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TRANSHUMANISM AGAINST THE TASK OF CULTURE

ABSTRACT

If the task of culture is a continuous ethical advancement of human beings and the development of their personalities through the means of symbolization, then the transhumanist movement sabotages that task, notably by the regression of human subjects towards a technocratic cult of imagination to be actualized through marketed technical enhancement. Transhumanism cedes the task of elucidation and transformation of experience through symbolic mastery to technical augmentation, leaving out the urgent ethical, existential, social problems and conceptual work to be taken care of by technological progress itself.

Keywords: transhumanism, culture, crisis, imaginary, anthropotechnics, embodiment, Fuchs, Chyła

“For the aim of this distinctively metaphysical program is to place mankind in the position of being the divine maker of the world, the demiurge, while at the same time condemning human beings to see themselves as out of date.”

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Cybernetics is Anti-Humanism: Advanced Technologies and the Rebellion against the Human Condition*

The task of culture can be understood after Randall Auxier as “the cultivation of the lures for freely developing personality”¹ against any form of vul-

¹ R. Auxier, *Cassirer: The Coming of a New Humanism*, “Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture,” 3 (5) 2018, pp. 7-26, p. 20. This task comes from a development of Ernst Cassirer’s thought, for whom culture (as *forma formata*) provides the necessary

garizing inertia and narrowness. Technocratic narrowness is one such intellectual position hindering cultural development,² because of its focus on efficiency based on the logic of optimization, reductionist understanding of consciousness, accelerationist idea of progress, and a scientific understanding of knowledge—all of which could be subsumed as the flattening of the symbolic sphere. Here the space between the actual condition and the ideal world shrinks since the ideal is fully realized in the material through technology; there is no room for a freely developing personality left. In the transhumanist view³ of a flourishing future there is not to be a revolution of the heart, as Erich Fromm once imagined,⁴ but precisely a fetishization of the imperative of “to have” in order to (technically) reach a desired “to be.” Hence the acquisition of the latest technologies becomes the default means of personality development,⁵ ousting symbolic amelioration.⁶

***PERFECTIBILITÉ* AS HUMANISTIC ANTHROPOTECHNICS**

basis for the development of the mind or *Geist* (*forma formans*) towards its self-liberation. Needless to say, definitions of culture are numerous. For Wojciech Chyła (inspired by Freud) culture is the sum of institutions, which tame our hedonistic-egotistic urges for the sake of society; cf. W. Chyła *Globalna transformacja: globalna deregulacja. Kilka uwag na temat mediów i kultury*, “Transformacje” No. 1-2 (92-93) 2017, pp. 348-358. A. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn give 163 definitions of culture, cf. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Cambridge and Massachusetts: Peabody Museum Press 1952.

² R. Auxier, op. cit., p. 20.

³ Here I will refer mostly to the techno-optimist, technocratic, and technophilic strand of the transhumanist movement (which is by no means uniform) as represented amongst others by Natasha Vita-More, Max More, Nick Bostrom, Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil—although ideas from its intellectual repertoire densely pervade popular culture and the social imaginary mostly in a non-discursive form (movies, shows, games, and technology itself). There are more intellectual, socialist-oriented representatives of the movement, such as Donna Haraway, cf. D. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, In D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-182.

⁴ E. Fromm, *To Have or to Be*, London and New York: Continuum 2008, p. 109.

⁵ R. Ilnicki, *Programowanie człowieka: Antropotechniki w miejsce antropologii*, “Transformacje” Nr 1-4 (72-75) 2012, pp. 456-473.

⁶ In the Polish philosophy of culture Wojciech Chyła and Rafał Ilnicki have developed an extensive reflection on this predicament. Here I will mostly refer to Chyła’s idea of humanistic pedagogy.

In *In Defense of the Human Being: Foundational Questions for an Embodied Anthropology*, the phenomenological psychiatrist, Thomas Fuchs, recalls Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of *perfectibilité* to underline the long way that the historical ideal of perfecting the human—as a means for a flourishing human becoming—has traveled since the Enlightenment in order to transform itself into the contemporary transhumanistic *credo* of technical enhancement:

The concept of the cultural, intellectual, and moral perfectibility of man, first formulated around the middle of the eighteenth century by Rousseau, has a long history. Christianity already knew the ideal of perfection in the imitation of God: “Be perfect, as the Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Paul calls on the Ephesians to cast off the “old man” and to put on the “new man,” created in the image of God (Eph 4:24). In Augustine, and later in Thomas Aquinas, the idea that man is the being in which nature transcends itself towards the divine is found only in anticipation of eternal life.⁷

Because of the domination of Christianity as the main mode of self-cultivation in Europe since late antiquity,⁸ until the Renaissance the idea of human perfectibility through education and moral development remained profoundly religious. Human self-shaping was only possible thanks to a God-given ability, which allowed oneself to imitate His divine ways—*imitatio Dei*, “being in the image of God”—through the incorporation of a mainly religious tradition. Its slow secularization was introduced with the arrival of humanist movements during the Renaissance. For humanists of that time, drawing on ancient traditions of philosophy as a way of life, such a quest was asymptotic: there was no possibility of fulfilling it and the human being ever remained a locus of mystery, even after close educational, pedagogical, and theological training. There was an imperative of incessant work on self-mastery in the present towards the unattainable ideal in the future, but that striving itself *was* what the perfecting of oneself was most oriented towards. With the Renaissance a slow recourse *ad fontes*, towards the ancient human self-fashioning through

⁷ T. Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being: Foundational Questions for an Embodied Anthropology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, p. 54.

⁸ P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, Malden: Blackwell 1995.

education arose among educated Europeans as a normative social ideal. The self-molding process was a pedagogical project of *humanitas*, i.e. of the ameliorating work of humanism *qua eruditio et institutio in bonae artes*—an embodiment of the great living ideas of artistic, philosophical, religious, and literary canons, directed towards crafting not only a humane person, but a humane community. “Both *paideia* and the Roman *humanitas* [...] were processes of educating a human into his true form, achieved only through formative laws. *Paideia* was dependent on the laws of the *polis* and a political life. Likewise, Roman *humanitas* was a virtue attained by rules. Both processes of development formed not just an ideal human, but rather, an ideal *citizen*.”⁹ Such erudition-constitution of identity exemplified by educated subjects would in turn help in progressing culture by reforming the community in accordance with the utopist allure of great thinkers and their living, idealworld-shaping ideas—ethical geniuses.¹⁰ This self-fashioning prescription in the wake of the increasing openness of the nature of human being was further developed and theoretically refined by the German Enlightenment and Romanticism, with the concept of *Bildung* straying still further away from the theistic Christian imperative of *imitatio Christi*, the incarnation and repetition of Christ’s way of life. Back then, *Bildung* (education, self-formation) in the form of a *critical* incorporation, and *creative reworking* of the cultural canon took the place of striving for a mere *likeness* to God. Thus the *humanum* became a free self-determination, a self-definition, but in the same stroke also a problem—a dangerous experiment of history that can succeed or fail. “If man was created for freedom and has no law on earth other than the one he lays down for himself, he must become the most savage creature if he does not soon recognize the law of God in nature,” warned Johann Gottfried Herder.¹¹

HUMANISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Since then savagery, a “barbaric potential [...] towards bestialization”¹²

⁹ L. Mueller, *Through a Glass, Darkly: The Struggle of Perfecting Humanity*, “Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture,” 5 (1) 2021, pp. 162-168, p. 163.

¹⁰ E. Kramer, *Utopia as the Gift of Ethical Genius: Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Utopia*, “Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture,” 1 (3) 2018, pp. 96-108, p. 100.

¹¹ T. Fuchs, op. cit., p. 55.

¹² P. Sloterdijk, *Rules for the Human Park: Answer to Heidegger’s ‘Letter on Human-*

has always remained a virtual possibility for humans as history (especially of the twentieth century) has shown. It is so precisely because of the very openness as the constitutive quality of human nature. The idea of perfectibility was popularized in the Enlightenment by Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and Herder,¹³ and further developed in Romanticism by Wilhelm von Humboldt with *Bildung* as the regulative idea of the modern university. Both perfectibility and *Bildung* were philosophical-ethical inventions created for the production of human beings proper, a domestication and taming through learned training—an anthropotechnic. With the nineteenth century's focus on pedagogy forming subjects-citizens who would build a national culture,¹⁴ which would in turn give birth to even more ethically advanced subjects, one could say that philosophy of culture proper starts.¹⁵

“The conviction that human beings are ‘impressionable animals’ and that it is hence necessary to get them to come under the right kinds of influences belongs to the credo of humanism,”¹⁶ says Peter Sloterdijk in his celebrated essay. After the death of God in Modernity, and the incorporation of His divine powers by the *anthropos*, the openness of human nature found itself possible of

ism,’ trans. I. Moore and C. Turner, p. 279, In *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017, pp. 274-305.

¹³ “According to Kant, the human becomes ‘human’ only thanks to education and self-education, and its personality depends on the work it puts into itself,” and “[b]oth [Kant and Herder] believe in progress and the possibility, even necessity, of perfecting of the human,” writes Leszek Kleszcz in: *Przełom hermeneutyczny w filozofii niemieckiej*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek 2007, p. 47, 153, my translation. Rousseau and Herder though, contrary to Kant, were, needless to say, critical of the notion of amelioration using purely rational methods. Kant, on the other hand, was critical of tradition, as it consisted of a plethora of prejudices and superstitions, that hindered the autonomy of reason.

¹⁴ “In fact, it was from 1789 to 1945 that the reading-happy national humanisms had their moment of glory [...] The power of teachers in this era and the key role of philologists were based on their privileged familiarity with authors who were qualified as senders of writings that establish communities,” in: P. Sloterdijk, op. cit., p. 277. On the way, the idealistic community-oriented *Bildung* as the cultural mission of university has been replaced by the marketized “discourse of excellency,” writes Bill Readings in his seminal diagnosis of postmodernity, *University in Ruins*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press 1996.

¹⁵ P. Bursztyka, E. Kramer, and M. Rychter, *Introduction: Philosophy of Culture and Humane-ization*, p. 5, In P. Bursztyka, E. Kramer, M. Rychter, R. Auxier (eds.), *Philosophy of Culture as Theory, Method, and Way of Life*. Leiden and Boston: Brill 2022, pp. 1-14.

¹⁶ P. Sloterdijk, *Rules...*, p. 280.

being conceived as a continuum oscillating between the polarities of the beastly (the disinhibited) and the godly (the inhibited). Humanization, then, making the person more human, is directed at taming, through humanistic mediation, of bestializing tendencies. Such tendencies are always at bay, potentially working towards the possibility of their own release, raw undercurrents flowing deep inside the psyche's *Id*.

Endowed with symbolization, the power of human cruelty and destructiveness far exceeds the unmediated adaptive and reactive aggression of other animal species.¹⁷ This was the biggest failure of humanism and a problem already pregnant within the Enlightenment's idea of perfecting (and culture as a perfecting program)—that it wasn't able to stop the subjugation of the Other: women and minorities, slavery, colonialism, and the rise of genocidal totalitarianisms of the twentieth century.¹⁸ There, in the name of universaliza-

¹⁷ R. Auxier, *op. cit.*, p. 17-19.

¹⁸ This precisely is the reason why Rosi Braidotti recommends giving up on the idea of the human as a normative ideal and a descriptive concept—in favor of “the posthuman.” Cf. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* Polity Press: Cambridge: 2013. But James Besse, on the other hand, demonstrates how posthumanism is paradoxically a friend of humanism because its authors point out the faults and sins of the ego-bound old humanism, thereby allowing course correction and the creation of a “new warm humanism.” “Despite their misguided wish to produce a new philosophical frame which (contrary to their intentions) cedes legitimacy to the old humanism, they ironically contribute to the sprightliness of the new humanism by expanding our understanding of what we are as humans”, in: J. Besse *The New (Warm) Humanism and Posthumanism: A Reply to Randall Auxier, ‘Cassirer: The Coming of a New Humanism’*, “Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture,” 3 (5) 2018, pp. 136-142, p. 141. Posthumanism's abandonment of humanism, as Besse states, legitimizes the old understanding of humanism of the Enlightenment's “particularized universalists.” In a way, it deems that definition correct, giving up on the correction of a historically too implicated concept. There, some posthumanists claim, the essence of the human has been “discovered,” correctly described, and evilly applied by the colonialist universalists, therefore we need to abandon the concept of the human altogether. Another strand of thinking about the human is that of such thinkers as Nietzsche, Scheler, and Cassirer. Nietzsche claims that the depths of the question of what the human is, have not been fully probed nor exhausted yet: “[t]here are a thousand paths that have never yet been walked; a thousand healths and hidden islands of life. Human being and human earth are still unexhausted and undiscovered,” In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. A. Del Caro, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 58. Scheler states that the human is undefinable; Cassirer that what the human is, can only be inquired functionally (not substantially by singling out any particular inner-worldly quality) by what the human does through its *Werk* in the world of culture: “[...] if there is any definition of the nature or ‘essence’ of man, this

tion of a particular racialized vision of the human being, Others were slaughtered and debased in the most elaborated, rationalized, and creative manners.¹⁹ In view of such hazards, humanistic anthropotechnics' categorical imperative is the production of tamed, humane, and sensitive human beings, not "beasts of history." Nevertheless, such a goal can be achieved only through symbolic, educational efforts of the subject carried out in—and for—a community (as the *polis* mirrors the *psyche*). The lure of a pedagogical utopia (of a personalist just society, of human flourishing and a "Kingdom of Ends") is what motivates the activity of humanistic projects. It is assumed that the ethical, domesticated humanity is the ideal, yet unachievable in full, end goal of a long and tiresome process of humanization of the human in history through pedagogical struggles, resistance overcoming, and pluralization of moral perspectives attentive to the voices of the Others—not a marketed commodity of technical origin, effortlessly acquirable.²⁰ And the latter is precisely what technocratic transhumanism offers as its means for achieving its version of human flourishing—an elitist, neoliberal, twisted offshoot of the humanistic ideal using store-bought technology directed at effortlessly enhancing cognition, memory, attention, happiness, and overall intellectual performance. In a word, the task of transformation of experience and personality development is ceded to digital prostheses and pharmacology.

[Transhumanism] holds that current human nature is improvable

definition can only be understood as a functional one, not a substantial one [...] Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature—but his work. It is this work, it is the system of human activities, which defines and determines the circle of 'humanity,'" in: E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2021, pp. 67-68.

¹⁹ "[T]he particularity of the Aryan race was proclaimed the universal principle of world order; and the road to transform that particularity into a universal principle was depicted as one leading through the extinction of all other, admittedly numerous, particularities," Z. Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, p. 118, In J. Besse, op. cit., p. 137.

²⁰ This is in concert with how humanization is currently understood by some of Philosophy as a Way of Life-oriented philosophers of culture: "We use 'humane' here not in the sense of supporting the territorialization of anthropocentrically constructed human subjectivity, but in the sense of *humanitas*, as a critical, careful, and caring attention to holistic growth of the diversity of others and ourselves (however one defines the creaturely existence of ourselves and the personhood of others)," in: P. Bursztyka, E. Kramer, and M. Rychter, op. cit., p. 2.

through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods. Technologies of concern include not only current ones, like genetic engineering and information technology, but also anticipated future developments such as fully immersive virtual reality, machine-phase nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence.²¹

Transhumanists prophesize: “[w]ith optimized genomes and bodies enhanced by links to external technology, people could be more beautiful [...] more intelligent, more emotionally sophisticated, more physically able, more socially connected, generally healthier and happier all round.”²²

After Wojciech Chyła, we can outline the difference between two visions for a flourishing culture: a pedagogic and an eugenic one. Chyła singles out two kinds of utopias which they respectively envision: a pedagogic utopia of humanistic media, and an eugenic utopia of technical media, as roughly belonging to the two extremes of the humanization pole mentioned earlier. The former desires to achieve its ends through symbolic exercises of collectively verified pedagogical struggles, spiritual training, and freely developing personality (not constrained to technocratic market values); the other—through individualistic, capitalistic, technical and pharmacological enhancement of physical and intellectual performance. With transhumanist-eugenic perfecting, a path is laid out for a “[...] stage where on demand, and in exchange for money, humans will themselves program their post-species characteristics and performance instead of themselves perfecting, as has been done this far, the inherited species characteristics and performance through laborious efforts of education and humanistic pedagogy.”²³

²¹ N. Bostrom, *In Defense of Posthuman Dignity*, “Bioethics,” Volume 19 Number 3 2005, pp. 202-214, p. 203.

²² S. Griffiths, *Is Technology Causing Us to ‘Evolve’ into a New SPECIES? Expert Believes Super Humans Called Homo Optimus Will Talk to Machines and Be ‘Digitally Immortal’ by 2050*, in: “Daily Mail Online” 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3423063/Is-technology-causing-evolve-new-SPECIES-Expert-believes-superhumans-called-Homo-optimus-talk-machines-digitally-immortal-2050.html> [access 11 November 2024].

²³ W. Chyła, *Media jako biotechnosystem. Zarys filozofii mediów*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM 2008, p. 11, my translation. All the consecutive translations of Polish texts in this article are mine.

In this vision technical media take on the role of primary memory extensions (ousting Michel Foucault's and Bernard Stiegler's *hypomnemata*), which allows the individual to experience technical possibilities of marketed digital audiovisuality (as a flipside of the libidinal economy²⁴) instead of themselves symbolically developing and projecting possibilities of linguistic and imagistic thinking. And the expansiveness of the ubiquity of virtual reality grows by the day.

UTOPIA AS A SYMBOLIC PRODUCT PROGRESSING CULTURE

In order to deepen the scope of Chyła's notion of a pedagogic utopia of humanism, let us now introduce Eli Kramer's idea of "utopia as the gift of the ethical genius."²⁵ Kramer's argument is based on Ernst Cassirer's interpretation of Kant's notion of genius, the latter being greatly influential in Romanticism and theory of art.

Great works of culture progress it by being the locus of new meanings and experiences that develop human personalities in ethical, esthetic, and moral manners. Eminent ethical teachers and sages are experts in constructing such artistically rich, non-existent worlds of possibilities that intensify, enliven our experience and imagination. "The great mission of the utopia is to make room for the possible as opposed to a passive acquiescence in the present actual state of affairs. It is symbolic thought which overcomes the natural inertia of man and endows him with a new ability, the ability constantly to reshape his human universe."²⁶ Ethical pedagogues and their utopias help us to overcome conformist idleness within us, "our natural inertia" stemming from the (quite pessimist) belief that we do live in the best of the possible worlds,²⁷ while drawing up possible horizons for moral and aesthetic advancements. Kramer calls these creators "ethical geniuses." The products of their creation—utopias—"[...] ought to be able to be used as original standards for actual institutions. They are not

²⁴ This is a creative development of Bernard Stiegler's idea carried out by Wojciech Chyła in his *Media jako biotechnosystem...*

²⁵ E. Kramer, op. cit.

²⁶ E. Cassirer, op. cit.. p. 68.

²⁷ This term, as borrowed from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, is of course the main *topos* of Voltaire's philosophical tale *Candide*.

located in the facts of adverse political experience,”²⁸ that banalizes existence and accepts the status quo but prepare an ideal sphere of a possible new kind of time and a new kind of community to come—free from the ideological constraints of contemporaneity. Those possibilities lure persons motivated to enact change for the better in the world (the Jewish *tikkun olam*), to actualize utopian projects in real-world communities: what Kramer called *eutopias*, the “good places.” “They are actualized and forward-looking institutions for the advancement of human dignity and culture. Eutopian politics aims at refining human political life through enacting the ‘good life’ in a smaller place, a kind of microcosm. Such a politics proffers tantalizing alternatives to the broader culture, which did not seem possible within that culture.”²⁹ Plato’s Academy was one such historical place, with small experimental colleges of liberal arts in the United States such as Antioch, Berea, Black Mountain or Deep Springs as its contemporary incarnations.³⁰

To recapitulate Kramer’s understanding of utopia: “[...] a utopia is the dynamic product (work) of the ‘ethical genius,’ a work that advances culture by luring it, via ideal imaginaries, to new realms of possibility for ethical advancement. Utopias have their dangers and limits, but nevertheless have a critical role to play in improving our ethical life.”³¹ Fusing this view with Chyła’s pedagogic utopia of humanistic media, we arrive at an understanding of how utopias, as symbolic products meant for interpretation, evaluation, imaginative elaboration, and institutional application progress culture by luring individuals to ethically perfect their understanding, characteristics and performance—thereby advancing their personalities *and* repairing the world.

MIND UPLOADING AS A TECHNOCRATIC CULT OF IMAGINATION

Let us now introduce the transhumanist fantasy *par excellence* of “mind uploading,” in order to place it in the context of our humanistic notion of utopia, and point to the moments of their irreconcilability. As Fuchs correctly laments

²⁸ E. Kramer, op. cit., p. 104.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁰ E. Kramer, *Utopia and Human Culture: Alternative Communities of Higher Learning in America*, Master thesis submitted at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2015.

³¹ Ibid., p. 97.

the narrow technocratic understanding of the human mind in transhumanism:

Despite all the objections, the brain appears to many today to be a kind of biological hard disk on which a program or algorithm runs, called “mind.” And this program, futuristically oriented AI researchers and transhumanist philosophers promise, is not even necessarily bound to the brain—it could be realized on any medium. “*Mind uploading*” is the ultimate utopia of the present: a process in which all the brain’s data are copied and transferred to an external medium, and with it our person itself. It would be the ultimate triumph of mind over matter: digital immortality.³²

Here we immediately encounter a stark contrast. With the pedagogic utopia of humanism a normative unity of human existence, learning, and schooling was erected, a unity directed towards “the intellectual upbringing of oneself”³³ (albeit critically reassessed in reaction to the bestiality of colonialism). Transhumanists, on the other hand, offer a eugenic, technocratically narrowed vision of upbringing—a transcending as “uploading”—one that does not consist of ethical, educational, psychagogic struggles, and literacy training, but of technical enhancement using marketed artifacts. The latter precisely circumvents ethical upbringing and self-overcoming, and is ultimately based on a bifurcation of the body and a disembodied mind. This vision aims for a disembodied existence—a paradoxical lifeless (because synthetic) “artificial life.”

For Natasha Vita-More,³⁴ arguably one of the most famous celebrity representatives of the transhumanist intellectuals today, embodiment is the main obstacle to happiness, not a necessary condition of human existence: “[...] the *Transhumanist Manifesto* challenges the issue of human aging and the finality of death by advocating three conditions. These conditions assert that aging is a disease, augmentation and enhancement to the human body and brain are essential for survival, and that human life is not restricted to any one form or environment.”³⁵ The elimination of the messy, bodily condition, is one of the main

³² T. Fuchs, op. cit., p. 16, emphasis mine.

³³ W. Chyła, op. cit., p. 23.

³⁴ <https://www.natashavita-more.com/> [access 11 November 2024].

³⁵ N. Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Manifesto*, <https://www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-manifesto> [access 11 November 2024].

tenets of transhumanist imaginaries,³⁶ visions, and projects (such as Vita-More's *Primo Posthuman*, a "whole body prosthetic"³⁷).

"The most immediate and vital issues for transhumanity" are in Vita-More's view "extending life, augmenting intelligence, and creativity, exploring the universe"³⁸—all technologically realized as extensions of contemporary technoscientific biotechnology, nanotechnology, neurotechnology, genetic engineering and pharmacology. "We are the neo-cyberneticists utilizing high-end creativity, engineering skills, scientific data, and automated tools to author our visions,"³⁹ of which mind-uploading remains the climax. "High-end" in this case means "technologically enhanced and oriented." The vision for a flourishing humanity is therefore not to be performed through the struggle of perfecting it using symbolic means that would lead to an ethical transformation of experience, governmentality, and morality but through neo-cybernetic ideals of materialist control of a system,⁴⁰ where every component of the system can be exchanged for a more negentropically efficient one. Advanced technologies are naively seen here as neutral, transparent, instrumental means of actualizing the said visions. As Max More admits, transhumanism is "[t]he intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly

³⁶ "The true goal of transhumanism is the defeat of aging and death. It is a Promethean ambition, but increasingly we see steps in that direction," in: D. Broderick, *Trans and Post*, p. 434, in: M. More and N. Vita-More (eds.), *Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell: 2013, pp. 430-438.

³⁷ "This future body prototype was motivated by forming new relationships between design, science and technology. Based on a strong interest in human enhancement, I used the phrase 'radical life extension' to refer to indefinite lifespans. This future body prototype was developed originally as 'Primo Posthuman' (1996) whole body prosthetic and its iterative dimensions are 'Platform Diverse Body' and 'Substrate Autonomous Persons'(2013)," In N. Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Manifesto*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Vita-More's words are the fulfillment of Heidegger's last text, *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, where he states that philosophy has been replaced by calculative thinking of cybernetics qua optimization of efficiency. Cf. M. Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, trans. D. Krell, In M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 427-449.

enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.”⁴¹ In principle, such goals as these could be stated by any powerful technocrat of the contemporaneous digital giants (Musk, Bezos, Zuckerberg, Pichai) uninterested in any ethical advancement of the human species or alternative governing policies designed to enact just social change, personalist society and common flourishing. As the brain is a biological computer and the person is a program running on it, we can run such programs on synthetic computers, since they both realize the same functions. Such is the transhumanist vision of a “substrate autonomous person,” also shared by Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil, upon whose ideas Fuchs comments:

“What awaits us is [...] a future, which, from our present vantage point, is best described by the words ‘postbiological’ or even ‘supernatural’. It is a world in which the human race has been swept away by the tide of cultural change, usurped by its own artificial progeny [...] Within the next century, they [machines] will mature into entities as complex as ourselves, and eventually into something transcending everything we know—in whom we can take pride when they refer to themselves as our descendants.” (Moravec 1988: 1). Moravec also already formulated the idea of digital immortality through “transmigration” of the spirit, which according to his estimate should technically be possible as early as 2018 (Moravec 1988: 108). While biological humanity is slowly dying out, humans will ensure the continued existence of their minds through computer simulation. Moravec’s successor Ray Kurzweil has meanwhile corrected the prognosis: he doesn’t expect the singularity, the fusion of human and computer into a cyborg and thus digital immortality, before 2045 (Kurzweil 2005). Yet the idea of mind uploading remains the same: “Up until now, our mortality was tied to the longevity of our hardware. When the hardware crashed, that was it [...] As we cross the divide to instantiate ourselves into our computational technology, our identity will be based on our evolving mind file. We will be software, not hardware.” (Kurzweil 1999: 128f)⁴².

⁴¹ M. More, *The Philosophy of Transhumanism*, <https://www.humanityplus.org/philosophy-of-transhumanism> [access 11 November 2024].

⁴² T. Fuchs, op. cit., p. 58.

ON THE REDUCTIONISTIC UNDERPINNINGS OF TRANSHUMANISM

Transhumanists point out that our bodily existence is the enemy of the human—it's fragile, flawed, imperfect, and unnecessary for existing. As such, it needs technical modernization, and eventually overcoming: a new technical “hardware” to be transferred to as pure data, a “pure, immortal spirit.” But such a presupposition is based on an inaccurate functionalistic, dualistic understanding of human consciousness. Let us examine it briefly, and confront with how contemporary philosophy of embodiment views consciousness.

The dualism exemplified in mind uploading fantasies is a sophisticated continuation of Descartes' mind-body opposition. The mind is *res cogitans*: purely brainbound, functionally identical with the data interacting in neuronal cerebral processes (echoing the Cartesian pineal gland as the *locus* of the soul), and autonomous from the rest of the body. It is nothing living but a “product of a neuronal calculation or an algorithm” because “[...] the mind is a neural computer, fitted by natural selection with combinatorial algorithms for causal and probabilistic reasoning.”⁴³ It can be augmented with prostheses, and eventually losslessly “uploaded” or recreated, based on information patterns copied from neuronal processes. Its maladies supposedly have nothing to do with living and feeling in the social reality based on a meaning brought forth in the intersubjective realm. Here “[...] it is only ever algorithms and information that make up the mind—nothing material, nothing physical, nothing living.”⁴⁴ Just as for Descartes and the French materialists infatuated with mathematics, living organisms are mere mechanical automatons. Here idealism of information, i.e. that experience is a substrate independent pattern of information interaction, is married with crude materialism in a neglect of the separate ontological status of living beings. It misses the fact, that “[a]ll experience is a form of life.”⁴⁵

⁴³ S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, New York: Norton 1997, p. 524 quoted in T. Fuchs op. cit., p. 24. For a possibility of a new form of embodiment in resistance to transhumanist thinking see Auxier's article *The Coming Revolution in Higher Education: Process, Time, and Singularity*, In A. Stoller, E. Kramer (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophical Proposals for the University: Towards a Philosophy of Higher Education*, Palgrave MacMillan 2018, pp. 217-260.

⁴⁴ T. Fuchs, op. cit., p. 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

The transhumanist view, that the human mind is only a calculated program running on a biological substrate, which in principle could be realized in a synthetic one, is based on the functionalist multiple realizability hypothesis. But such a view is wrong as it omits the primordial living and embodied dimension of consciousness with its “sensing, feeling, striving, perceiving,” and ecological situatedness. It omits the human “feeling of being alive”⁴⁶ and its basic quality of “for-me-ness”⁴⁷ stemming from a centrality of existential perspective, which is indispensable for any experience of the Other that we certainly enjoy as experience shows. “Consciousness is not at all the mindless passing through of data states—it is self-awareness. It is for me that I feel pain, perceive, understand, or think.”⁴⁸ This basal self-familiarity is implicitly, tacitly present in all of our mental acts and physical activities as background feelings, drives, and instincts. It is a feature of an embodied, animated, ecologically situated, socially embedded, *finite* experiencing organism, not of a lifeless artifact of computation with no centralized perspective. Thus, as writes Evan Thompson on the “brain in a vat” thought experiment: “[...] we shouldn’t expect there to be a purely neural explanation of consciousness. Instead, what we should expect—or at least aim for—is a much richer biological account of consciousness as a life-regulation process of the whole organism dynamically engaged in its world.”⁴⁹

Consciousness is neither “substrate independent” nor intracranially brain-bound: “[t]he basal activity of consciousness, the primary, as yet unreflected experience, already rests on the interaction between the brain and the rest of the organism.”⁵⁰ Conscious experience is always already intertwined with bodily experience, which is the holistic phenomenal manifestation of numerous interrelated life processes (hunger, desire, fear, pleasure, proprioception, and their phenomenal counterparts: sense of agency, sense of ownership,

⁴⁶ T. Fuchs, *The Feeling of Being Alive*, In J. Fingerhut, S. Marienberg (eds.), *Feelings of Being Alive*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter 2012, pp. 149-166.

⁴⁷ D. Zahavi and U. Kriegel, *For-Me-Ness: What It Is and What It Is Not*, In D. Dahlstrom, A. Elpidorou, W. Hopp (eds.), *Philosophy of Mind and Phenomenology: Conceptual and Empirical Approaches*, New York and London: Routledge 2016, pp. 36–53.

⁴⁸ T. Fuchs, *In Defense...*, p. 25.

⁴⁹ E. Thompson and D. Cosmelli, *Brain in a Vat or Body in a World? Brainbound versus Enactive Views of Experience*, “Philosophical Topics” Vol. 39, No. 1, Spring 2011, pp. 163-180, p. 178.

⁵⁰ T. Fuchs, op. cit., p. 27.

self-affection⁵¹) themselves embedded in intersubjectively lived meaning. “Thus, life is what has already happened to us and affected us before we can notice it and respond to it.”⁵² These background bodily feelings, moods, and drives that affect us, do so while preceding our conscious observation or thematization. As such they cannot be thought of as a mere calculation running on artificial substrate; silicon substrate doesn’t experience life processes with which it could identify, *for which it could care*, for it is not a life with a limited temporality.⁵³ Analogically this is why astrophysicists do not get sucked in by their supercomputers, which simulate black holes. Gravity is not a computation. “Likewise, conscious experience requires embodiment, and thus biological processes in a living body.”⁵⁴

Even though it’s phenomenologically false and scientifically unsound, the computer brain model, and with it the transhumanistic transfer of the mind to a silicone machine, remains a popular *topos* in our culture, promising digital immortality and unconstrained libertarian freedom in the world of the virtual, the cyberspace. Fuchs correctly points out that this imaginarium’s success is based on, among other things, Alan Turing’s false solipsist premise, that it is not possible to distinguish consciousness from simulation anyway, and so what “seems to” act intelligent “is” intelligent. The alleged impossibility stems from the fact that we, as humans, supposedly cannot be even sure of whether others think, since the only immediate insight into the mental sphere that we have is of our own mind’s contents. But this view too is wrong. “We perceive others as members of a common life form in which we always already presuppose subjectivity or selfhood. This perception is bound to our common aliveness, embodiment, and life history.”⁵⁵ We intuitively sense a common form of embodiment of life in other living beings, unconsciously always grasping other people’s

⁵¹ A. Newen, *The Embodied Self, the Pattern Theory of Self, and the Predictive Mind*, “Frontiers in Psychology,” 9:2270 (2018).

⁵² T. Fuchs, *The Feeling...*, p. 159.

⁵³ Henri Bergson expressed this succinctly: “[...] there is no living being who does not feel himself coming gradually to the end of his role, and to live is to grow old.” In H. Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T.E. Hulme, New York and London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons 1912, p. 12.

⁵⁴ T. Fuchs, *In Defense...*, p. 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 19. This is also the view of Cassirer as for him the experience of the phenomenon of expression—that the world and others express a form of subjectivity—is the basic given of consciousness. Cf. E. Cassirer *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Vol. 3, Phenomenology of Cognition*, trans. S. Lofts, London and New York: Routledge 2022.

mind states from their meaningful, bodily behavior and its rhythmicity, for the body has its own operative intentionality.⁵⁶

The body of an individual constitutes her person just as well as individual character traits do. But transhumanists express contempt for bodily existence and ascribe to a devaluation of life itself to which Fuchs counters: [...] *a person's attitudes, behavior, and habits are always simultaneously attitudes, movement patterns and dispositions of their body*—right down to the characteristic style of gait, gestures, and facial expressions, articulation, and prosody. We recognize a person by his posture and behavior; *his corporeality is part of his personality*, his identity. Not only “inner,” psychological or mental characteristics but also the individual body constitutes the person.⁵⁷

The person manifests herself through her body without delay; the body is the “real player in the field,” not the brain, not the neuronal processes behind it; the body actualizes the person in whole (although not exhaustively) and not only as a “ghost in the shell.” And so, from an embodied perspective, a disembodied existence sounds incoherent and perverse: a lifeless, fantastical “existence” in a technical contraption⁵⁸ devoid of subjective experience is impossible to imagine. In this radical but passionately awaited in a quasi-religious attitude and atmosphere variant of mind transference, transhumanism becomes posthumanism as it advocates for such radical technical transformation of the human, that it abandons its fundamental species characteristics, resulting in the creation of a new being: the posthuman. This passionate yearning seems paradoxical: how can one desire something that will make one stop being who one is at the most fundamental level? How can anyone be sure that such transformation will bring about only desired consequences, since the basis of evaluating such transformation (human morality and ethics) will itself be gone? “Notions of the good, which every enhancement or reengineering of human nature are ultimately intended to serve, are themselves still tied to the natural basis of *Homo sapiens*.”⁵⁹ Because of that it is impossible to desire in good faith of such a leap,

⁵⁶ T. Fuchs, op. cit., p. 110.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 111, emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ Such an existence is richly represented in cultural imaginaries of sci-fi productions like the cult classic animation *Ghost in the Shell*, 1995, its 2004 sequel, *Ghost in the Shell 2*, both directed by Mamoru Oshii, and *Ex Machina*, 2015, directed by Daniel Garland.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

hence it cannot serve as “a new realm of possibility for ethical advancement,”⁶⁰ contrary to Kramer’s definition of utopia.

Thus we can also state that the transhumanist *ou-topos* lacks in its artistic, intellectual, and ethical depths to be seen in terms of the rich and potent works of the utopian (and dystopian for that matter) works proper. Here the ethical advancement is hindered with the “technocratic narrowness” of techno-augmentation as the main means of achieving a flourishing “life,” disregarding the pedagogical dimension of the Kantian “upbringing of humanity.” The transhumanist vision turns out to be impossible for actualization as the *eu-topos* (good place).⁶¹ As a story, it doesn’t seem to be of the kind that helps humanity broaden its ethical perspective and advancement, and so it doesn’t progress culture in the sense that utopias do. It presents itself as a narrow, dogmatic viewpoint on the human (with the mind as “software,” running on an obsolete and backward “hardware”), foreclosing the horizon of potentialities within us, dehumanizing, reifying and depersonalizing through its dismissal of the living, subjective dimension of experience.

Whenever a vision for “a better world” becomes singular, constraining, foreclosing and dehumanizing, it turns into a cult. Such was the case with Richard Wagner’s vision for an intellectual community, of which Friedrich Nietzsche was part, until he resigned with distaste. Wagner’s vision for a cultural renewal of Germany was apodictic, absolutist, ultranationalistic, antisemitic and limiting.⁶² By analogy, we can call technocratic transhumanism in general, and its mind uploading fantasy specifically, a technocratic cult of imagination: a vulgar, neoliberal futuristic vision founded upon a technoscientistic (materialist, neuroreductionist, cerebrocentric) and inaccurate (disembodied) understanding of the human. Transhumanism is fetishistically focused on technical extensions as a neo-cybernetic substitute for symbolic amelioration of the individual and its community: a dismissal of the humanists’ pedagogic utopia.

⁶⁰ E. Kramer, *Utopia as...*, p. 97.

⁶¹ It is neither an instance of the Foucauldian heterotopia, “other place,” as Foucault describes a sort of topology of the social sphere, in which heterotopias play an important role in the socialization process—one either has to go through them to become mature, or a part of the community, to purify oneself, or perform a ritual—but all in relation to the regular space of social interaction. In a disembodied digital existence, there can be no experience of space—that would require having a body. Cf. M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, trans. Jay Miskowiec, “Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité”, October 1984.

⁶² E. Kramer, *Utopia and Human Culture...*

CONCLUSION: TRANSHUMANISM WORKS AGAINST THE TASK OF CULTURE

Rapid advancements of digital technology exert radical influence on culture and bring about various transhumanistic imaginaries feeding off these advancements, the most extreme example of such influence being the mind uploading fantasy. Transhumanism promises a flourishing life achieved solely through the use of enhancements and augmentations of technics—basically saying that all societal problems will go away, if we just enhance our cognitive capabilities with enough prostheses and pills. Through this lens, the Greek ideal of *paideia*, Roman *humanitas*, Christian *imitatio Dei*, Enlightenment's *perfectibilité*, and Romanticism's *Bildung* no longer seem normatively attractive. The pedagogic utopia of tiresome humanistic education through symbolic self-fashioning and community amelioration is fervently challenged by a technocratic imagination of effortless technical self-upgrading. The human body is seen as an obstacle for progress (Stellarc's "the body is obsolete") and the completion of technicization of existence. Transhumanism is based on a false dualism of mind and body, which in turn gives credibility to the mind uploading project. This hinders the symbolic work of culture towards free personality development in individuals and ethical striving towards the good life. With transhumanism the *ars bene vivendi* becomes a store-bought commodity, abandoning the ethical dimension of self-overcoming so passionately defended by amongst others Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Pierre Hadot,⁶³ Peter Sloterdijk,⁶⁴ Richard Schusterman,⁶⁵ and today the Philosophy as a Way of Life orientation in philosophy.

All this allows us to say that as a real community of the (often academic) intelligentsia, *the transhumanist movement is working against the ideal task of culture*, understood after Auxier as "[...] the creation of the world, and the pursuit of freely developing personality between our actual condition and

⁶³ In his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* Hadot summarizes the similarities between Foucault and himself.

⁶⁴ Particularly in his *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. W. Hoban, Cambridge: Polity Press 2013.

⁶⁵ R. Schusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, London: Psychology Press 1997.

our ideal world.”⁶⁶ Even though transhumanists sometimes express the thought that the augmenting technologies should be accessible to all, they do not lay out any viable paths to social and political reform that could change the dominating model of education, economy, and politics. Transhumanism pushes culture towards a future of preservation, and a further deepening, of the present technocratic, neoliberal state of geopolitics. It is accelerationist in the sense that it shares with accelerationism the conviction that the progress of technology, and not in ethical governing based on education and just contractualism, is the best means to achieving flourishing ends for society.⁶⁷ Instead of “implementing pedagogical utopia of shaping and perfecting the spirit” through humanistic anthropotechnics of humane-ization, we are lured in with the vivid power of audiovisual phantasms, imaginaries of techno-augmentation of our physical and cognitive capabilities “[...] into the post-humanistic periods of implementing merely the eugenic utopia: of technological automatic support to the biologically and culturally inherited species accomplishments.”⁶⁸

Thus, the technicized, upgraded *homo optimus* of “[...] transhumanity in the process of its hatching is taken as the one that makes us forget of the ancient humanity of humanisms.”⁶⁹ Humanism, after all, ideally “[...] excludes any improvement of the human being using means other than the symbolic linguistic-rational: educational, communicational.”⁷⁰ And so, one can clearly see that transhumanism works against the ideal task of cultural utopias by luring persons away from “new realms of possibility” of ethical advancement. Instead it lures us in to a regression: of preserving the capitalist, neoliberal status quo of technicized consumerism, consumerism of “enhancement upon demand,” which excludes symbolic efforts of meaning-making perfected through the in-

⁶⁶ R. Auxier, *Cassirer...*, p. 21.

⁶⁷ A. Beckett, *Accelerationism: how a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live*, “The Guardian,” 2017, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in> [access 11 November 2024].

⁶⁸ W. Chyła, *Media jako biotechnosystem...*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15. Max More admits as much: “Humanism tends to rely exclusively on educational and cultural refinement to improve human nature whereas transhumanists want to apply technology to overcome limits imposed by our biological and genetic heritage,” in: M. More, *The Philosophy of Transhumanism*, <https://www.humanityplus.org/philosophy-of-transhumanism> [access 11 November 2024].

ternalization of critically evaluated ethical canon of living ideas of the philosophical tradition. The transhumanist intellectual is certainly neither a “cosmopolitan genius” nor an “ethical teacher” as their works, riddled with boorish, infantile compensation fantasies and technophilic cravings, damage our relationship with nature and ourselves (in the way they present consciousness and life as programmable machines running on algorithms), instead of deepening it. These works are not the works which would “utilize the possible through symbolic products,”⁷¹ since they offer unscientific impossibilities based on wishful thinking (the Freudian pleasure principle) which situates itself dangerously close to magic, animism, and myth. There is no chance for transhumanist imaginaries to be “[...] able to be used as original standards for actual institutions.”⁷²

If we were to answer the questions that Kramer claims ethical utopias ought to pose such as “what kinds of stories help us in the present to re-imagine our human universe” or “what stories limit us, or are dangerous and destroy our chances of a better future,”⁷³ on the basis of previously stated arguments, we would have to say that the necrophilic (in Erich Fromm’s sense) visions of mind uploading are neither artistically fruitful nor socially helpful. It would also be hard to see someday the transhumanist imaginaries as “actualized and forward-looking institutions for the advancement of human dignity and culture,” and “enacting the ‘good life’ in a smaller place”⁷⁴ since their depersonalization and reification of the human leave us so obviously void of any dignity. Indeed, the transhumanist movement seems to be a “[...] organization bent on depersonalizing and dehumanizing the opportunities of others.”⁷⁵

Thus, in the sense that has been specified above, transhumanism sabotages the task of culture, and the task of philosophy as well, as we could argue after Eli Kramer, Przemysław Bursztyka and Marcin Rychter that “[...] *both culture and philosophy, when properly understood, share the same fundamental*

⁷¹ E. Kramer, *Utopia as...*, p. 104.

⁷² *Ibid.* The history of cryonics, which is a business that has been running for more than half a century, shows this. A philosophical analysis of cryonics was produced by Rafał Ilnicki in *Cryonics: Technological Fictionalization of Death*, “Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture,” 2, no. 4(6) (2018), pp. 36–45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 107.

aim and the same fundamental feature. That is, *both provide a kind of cultivation, a humane-ization* (again in the sense of an attending to the development of oneself and the other) *of reality.*"⁷⁶ That's why somewhat paradoxically we can call transhumanism an anti-cultural and anti-philosophical philosophy.

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⁷⁶ P. Bursztyka, E. Kramer and M. Rychter, op. cit., p. 7, emphasis mine.

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