
Transhumanism

BY FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

OCTOBER 23, 2009

For the last several decades, a strange liberation movement has grown within the developed world. Its crusaders aim much higher than civil rights campaigners, feminists, or gay-rights advocates. They want nothing less than to liberate the human race from its biological constraints. As "transhumanists" see it, humans must wrest their biological destiny from evolution's blind process of random variation and adaptation and move to the next stage as a species.

It is tempting to dismiss transhumanists as some sort of odd cult, nothing more than science fiction taken too seriously: Witness their over-the-top Web sites and recent press releases ("Cyborg Thinkers to Address Humanity's Future," proclaims one). The plans of some transhumanists to freeze themselves cryogenically in hopes of being revived in a future age seem only to confirm the movement's place on the intellectual fringe.

But is the fundamental tenet of transhumanism — that we will someday use biotechnology to make ourselves stronger, smarter, less prone to violence, and longer-lived — really so outlandish? Transhumanism of a sort is implicit in much of the research agenda of contemporary biomedicine. The new procedures and technologies emerging from research laboratories and hospitals — whether mood-altering drugs, substances to boost muscle mass or selectively erase memory, prenatal genetic screening, or gene therapy — can as easily be used to "enhance" the species as to ease or ameliorate illness.

Although the rapid advances in biotechnology often leave us vaguely uncomfortable, the intellectual or moral threat they represent is not always easy to identify. The human race, after all, is a pretty sorry mess, with our stubborn diseases, physical limitations, and short lives. Throw in humanity's jealousies, violence, and constant anxieties, and the transhumanist project begins to look downright reasonable. If it were technologically possible, why wouldn't we want to transcend our current species? The seeming reasonableness of the project, particularly when considered in small increments, is part of its danger. Society is unlikely to fall suddenly under the spell of the transhumanist worldview. But it is very possible that we will nibble at biotechnology's tempting offerings without realizing that they come at a frightful moral cost.

The first victim of transhumanism might be equality. The U.S. Declaration of Independence says that "all men are created equal," and the most serious political fights in the history of the United States have been over who qualifies as fully human. Women and blacks did not make the cut in 1776 when Thomas Jefferson penned the declaration. Slowly and painfully, advanced societies have realized that simply being human entitles a person to political and legal equality. In effect, we have drawn a red line around the human being and said that it is sacrosanct.

Underlying this idea of the equality of rights is the belief that we all possess a human essence that dwarfs manifest differences in skin color, beauty, and even intelligence. This essence, and the view that individuals therefore have inherent value, is at the heart of political liberalism. But modifying that essence is the core of the transhumanist project. If we start transforming ourselves into something superior, what rights will these enhanced creatures claim, and what rights will they possess when compared to those left behind? If some move ahead, can anyone afford not to follow? These questions are troubling enough within rich, developed societies. Add in the implications for citizens of the world's poorest countries — for whom biotechnology's marvels likely will be out of reach — and the threat to the idea of equality becomes even more menacing.

Transhumanism's advocates think they understand what constitutes a good human being, and they are happy to leave behind the limited, mortal, natural beings they see around them in favor of something better. But do they really comprehend ultimate human goods? For all our obvious faults, we humans are miraculously complex products of a long evolutionary process — products whose whole is much more than the sum of our parts. Our good characteristics are intimately connected to our bad ones: If we weren't violent and aggressive, we wouldn't be able to defend ourselves; if we didn't have feelings of exclusivity, we wouldn't be loyal to those close to us; if we never felt jealousy, we would also never feel love. Even our mortality plays a critical function in allowing our species as a whole to survive and adapt (and transhumanists are just about the last group I'd like to see live forever). Modifying any one of our key characteristics inevitably entails modifying a complex, interlinked package of traits, and we will never be able to anticipate the ultimate outcome.

Nobody knows what technological possibilities will emerge for human self-modification. But we can already see the stirrings of Promethean desires in how we prescribe drugs to alter the behavior and personalities of our children. The environmental movement has taught us humility and respect for the integrity of nonhuman nature. We need a similar humility concerning our human nature. If we do not develop it soon, we may unwittingly invite the transhumanists to deface humanity with their genetic bulldozers and psychotropic shopping malls.

YOU MAY LIKE

SPONSORED LINKS BY **TABOOLA** 

ARE YOU GROWING YOUR APP THE HARD WAY?

LOCALYTICS

PAY OFF YOUR CREDIT CARD BALANCE FASTER USING THIS ONE TRICK

LENDINGTREE

MEET THE MAN WHO IS DISRUPTING A \$13 BILLION RAZOR INDUSTRY

DOLLAR SHAVE CLUB

BEFORE JENNIFER LAWRENCE AND TAYLOR SWIFT WERE FAMOUS, THEY MODELED FOR ABERCROMBIE—AND

MORE FROM FOREIGN POLICY

BY TABOOLA

HOW DID THE BRITISH PRESS COVER THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

GUEST POST: USING RELIGION TO RESTRAIN IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

CHINA: THE BEST AND THE WORST PLACE TO BE A MUSLIM WOMAN

WHEN A BOY'S LIFE IS WORTH MORE THAN HIS SISTER'S

HOW BAD IS BAD?

RELIGION IS NOT THE ENEMY

Spreading Democracy

We are at present engaged in what purports to be a planned reordering of the world by the powerful states. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are but one part of a supposedly universal effort to create world order by "spreading democracy." This idea is not merely quixotic — it is dangerous. The rhetoric surrounding this crusade implies that the system is applicable in a standardized (Western) form, that it can succeed everywhere, that it can remedy today's transnational dilemmas, and that it can bring peace, rather than sow disorder. It cannot.

Democracy is rightly popular. In 1647, the English Levellers broadcast the powerful idea that "all government is in the free consent of the people." They meant votes for all. Of course, universal suffrage does not guarantee any particular political result, and elections cannot even ensure their own perpetuation — witness the Weimar Republic. Electoral democracy is also unlikely to produce outcomes convenient to hegemonic or imperial powers. (If the Iraq war had depended on the freely expressed consent of "the world community," it would not have happened.) But these uncertainties do not diminish the appeal of electoral democracy.

Several other factors besides democracy's popularity explain the dangerous and illusory belief that its propagation by foreign armies might actually be feasible. Globalization suggests that human affairs are evolving toward a universal pattern. If gas stations, iPods, and computer geeks are the same worldwide, why not political institutions? This view underrates the world's complexity. The relapse into bloodshed and anarchy that has occurred so visibly in much of the world has also made the idea of spreading a new order more attractive. The Balkans seemed to show that areas of turmoil and humanitarian catastrophe required the intervention, military if need be, of strong and stable states. In the absence of effective international governance, some humanitarians are still ready to support a world order imposed by U.S. power. But one should always be suspicious when military powers claim to be doing favors for their victims and the world by defeating and occupying weaker states.

Yet another factor may be the most important: The United States has been ready with the necessary combination of megalomania and messianism, derived from its revolutionary origins. Today's United States is unchallengeable in its techno-military supremacy, convinced of the superiority of its social system, and, since 1989, no longer reminded — as even the greatest conquering empires always had been — that its material power has limits. Like President Woodrow Wilson (a spectacular international failure in his day), today's ideologues see a model society already at work in the United States: a combination of law, liberal freedoms, competitive private enterprise, and regular, contested elections with universal suffrage. All that remains is to remake the world in the image of this "free society."

This idea is dangerous whistling in the dark. Although great power action may have morally or politically desirable consequences, identifying with it is perilous because the logic and methods of state action are not those of universal rights. All established states put their own interests first. If they have the power, and the end is considered sufficiently vital, states justify the means of achieving it (though rarely in public) — particularly when they think God is on their side. Both good and evil empires have produced the barbarization of our era, to which the "war against terror" has now contributed.

While threatening the integrity of universal values, the campaign to spread democracy will not succeed. The 20th century demonstrated that states could not simply remake the world or abbreviate historical transformations. Nor can they easily effect social change by transferring institutions across borders. Even within the ranks of territorial nation-states, the conditions for effective democratic government are rare: an existing state enjoying legitimacy, consent, and the ability to mediate conflicts between domestic groups. Without such consensus, there is no single sovereign people and therefore no legitimacy for arithmetical majorities. When this consensus — be it religious, ethnic, or both — is absent, democracy has been suspended (as is the case with democratic institutions in Northern Ireland), the state has split (as in Czechoslovakia), or society has descended into permanent civil war (as in Sri Lanka). "Spreading democracy" aggravated ethnic conflict and produced the disintegration of states in multinational and multicomunal regions after both 1918 and 1989, a bleak prospect.

Beyond its scant chance of success, the effort to spread standardized Western democracy also suffers from a fundamental paradox. In no small part, it is conceived of as a solution to the dangerous transnational problems of our day. A growing part of human life now occurs beyond the influence of voters — in transnational public and private entities that have no electorates, or at least no democratic ones. And electoral democracy cannot function effectively outside political units such as nation-states. The powerful states are therefore trying to spread a system that even they find inadequate to meet today's challenges.

Europe proves the point. A body like the European Union (EU) could develop into a powerful and effective structure precisely because it has no electorate other than a small number (albeit growing) of member governments. The EU would be nowhere without its "democratic deficit," and there can be no future for its parliament, for there is no "European people," only a collection of "member peoples," less than half of whom bothered to vote in the 2004 EU parliamentary elections. "Europe" is now a functioning entity, but unlike the member states it enjoys no popular legitimacy or electoral authority. Unsurprisingly, problems arose as soon as the EU moved beyond negotiations between governments and became the subject of democratic campaigning in the member states.

The effort to spread democracy is also dangerous in a more indirect way: It conveys to those who do not enjoy this form of government the illusion that it actually governs those who do. But does it? We now know something about how the actual decisions to go to war in Iraq were taken in at least two states of unquestionable democratic bona fides: the United States and the United Kingdom. Other than creating complex problems of deceit and concealment, electoral democracy and representative assemblies had little to do with that process. Decisions were taken among small groups of people in private, not very different from the way they would have been taken in non-democratic countries. Fortunately, media independence could not be so easily circumvented in the United Kingdom. But it is not electoral democracy that necessarily ensures effective freedom of the press, citizen rights, and an independent judiciary.

YOU MAY LIKE

SPONSORED LINKS BY [TABOOLA](#) 

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEASURING YOUR APP & GROWING IT

LOCALYTICS

THE FASTEST WAY TO PAY OFF \$10,000 IN CREDIT CARD DEBT

MEET THE MAN WHO IS DISRUPTING A \$13 BILLION RAZOR INDUSTRY

DOLLAR SHAVE CLUB

BEFORE JENNIFER LAWRENCE AND TAYLOR SWIFT WERE FAMOUS, THEY MODELED FOR ABERCROMBIE—AND THE PHOTOS ARE EPIC

TEEN VOGUE

MORE FROM FOREIGN POLICY

BY TABoola

ONE REASON YOU SHOULDN'T GO TO AFGHANISTAN WITH A BEARD

THE REAL SHAME IN PAKISTAN

THE WORLD'S 10 MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES

OBAMA'S FOREIGN POLICY SUMMED UP IN ONE QUOTE

82ND AIRBORNE GENERAL SHIPPED HOME FROM AFGHANISTAN UNDER CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION

QUOTE OF THE DAY: AN ARMY GENERAL ON THE 'ODIOUS' AMERICAN WAY OF LOSING WARS

