

# INTRODUCTION—THE TRANSHUMANIST FAQ: A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

NICK BOSTROM\*

## GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT TRANSHUMANISM

### WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

Transhumanism is a way of thinking about the future that is based on the premise that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase. We formally define it as follows:

1. The 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 enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.
2. The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies.

Transhumanism can be viewed as an extension of humanism, from which it is partially derived. Humanists believe that humans matter and that individuals matter. We might not be perfect, but we can make things better by promoting rational thinking, freedom, tolerance, democracy, and concern for our fellow human beings. Transhumanists agree with this proposition but also emphasize what we have the potential to become. Just as we use rational means to improve the human condition and the external world, we can also use such means to improve ourselves, the human organism.

In doing so, we are not limited to traditional humanistic methods, such as education and cultural development. We can also use technological means that will eventually enable us to move beyond what some would think of as “human.”

It is not our human shape or the details of our current human biology that define what is valuable about us, but rather our aspirations and ideals, our experiences, and the kinds of lives we lead. To the transhumanist, progress occurs when more people become more able to shape themselves, their lives, and the ways they relate to others, in accordance with their own deepest values. Transhumanists place a high value on autonomy: the ability and right of individuals to plan and choose their own lives. Some people may, of course, for any number of reasons, choose to forgo the opportunity to use technology to improve themselves. Transhumanists seek to create a world in which autonomous individuals may choose to remain unenhanced or choose to be enhanced and in which these choices will be respected.

Through the accelerating pace of technological development and scientific understanding, we are entering a whole new stage in the history of the human species. In the relatively near future, we may face the prospect of real artificial intelligence. New kinds of cognitive tools will be built that combine artificial intelligence with interface technology. Molecular nanotechnology has the potential to manufacture abundant resources for everybody and to give us control over the biochemical processes in our bodies, enabling us to eliminate disease and aging. Technologies such as brain-computer interfaces and neuropharmacology could amplify human intelligence, increase emotional well-being, improve our capacity for steady commitment to life projects or a loved one, and even multiply the range and richness of possible emotions. On the dark side of the spectrum, transhumanists recognize that some of these emerging technologies could potentially cause great harm to human life; even the survival of our species could be at risk. Seeking to understand the dangers and working to prevent disasters is an essential part of the transhumanist agenda.

Transhumanism is entering the mainstream culture today, as an increasing number of scientists, scientifically literate philosophers, and social thinkers are beginning to take seriously the range of possibilities that transhumanism encompasses. A rapidly expanding family of transhumanist groups, differing somewhat in flavor and focus, and a plethora of discussion groups in many countries around the world, are gathered under the umbrella of Humanity+ (formerly World Transhumanist Association), a nonprofit democratic membership organization.