species. By employing some of the ideas that characterize the philosophy of Karl Jaspers we can assess if they provide any new vantage point to help us make better decisions when contemplating human augmentation technologies.

Before we get started I have to acknowledge that there are some significant differences of opinion of the definitions of terms I need to use in making my case. The terms, "posthuman" and "transhuman" are used widely but often have subtly different meanings to the various authors who use them. It is not my primary interest to engage in the debate over what the correct usage of these words is, I just need one of them to refer to altering the human condition through technology and the other to refer to the event propagated by the radical alteration of humanity through technological means such that the resulting entities can no longer be accurately called Homo sapiens. With that in mind, I will use posthuman to refer to humans that have used technology to move beyond the limits of their biological bodies (phylogeny) and transhuman to refer to theoretical entities that have used technology to move so far beyond human genealogy and psychology that they now count as a not only a separate species, but may have moved beyond biology completely and count as an entirely new form of life. In this sense posthumanity might be seen as a somewhat mundane eventuality in comparison to the bazaar new world possible through transhumanity. In fact, Andy Clark argues that humans have always been inseparable from their technology and in that way we have always been at least low-tech cyborgs, and therefore we come from a long lineage of technologically enhanced humans.[1] If one takes this idea seriously, then

the concept of posthumanity as I am defining it here, is just a very complicated and advanced expression of the human drive to create new technologies and to modify our bodies and lived environments with them. Even if you are not as sanguine as Clark in attributing cyborg technologies to our ancient ancestors, one would be hard pressed to deny that legitimate cyborgs do now exist given the amazing advances in prosthetics and wearable technologies that augment human capabilities far beyond what a natural human body could achieve naturally. This means that, at the very least, there have been some posthumans living among us for the last century, if not before. While posthumanity is not a choice we have to make since it is well upon us, transhumanity, as I have defined it here, is yet to be and therefore will only exist if we chose to make it so. The transhuman option is certainly a choice we might make, is it an option we should take? Part of the answer to that question will be found by considering the moral arguments against and in favor of making that choice.

Transhumanisms

Since we are not transhuman ourselves, transhumanity is something we can only dimly imagine. Because of this we have to be careful not to oversimplify the concept through a lack of imagination. When we speak of transhumanity or the epochal changes that will precede it, we have a tendency to stretch our language in ways that can be misleading. Often terms that have technical meanings in other domains such as "the singularity" can be misleadingly used to signify linguistic totalities to become quasi-religious incantations where critical thoughts on the matter become impossible to convey in the face of these ultimate universal signifiers. As Ludwig Wittgenstein warned us, when we push our language this hard, meaningful speech becomes impossible. This means that we should probably be cautious about trying to say anything of use about the singularity and certainly nothing very intelligible can be said about post singular events. But we can say meaningful things about choices that we are making that will lead us to the complete transformation of the human species, most importantly, why to go in that direction in the first place.

It is also imperative that we recognize that there is no one guaranteed way transhumanity will arrive.

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[1] Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies,*

and the Future of Human Intelligence, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Raymond Kurzweil,[2] Hans Moravec[3] and other thought leaders in the transhumanist movement use language that would make it seem that there is a kind of technological determinism driving us inexorably towards transhumanism. Kurzweil appropriated the term "singularity" from physics where it has a certain technical meaning and extends it beyond that to refer to, "a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impacts so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed" (*SN* 7). He ponders that singularity arises the moment when technology becomes able to think for itself and this would spark an exponentially accelerating growth of such sentient technology that will eventually sweep the globe and beyond. Hans Moravec makes similar predictions though he uses the phrase "mind fire" to describe the rapid spread of sentient technology, as it would move from earth to the rest of the universe or from some other alien local to eventually sweep through our solar system. Terms like singularity or mind fire read as if there is a particular moment in time where everything transforms in an accelerating approach towards a perfect rational universe. It is an event that is positively inevitable whether or not we pursue this technology or make the breakthroughs necessary given that there are so many other locals in the universe where the spark might ignite, it will happen regardless of what we do or the choices we make.[4] If we accept these arguments, there is a moral imperative that follows with them. We can create a better universe with less death, pain and suffering by pursuing the transhumanist future, to ignore this would bring about unnecessary death, pain, and suffering, so the only choice is to embrace the transhumanist future.

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[2] Raymond Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, New York: Viking Books, 2005. [Henceforth cited as *SN*]

[3] Hans Moravec, *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[4] The certainty with which they make these predictions has caused Kurzweil to wonder why indeed the singularity has not already happened given the age of the universe; his only explanation is that we must be the only advanced intelligence in the universe. Nick Bostrom, on the other hand, has suggested that perhaps it has already happened and we are now experiencing life inside a simulation of the old universe created by that singularity. See Nick Bostrom, "Are You Living In A Computer Simulation?," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 53/211 (2003), pp. 243-55. [Henceforth cited as *LCS*]

Other authors such as Nick Bostrom have theories that are less dramatic. He does allow for some variability in how the story might unfold and not all of them are morally beneficial, but he does maintain that there are a number of possible scenarios in which "...it could be very good for us to become posthuman."[5] Meaning that if we properly design these new posthuman lives, then this could lead to greater happiness, less death, pain and suffering, as well as just simply more fun, than what we can accomplish given our present state. Bostrom identifies three key human capacities which, if sufficiently augmented, take us into the posthuman condition; health span, cognition, and emotion. His argument is that significant augmentation to any one of these or any combination thereof will create a lifeworld for us that is better than the one we live in right now and therefore it would be morally required of us to pursue these options as a species.

Bostrom seems to have thought through the philosophical implications of transhumanity a bit more carefully and I will be provisionally accepting his position here. There are a number of ways that transhumanity could occur and it is obvious that some of these technological transformations are better than others from a moral standpoint. A simple example would be that it might not be that desirable for significant medical augmentation to be made to human lifespan if there is not a corresponding augmentation to human health span. What purpose would it serve to live for centuries but suffer most of that time in a state of age related dementia? An eternity spent in a rest home cannot be considered a worthy life. But, if one's health span is augmented, then life may be more worthwhile given that one would be a peak performance for longer. Of course this might not be enough either. Here I am reminded of the old Medieval tale told of what happened to a scout from the army of Alexander the Great when he discovered the "Well of Life." While the army was traveling through a dark and mysterious land he was ordered to look for the fabled well and report back if he found it. This scout did find the well but instead of going back to tell Alexander, he chose to bathe in the pool first. In doing so he unintentionally usurped the eternal life it granted since it could only work for one person. Unable to kill the now immortal

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[5] Nick Bostrom, "Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I grow Up," in *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*, eds. Bert Gordijn and Ruth Chadwick, Dordrecht: Springer 2008, pp. 107-36, here p. 2.

scout for his insolence, Alexander instead had a heavy stone monument built on top of him leaving him to an eternal life of imprisonment and darkness.[6] With a little imagination we can all imagine a nightmare what if scenario for each of the other two identified capacities of cognition and emotion where they seem more like a curse than a blessing. Bostrom does counter these kinds of "what if" objections by claiming that they "misunderstand what is being proposed" (*LCS* 12). He claims we are not really in a position to properly imagine the kinds of lives that would be possible to future posthumans. It is impossible just as it was impossible for our prehuman ancestors to imagine the world we post-hominids have created, a world of plumbing, cars, computers and fast food, but also a world that made their way of life and in fact their entire branch of the human tree impossible to maintain. In a way, passing judgment on the value of posthuman life is beyond our jurisdiction. What if pre-humans had decided to put the brakes on evolution with their species as the enforced end point? No plumbing, no cars, no computers, no coffee shops—the horror. Again, we have an argument here that places moral authority on the pursuit of posthuman and eventually transhuman augmentation. To do otherwise would be myopic and presumptuous since we cannot defeat the forthcoming moral premises that none of us can even understand due to our place in the evolutionary timeline.

Bostrum's argument started out very rational but it eventually relies on the ultimate premise that something that may seem morally reprehensible to us, such as the extinction of Homo sapiens, is due only to our myopic fixation on the evolutionary status quo of today. From a viewpoint of the future it will be seen as a necessary step in the evolution of new transhuman species and therefore a moral good. This argument relies on too many unforeseen future events for me to fully endorse and I will refer to this move from this point on as the "Argument from the Future."

What we are left at least is the realization that there is not a single inevitable transhuman future but instead the more realistic view that there are a series of potential transhuman futures. Some of these futures may be able to make a claim to be ethically imperative but these

arguments are not yet universally persuasive. Most proponents of transhumanism focus on the distant future where anything is possible in order to employ the Argument from the Future. Since I find that move fallacious, I would instead like to ground the argument here by looking at near term futures that are more easily comprehensible. Let us look at the transition period we are now in where we are on the cusp of developing transformative technologies but they have not reached their full potential. What is the ethical impacts of the very near term process of accelerating technological change, which it is not enough to deliver the posthuman or transhuman dream, but is still enough to greatly disrupt the lifeworlds that humans experience now.

Getting A Seat on the Transhuman Express

Today we speak of a digital divide between those who have access to information technology and those who do not, tomorrow we may speak of the longevity divide, or a cognitive and happiness divide. Just as wealth and power tend to concentrate in a lucky minority, so too will the initial advances in longevity and other augmentation technologies. Due to the rapid acceleration of technological advances, a small head start at the beginning will quickly increase to become an insurmountable gap. Whoever does not have a seat on the transhuman express when it leaves the station, will be left behind to live a short natural human life. Perhaps in the far future resources will be plentiful, but they are not now and big advances in healthcare are expensive and historically they have never distributed fairly. The first corporations run by humans augmented by artificially intelligent business systems will outperform those behind the tech curve and drive them into bankruptcy. Hugo de Garis has predicted that this is likely and that normal humans will have no real way of competing.[7] How would anyone compete with machines with a few hundred or thousand times the intellect of a human much less machines with trillions of times the intellects of humans that de Garis imagines?

That is a frightening tale. Much of my writing addresses machine ethics as a critical component of our species survival. And if we build machines capable of ethical reasoning then we can mitigate some of these

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6   Robert Steele, "How Alexander Came To The Trees Of The Sun And The Moon And What They Told Him," in *The Story of Alexander*, London: David Nutt 1894, pp. 159-70. Last accessed 11-26-2013 http://archive.org/details/storyofalexander00steeuoft.

7   Hugo de Garis, *The Artilect War: Cosmists Vs. Terrans: A Bitter Controversy Concerning Whether Humanity Should Build Godlike Massively Intelligent Machines*, Palm Springs, CA: ETC Publications, 2005.

fears. I agree with Kurzweil, Moravec and others who argue that it is quite possible that advanced intellects would also be capable of advanced ethical reasoning. But, we have to be realistic and recognize that in the initial steps down this road we must make the right choices to solve the problems of machine morality, a science that can hardly even be called a science today as only a small handful of people are even working on the computationally difficult problem of programming moral reasoning into a machine. We also have to acknowledge that not everyone working on AI is even remotely interested in this problem and instead are working hard on making autonomous weapons and amoral economic trading algorithms that do not even consider the happiness of human moral agents when they pull the trigger or initiate a flash crash. While I am relatively confident we can avoid the Artilect war with billions of human dead that de Garis imagines, I am far less sanguine that we will avoid the economic excesses and resulting human suffering that machine trading will bring about, and those with the technological advantage will grow fabulously wealthy and block all the other small competitors out of the market. At least in the short run.

This period we have now entered is fraught with new ethical problems. Just pressing forward with all our effort to attain the transhuman dream, as beautiful as it may be, ignores the complexity of the interim period and the many ways that dream can be derailed. Closing these gaps in capacity that will develop is the only ethical choice and will tax our human and even posthuman capacities for empathy and altruism.

Would Karl Jaspers buy a Ticket for the Transhuman Express?

It would be a stretch to suggest that Jaspers expressed an opinion of transhumanism. He has long passed on before the term was even coined. But we can extrapolate what he might have thought given that he has a distrust of the quest for some kind of technotopia due to the totalizing character of modern technology. His distrust is somewhat similar to Heidegger who argues that this kind of technology has the potential to erase, or completely transform, the human lifeworld.[8] It should be noted that Jaspers' views on technology are complex

and that he does not see all technological creativity as dubious. This can be seen from his *Radiovortrag* in the early 1950s where Jaspers asks: "Will the creativity of the mind continue or restrict itself to technology?"[9] He clearly sees technology as a location for human creativity but it also has a way of captivating our attention in a way that prevents us from being just as creative in other realms of human endeavor.

This attitude towards technology can be extrapolated to how he might feel about our efforts to seek a technological transcendence. While Jaspers is interested in transcendence, his is not the kind found in the writings of proponents for technotopia, and has little room for the accelerating and ever-changing world we find ourselves in, a world that has replaced philosophical transcendence with a technological form of transcendence which, "…is not definitive, our hopes, no longer anchored in Transcendence, have turned towards the sublunary sphere, alterable by our endeavours, so that we have faith in the possibility of earthly perfectionment."[10] From this we can see that Jaspers was already weary of the substitution of a desire for earthly perfection over what he felt was a more authentic kind of transcendence. We must also remember that Jaspers has a more complex notion of transcendence. He has two distinct kinds of transcendence, one being the transcendence of the subjective, which he calls *Existenz*, and the other is the transcendence of objectivity that is translated in English as Transcendence.[11] The transcendence described in transhumanism is more closely related to the transcendence of the subjective human life so it would be best to compare Jaspers' views on *Existenz* to the transhuman state, rather than try to fit them to his views on the Transcendence of objectivity. In fact, Jaspers seems to argue that as technology proceeds to occlude our experience of an authentic human lifeworld we lose even our ability to comprehend spiritual Transcendence and it is entirely replaced by

8 Martin Heidegger, Martin (1982). *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977.

9 I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for providing this citation. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy Is For Everyman*, trans. R.F.C. Hull and Grete Wels, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1967, pg. 16.

10 Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD 1959 (1931), p. 10.

11 Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard F. Grabau, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959.

the coercive force of modern technique with a desire for perfectionment. Jaspers himself had to endure an early attempt at totalitarian transcendence through a state enforced "triumph of the will," there is no doubt he would be hesitant to endorse any modern form of totalizing mechanized transformation. Though, of course he does endorse the Transcendence of objectivity that can be achieved thorough human scale art and artifact.

Death, *Existenz*, Deathlessness, and the Transhuman

One important aspect of our discussion on the ethical imperative of transhumanity is to determine what kind of phenomenological existence a transhuman entity would experience since that will help us determine if the result will be worth the painful period of change as we move from human to transhuman. Proponents such as Kurzweil and Moravec imagine the transcendent man as a kind of ultimate scientist or engineer who would no doubt experience the universe the way the scientific method experiences the universe. It takes a subjectivity to experience scientific wonder. But an entity that is pure method would not have the subjective standpoint to experience wonder; such entity would be all process. Bostrom has a more compelling vision since he is talking about posthumans of an advanced sort who still have a subjectivity from which they experience a heightened sense of being, place, happiness and even fun. We will find that Jaspers can provide a strong critique of the value of adopting the transhuman state of being but will have a much harder time finding a way to critique the less radical posthuman condition.

Both the transhuman and posthuman endeavor is one that seeks to limit or eliminate death. Jaspers also wrote on the philosophical implications of human death. While Jaspers did not write on extreme human longevity, the Jaspers scholar Filiz Peach has noted that:

> In recent years, there has been speculation that other modes of survival are possible. As a result of developments in contemporary medical science, biology and technology, there is a belief that people may survive death in the future by preserving their physical bodies. In the final analysis, however, scientific and technological developments can do no more than prolong life. Human beings eventually have to face up to death.[12]

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[12] Filiz Peach, *Death, "Deathlessness" and Existenz in Karl Jaspers' Philosophy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2008, p. 12. [Henceforth cited as *DDE*]

Peach continues on using the philosophy of Jaspers to claim that the more we succeed in a pathological quest to avert death the more we move away from *Dasein* in its finite relationship to death and instead approach *Existenz* which is a state that is eternal and unaffected by change or death. Peach warns us that:

> Jaspers' concept of Existenz is beset with philosophical ambiguities which leave it open to diverse interpretations. Difficulties arise partly from his occasional imprecise use of language in describing highly complex subjective experiences regarding Existenz. As a result, his views can seem incoherent or ambiguous. [*DDE* 98]

Indeed *Existenz* is a difficult concept to understand in Jaspers' philosophy. Is *Existenz* an actual reality experienced after death or is it simply a theoretical possibility for Jaspers? The answer is unclear and both sides can be argued but it is likely that Jaspers meant *Existenz* to be somewhat opposite of *Dasein*, such that *Dasein* has phenomenal existence, *Existenz* does not (*DDE* 100). But either way, what is of interest to us is the question; would the transhuman condition be a phenomenological form of *Existenz* and if so, would that be a state of being that held any moral worth?

Peach argues that all forms of immortality are hopeless given that we have no known method of cryogenically preserving living organisms since the process damages the biological cells so greatly and the alternative of suspended animation is not really life anyway, which means that he feels that death is an objective reality we cannot avoid (*DDE* 21). For Jaspers,

> immortality is not a form of survival but a "time-negating immersion in eternity." Thus for Jaspers immortality cannot be identified with survival in another form; that is to say, it is not continued existence. [*DDE* 117-8]

Existenz then is not a form of infinite survival but the experience of a moment in timelessness: aeternitas not entirely changeless but also beyond the temporal realm. Having no subjectivity, it then has no relation to the moral or ethical and is valueless from that standpoint.

The transhuman stance towards the finite human lifeworld is timeless and disaffected and therefore essentially nonexistent. It is a kind of death in its own right. Earlier we discussed the paradox that has occurred to many transhumanists. This paradox occurs when we realize that given the size and age of our galaxy and the many habitual places in it that should

harbor life, if something like the singularity is inevitable, it should have already happened and the place should be teaming with transcendent beings. Perhaps it is, and if Jaspers is correct, these beings would seem absent to us given that their transcendence has taken them out of the finite and into an eternal but impotent state of *Existenz*.

Are We Ethically Required to be Transhumanists?

In light of this discussion I have to say no. Given the way that I define transhumanism as a permanent technological break with human nature, then there is no ethical reason to do so unless it can be shown that human beings as they exist now have zero ethical worth, and that level of pessimism is unjustified. As we have seen, extreme intellect and longevity are not intrinsically valuable though they can be instrumental in creating or preserving characteristics that are ethically valuable. But most importantly, the post singular transhuman most likely is an expression of *Existenz* and does not represent the survival of any moral agent since it has no subjectivity and this state is therefore non-interactive with ethical value.

Some versions of posthumanity on the other hand are not so easily dismissed. Since these persons would still have subjectivity they would be capable of moral agency.[13] In fact, if Bostrom is correct, then these entities would have a heightened sense of being-in-the-universe and their corresponding moral inclinations would be more subtle and possibly more valuable.

Thus we are not ethically compelled to seek mass extinction through transhumanism though we are required to continue to evolve with the help of technology into more interesting and engaged human beings.

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[13] Along with posthumans I would also like to include certain artificial agents here as I have argued in other works such as, John P. Sullins, "When Is a Robot a Moral Agent," *International Review of Information Ethics*, 6/12 (2006), 23-30. Last accessed 12-26-2013 http://www.i-r-i-e.net/inhalt/006/006_Sullins.pdf