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Reinventing Cockaigne

Utopian Themes in Transhumanist Thought

Abstract

This paper argues that transhumanism is a form of utopianism. Transhumanist writings are rich with utopian ideas and images that can be traced back to ancient and medieval myths, dreams and hopes. By analysing the former in the light of the latter, I intend to show that the persuasiveness of transhumanist arguments for radical human enhancement crucially depends on their utopian content, and that this seriously undermines transhumanists' self-proclaimed commitment to critical rationality and, consequently, diminishes the weight that we should give to their arguments.

"There no one suffers shortages;/ The walls are made of sausages."
(About the Wonderful Land of Cockaigne, ca. 1458)

Transhumanism was defined by the evolutionary theorist Julian Huxley in 1927 as the belief that the human species can and should transcend itself "by realizing new possibilities" of and for human nature.[1] This belief, which lay dormant for several decades, is currently supported by a growing number of natural scientists and philosophers. Not all of them refer to themselves as transhumanists, but they all advocate the development and use of new technologies that promise to help us overcome familiar biological limitations and become what we allegedly have always wished to be. A radical transformation of human nature is sought and demanded, in the name of reason, science and progress, and in the spirit of enlightenment and humanism. Transhumanists want to

do something against the "terrible fact of death"[2], and advocate social, mental and physical improvement not only of individuals but of the whole species, which, they claim, will also make us happier and less prone to suffering. Nick Bostrom, Director of the *Future of Humanities Institute* at the University of Oxford declares: "I want to help make the world a better place" and speculates about "lives wonderful beyond imagination" that future radically enhanced human or "post-human" beings might enjoy.[3] Similarly, John Harris, who is arguably one of the most influential British bio-ethicists today, claims that "taking control of evolution and our future development to the point, and indeed beyond the point, where we humans will have changed, perhaps into a new and certainly into a better species altogether" is "nothing short of a clear imperative to make the world a better place."[4]. Claims such as these, which are getting more and more common, reveal a conspicuous proximity to utopianism.

Utopias can be loosely defined as "man's dreams of a better world"[5], or perhaps a *perfect* world, with perfect human beings or at least human beings that are as perfect as they can be in a perfect (social, political, or technical) environment. Transhumanist visions of our post-human future evoke not only mythical places such as the Land of Cockaigne, the Isles of the Blessed, or the Golden Age, in which men lived like Gods. They also echo the promises of alchemy and later of modern science to secure wealth and happiness for all human beings.

The proposed transition from the human to the posthuman via radical enhancement is typically justified by a speculative account of all the fantastic things and experiences that await us (or if not us personally, then at least humanity) once we have achieved posthuman status. Bostrom is particularly articulate in describing the many and practically boundless delights of posthumanity: "You have just celebrated your 170th birthday and you feel stronger than ever. Each day is a joy. You have invented entirely new art forms, which exploit the new kinds of cognitive capacities and sensibilities you have developed. You still listen to music – music that is to Mozart what Mozart is to bad Muzak. You are communicating with your contemporaries using a language that has grown out of English over the past century and that has a vocabulary and expressive power that enables you to share and discuss thoughts and feelings that unaugmented humans could not even think or experience", and so on and so forth.[6] Basically,

everything will be much, much better (and easier). In his *Letter from Utopia*, in which one of those fortunate posthumans of the future addresses us merely humans, we are reminded of those few and all-too-short precious moments in which we experience life at its best, only to be told that those moments are nothing compared to the bliss permanently experienced by the posthuman: "And yet, what you had in your best moment is not close to what I have now – a beckoning scintilla at most. If the distance between base and apex for you is eight kilometres, then to reach my dwelling requires a million light-year ascent. The altitude is outside moon and planets and all the stars your eyes can see. Beyond dreams. Beyond imagination."[7] Posthumans will no longer be cursed with ageing bodies, and will no longer have to die; they will know and understand things that are entirely beyond our reach now; and above all, they will have lots and lots of pleasurable experiences: "Pleasure! A few grains of this magic ingredient are dearer than a king's treasure, and we have it aplenty here in Utopia. It pervades into everything we do and everything we experience. We sprinkle it in our tea" (p. 5). The letter ends with an urgent call to bring the posthuman into existence and is signed by "your possible future self".

There is nothing very unusual about the utopian outlook that Bostrom endorses so unabashedly. On the contrary, it is rather common and apparently shared by many who see humanity's salvation in emerging and converging technologies and technological growth in general. The scientists and US government officials who authored the 2002 landmark report *Converging Technologies for Improving Human Performance*, commissioned by the *US National Science Foundation* and *Department of Commerce*, seriously expected that through the convergence of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science we would soon be able to solve all the world's problems. Technological progress would result in "world peace" and "evolution to a higher level of compassion and accomplishment."[8] More importantly, it would also lead to "a golden age of prosperity" (p. 291) and "economic wealth on a scale hitherto unimaginable" (p. 293). Economic wealth is here clearly seen as both necessary and sufficient for permanent human happiness, where the latter, in well-tried utilitarian fashion, is equated with unlimited access to, and enjoyment of, pleasurable experiences.

Bostrom's transhumanist comrade-in-arms David Pearce, who favours a negative utilitarianism whose aim is the abolition of all suffering, is equally optimistic (and

equally hedonistic in his outlook): "Over the next thousand years or so", he knows, "the biological substrates of suffering will be eradicated completely" and consequently the "states of mind of our descendants (…) will share at least one common feature: a sublime and all-pervasive happiness."[9] It will be nothing less than a "naturalisation of heaven", where we "will have the chance to enjoy modes of experience we primitives cruelly lack. For on offer are sights more majestically beautiful, music more deeply soul-stirring, sex more exquisitely erotic, mystical epiphanies more awe-inspiring, and love more profoundly intense than anything we can now properly comprehend" (0.4.). "As an exercise, the reader may care briefly to summon up the most delightful fantasy (s)he can personally conceive. Agreeable as this may be, states of divine happiness orders of magnitude more beautiful than anything the contemporary mind can access will pervade the very fabric of reality in generations to come. Even the most virile of imaginations can apprehend in only the barest and formal sense the ravishing splendour that lies ahead" (1.7.).

In the same vein, to add just one more example, Gregory S. Paul & Earl D. Cox in their celebration of cyberevolution ask us to consider "the advantages of being able to learn and understand anything your mind desires in a few minutes. Imagine yourself a virtual living being with senses, emotions, and a consciousness that makes our current human form seem a dim state of antiquated existence. Of being free, always free, of physical pain, able to repair any damage and with a downloaded mind that never dies."[10]

The exuberant rhetoric that marks all those descriptions frames the more serious and, as I am happy to admit, occasionally rather sophisticated philosophical arguments that Bostrom and some of his more academically inclined fellow transhumanists such as John Harris or James Hughes have presented. The rhetorical framing, however, is far more than mere decoration and literary flourish, for the arguments are all based on the presumption that the proposed changes of the human condition will have immensely desirable effects. The rhetoric disguises the fact that we actually know very little about what it would be like to be posthuman and that we cannot be certain that the world we are going to create by taking the path of radical enhancement is anything like the world described so imaginatively by its ardent proponents. In fact, the whole idea of being able to fulfil all our desires and to live a life of pure joy that allegedly lies ahead of us betrays

clearly enough its mythological roots. Just as the medieval Land of Cockaigne, in which food and drink rains down from the sky, sexual restraints no longer exist, and nobody has to die or fall ill, or the Fountain of Youth, which occurs in one form or another in countless legends and which has the power to return to us what we often miss more than anything else, namely our lost youth, the transhumanist account of posthuman existence is an obvious wish-fulfilment fantasy. And there is not even much difference between the themes that inform the mythological fantasies on the one hand, and the transhumanist fantasies on the other. Sensual pleasures are still very important (with sexual pleasures ranking particularly high), and so is youth and youthful vigour, and, perhaps more than anything else, the freedom to do as one pleases and not to be restricted in any way. As the legend of Cockaigne has it: "Lovely women and girls may be taken to bed,/ Without the encumbrance of having to wed./ Nothing sinful about it, no one feels shame,/ For their custom in this is not to lay blame."[11] If we compare this for example to de Val's and Sorgner's recent *Metahumanist Manifesto*,[12] we find basically the same idea of boundless sexual liberty, although somewhat intellectualised by pseudo-radical jargon: "Metasex not only challenges the dictatorship of anatomical, genital and binary sex, but also the limits of the species and intimacy. Pansexuality, public sex, poliamoria, or voluntary sexwork are means to redefine sexual norms into open fields of relationality, where modalities of affect reconfigure the limits of kinship, family and the community."

Yet whatever the details of the dreamworld that individual transhumanists conjure up, they usually agree that the radically enhanced posthumans will live like the first race of humans did during the *Golden Age* that Hesiod tells us about, when there was no hard work or grief and no miserable old age: "They had everything good. The land bore them fruit and all of its own, and plenty of it too. (…) And sure when Earth covered over that generation, they turned into holy spirits."[13] The latter we now hope to achieve, after having enjoyed a long life as physical organisms and an accompanying array of bodily pleasures, by uploading our minds to a computer. Hesiod's holy spirits have adapted to modern times and have reappeared as Kurzweil's spiritual machines,[14] but they are essentially the same.

Transhumanists like Bostrom, however, often put more or at least equal emphasis on what they think of as cognitive enhancement, which plays rather a minor role in

ancient myths. Cognitive enhancement is meant to greatly facilitate understanding and the acquisition of knowledge. It is assumed that of understanding and knowledge one can never have enough. They are regarded as both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. Intrinsically because through knowledge and understanding we get access to intellectual pleasures of which we would otherwise remain ignorant, and instrumentally because the more we know and understand the better will we able to control our environment, and the better we will be able to do that, the closer we get to the kind of naturalised heaven that not only Pearce dreams of. Yet by including knowledge and understanding among the prizes that a radically enhanced human can be certain to attain and by connecting them with the mythological themes of effortless pleasure and eternal life, transhumanists revive yet another set of medieval ideas that we can find at work in the beliefs and endeavours of the alchemists.

Contrary to a popular misconception, alchemists were not primarily concerned with the transmutation of base metal into a far more valuable substance, such as silver or gold, but more generally with the overcoming of the boundaries that separated the various kinds of things from each other and that prevented ascendency to perfection. In their desire to know how diverse substances could be transmuted into another, they made discoveries that helped advance the budding sciences of metallurgy, chemistry, and medicine. The Philosopher's Stone, which was thought to make all transmutations possible, was also the Elixir of Life, or was meant to be used to the same effect. The search for material perfection went hand in hand with the search for spiritual perfection, that is, wisdom (knowledge and understanding). It was generally believed that the ability to turn common metal into gold (a substance that neither rusts nor decays) would go along with unlimited wealth, wisdom, and immortality. "The philosopher's stone is a symbol for the permanence and perfection which man has always sought and never found. The alchemical dream of transmuting base metal into gold was more than a scheme to get rich quick; it was a dream in which death could play no part."[15] This dream was based on a quasi-Aristotelian understanding of nature, according to which everything that is strives, by its very own nature, for perfection (or, in Aristotle, for that state of being that represents its generic optimum). Just as the acorn strives to grow into an oak and the body of a child into the body of woman or a man, common metal likewise yearns

to become something better. To turn it into gold is thus not a violation of its nature, but a way of supporting it. It is not as if by doing so we would force things to do or be what they are not meant to do or be, but rather that we simply help them along, assist them in their journey to perfection and thus in the realization of their own true nature. The same holds true for the expected transformation of the human from a mortal into an immortal being. It is simply a matter of learning to be the kind of being that we have always meant to be.

Transhumanists often show a similar adherence to a crypto-Aristotelian teleology of the human and they are just as happy to exploit its utopian potential. Max More claims that "to halt our burgeoning move forward, upward, outward, would be a betrayal of the dynamic inherent in life and consciousness. We must progress on to transhumanity and beyond". Nick Bostrom makes extensive use of the metaphor of growing up and tells us that humans are like children who naturally (although with a little help from enhancement technologies) evolve into posthuman adults.[16] If we let this happen (and it is a matter of letting it happen rather than actively bringing it about), we will, according to Bostrom, "truly grow up and experience life as it should have been all along."[17] Finally, Gregory Stock maintains that human nature is essentially Promethean, so that we will, following our own natural ends, progress further into posthumanity whether we like it or not.[18] This kind of techno-optimism, and indeed techno-determinism, is getting increasingly common among scientists working in the field today. Biotechnology promises to be the real Philosopher's Stone, that elusive device that the alchemists so desperately tried to find and which would finally give them the power to reinvent the world so that it would match their desires. The modern utopia rests on a strong belief in the transformative and salutary power of science and technology that has always accompanied their rise and been at the root of their success.

While classical social utopias such as Thomas More's *Utopia* or Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* did not seek to radically transform the human condition, this changed with the publication of Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* in 1627, which marked the transition from the traditional social and political utopias to the modern techno-utopia. Bacon envisaged a scientific and technical utopia, in which the "Enlarging of the bounds of Humane Empire, to the Effecting of all Things possible" is declared to

be the ultimate goal of the fictional society that the novel's narrator encounters on the remote (fictional) island Bensalem.[19] One of the main areas of research those islanders engage in seems to be human enhancement. Among the discoveries they have already made by devoting themselves completely to their goal Bacon lists the production of food that makes "the very Flesh of Mens Bodies, sensibly, more Hard and Tough; and their Strength farre greater, then otherwise it would bee" (p. 40), the resuscitation of (seemingly) dead bodies, the ability to make animals grow larger or smaller, more fruitful or barren, to change their colour, shape or behaviour, the creation of chimeras (that is, mixtures of different kinds of animals), and finally the creation of "Perfect Creatures" (p. 39). Although these experiments are being undertaken with animals rather than humans, the sole reason for conducting them is in order to "take light, what may be wrought upon the Body of Man" (p. 38).

This tradition was continued into the 20th century by H.G. Wells, who also distinguished the "modern" utopia by its inherent commitment to constant progress: "the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage leading to a long ascent of stages."[20] Transhumanists tend to share this assessment and emphasise the fundamental unboundedness of the enhancement process, which again links them to earlier modes of thought. Belief in human perfectibility has in fact replaced visions of (realistically unattainable) perfection since the late 18th century. In 1795, not yet sobered by the fate of the French Revolution, the Marquis de Condorcet declared human beings to be indefinitely perfectible within the boundaries of human nature, and wondered how much more we could expect for the improvement of our cognitive and physical abilities, the extension of our life span and ultimately the conquest of death if we only found a way to improve this nature itself, finally "released from the empire of fate and from that of the enemies of its progress, advancing with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue and happiness."[21] Like many transhumanists today, Condorcet was convinced that it was our human destiny to make this step. At the same time in England, William Godwin preached human perfectibility and saw us becoming increasingly godlike, perhaps immortal, with a necessity that is rooted in our nature, for we are all, essentially, godlike beings.[22] A few years later, Johann Gottlieb Fichte in Germany predicted that we will eventually gain a complete understanding of

nature and that work will cease to be a burden because men will have learned how to reduce mechanical toil. He was also convinced that God will some day reveal a glorious end to humanity, which "is wholly incomprehensible to me here".[23]

All these utopian ideas can be found again in one form or another in transhumanist writings. Transhumanism closely follows the utopian tradition that has developed from its mythological beginnings via the proto-scientific aspirations of alchemy to modern science and the hopes that its steady progress has kindled and nourished. If anything, the utopian element has, in the wake of the biotechnological revolution, become even more pronounced and expressive of further-reaching ambitions. According to Gregory Stock, we will soon "seize control of our evolutionary future."[24] Biological enhancement will lead us to "unexplored realms, eventually challenging our basic ideas about what it means to be human", which he thinks is not something to deplore, but rather to celebrate. The "beginning of human self-design" (p. 3) is a good thing without qualification because it promises, for the first time in history, *complete autonomy*. We have come to regard our own physical bodies as external restraints (rather than as the internal condition of being someone at all and thus the source of all the freedoms that we *have* got). They seem to prevent us from being entirely autonomous. For that reason, we need to overcome not only the nature that surrounds us, but also the nature that we are ourselves. Elsewhere I have called this vision of *complete control* that pervades transhumanist writings the *ultimate utopia*.[25] It is present in the unconcealed desire for personal immortality and the acquisition of godlike qualities such as omnipotence, omniscience, and even omnibenevolence. The idea, publicised by Kurzweil and others, that we will one day be able to upload our minds to computers (and thus achieve immortality) is clearly inspired by the same hopes and desires.

Now what is the relevance of all this? Would it matter for our assessment of transhumanism if it were a kind of utopianism? Before we can try to answer this question, we need to determine first what exactly the function of utopian ideas and images in transhumanist writings is. It is fairly clear that they provide considerable motivation for the development and endorsement of enhancement technologies, and hence very likely that without a prominent display of such utopian fantasies there would be far less willingness to fund research into, and development of, enhancement technologies. Those

ideas thus function as a call to arms to prospective followers and investors. In some cases this is quite obvious, when for instance Aubrey de Grey, after promising us an "endless summer of literally perpetual youth,"[26], calls out a "crusade against aging" (p. x) and expressly asks his readers to "lobby for more funding for rejuvenation research, and for the crucial lifting of restrictions on federal funding to embryonic stem cell research in the United States, by writing letters to your political representatives, demanding change", or better even, to directly donate to the *Methuselah Foundation* that de Grey founded in 2003 (p. 336). And if we accept his co-author and research assistant Michael Rae's description of de Grey as "tirelessly and courageously bearing Promethean fire to a world yet shivering under the winter of age-related death and decay" (unpaginated dedication), which not accidentally evokes an image that contrasts starkly with the utopian counter-image of the predicted endless summer of perpetual youth, then we may well feel inclined to join the crusade and empty our pockets for the cause. It seems that the brighter the posthuman future appears to us, and the bleaker the human present, the more reason we have to abandon humanity and seek to bring about posthumanity. The purported brightness of the future and corresponding bleakness of the present reinforce each other. For this reason, utopian descriptions of the posthuman condition are generally complemented with dystopian descriptions of the merely human, for instance when death is depicted as "the greatest evil"[27] or more imaginatively and memorably as an all-devouring dragon, whose "red eyes glowed with hate" and whose "terrible jaws flowed an incessant stream of evil smelling yellowish green slime."[28] And once the dragon is dead, of course, the future is suddenly wide open for the creation of a "better world" (p. 276).

Transhumanist descriptions of how our posthuman future is going to be like are descriptions only on the surface. In fact, their purpose is very different from that of mere descriptions. Their aim is not to describe facts or to express a belief about the (future) state of the world. Instead, they belong to a class of speech acts that John Searle has described as being "not in the business of trying to tell us how things are in the world", but rather of "trying to change the world to match the content of the speech act."[29] As paradigmatic examples of such speech acts Searle mentions promises and orders. Utopian accounts of our posthuman future have something of both. They promise us a far better

future, a future that is presented as definitely worth pursuing and in fact more desirable than anything else. The act of promising entails a commitment, but the fulfilment of the promise may nonetheless presuppose that certain conditions are met. I can promise you that something will occur *if* you do what I tell you to do. My commitment is to the certainty of the outcome, *provided* you collaborate. Posthuman utopias are similar to such conditional promises. They are presented as certain outcomes (conveying that 'this fabulous alluring future actually *will* occur!'), but at the same time as dependent on our willingness to help bring it about and not to throw any unnecessary obstacles in its way. The promise thus borders on an order. We are told to support radical enhancement ('Do this!') and, so that we have a reason to obey, we are promised a hefty reward (an indefinitely extended life span, pleasures beyond anything we can currently imagine, vastly superior understanding, autonomy and complete control, you name it).

This precarious combination of promise and order that underlies the usual accounts of our posthuman future makes its utopian character even more significant for a critical assessment of the transhumanist agenda. Utopian ideas and images do not merely serve as motivational aids to get people to support the radical enhancement agenda, they also affect the very arguments that are proposed in favour of human self-transformation and in particular in support of the claim that it is our moral duty to develop and use technologies that make this happen. As philosophical arguments they appear to be self-contained, but in truth utopian ideas form the fertile soil from which those arguments grow, so that without them they would wither and die.

So how relevant is all this for our assessment of transhumanism as a philosophical movement whose explicit goal it is to change the world by changing human nature? It may seem that nothing has been said so far that would necessarily discredit the transhumanist enterprise as such. Why, after all, should it be wrong to dream of a better world and to encourage everyone to help bring it about? Perhaps the alleged similarity between age-old utopian ideas and the transhumanist agenda is merely superficial anyway, and even if it is not, it is far from obvious that there is anything wrong with utopianism as such. On the contrary, it seems that a decent dose of utopianism is the engine of all progress, not only the progress that is yet to come, but also all the progress

that we have made in the past to get us to where we are now. Surely we would not want to relinquish that.

Now first of all, the similarities are anything but superficial. What drives transhumanists and their persistent call for radical human enhancement is the same old desire that expresses itself in ancient myths and modern utopias: the desire for overcoming natural restraints, for a life not limited by things that we cannot control. What has changed is merely that for the first time in history, mainly due to the rapid development of the biosciences and related technologies, it actually seems possible that we will very soon achieve all this: that we will be free of sickness and disease, free of the necessity to die, know everything there is to know, enjoy pleasures without restraint or remorse, and live in complete harmony with others and with ourselves. But even before the science and technology existed that today promises to make all this happen very, very soon (according to de Grey, the first person to live to 1,000 years is probably already in his 60s, and Kurzweil expects his Singularity, which represents a "profound and disruptive transformation in human capability," to occur in 2045[30]) people already envisioned such a technology. Bacon's almost four hundred years old description of the things that the scientific community on his fictional island Bensalem have already accomplished bears a remarkable similarity to the things that we are doing, or trying to do, today. This suggests that it is not recent scientific developments that first gave rise to the ambitions for the radical transformation of the human condition that transhumanists encourage us to share, but on the contrary, that it is those ambitions that have kept us looking for the means to complete them until eventually we seem to have found them, or at least to have come very close to finding them. Scientific and technological developments are ultimately driven by non-scientific purposes. All that science can ever do is provide the means to ends whose origin lies beyond science (although it might fuel the pursuit of those ends).

Of course the availability of the means does make a huge difference in practical terms. Plato's vision of a radically transformed society ruled by philosophers could not do much harm because he lacked the political power to make his vision real. Yet the history of the 20th century has shown how utopian ideas about an ideal advanced society, when endorsed by powerful rulers determined to change the world according to their

vision, can easily lead to disaster. To repeat, that is not to say that it is necessarily wrong or bad to dream of a better world or to try to make the world a better place. Of course important developments have often been driven by utopian dreams of a better world. So clearly those dreams fulfil an important function. They serve as a reminder that the world doesn't *have* to be as it is: that there are other possible worlds that we could live in - worlds in which nobody is poor and where everyone has enough to eat, worlds in which people are not being oppressed and each can say what they please, where everyone counts for one and no one for more than one; worlds perhaps where we don't have to work so hard and where there is more enjoyment, where being alive is an unimpaired pleasure, where there is no suffering, disease, or death, where we are powerful and no longer have to fear anything or anyone. Utopian dreams like these have no doubt stimulated social, scientific and technological progress. However, we must not forget that they have also led to humanitarian disaster when concerted attempts to make the dream come true failed miserably. Unfortunately, some worlds turn out to be less desirable than they appeared to be in our dreams, and some dreams get compromised by the means thought necessary to realize them. Others are repugnant in their own right. Clearly not all dreams are worth dreaming, and not all survive their implementation into the real world undamaged. The challenge is to know in advance what will happen if we endeavour to turn utopia into reality.

The problem with the transhumanist dream is that its realization requires a *radical* transformation of the human condition, and radical transformations, and even all *attempts* at radical transformation, are typically fraught with dangers and uncertainties. This is the reason why we cannot ignore the utopian elements in transhumanist arguments for radical enhancement. They are highly relevant because they effectively conceal the fact that we actually have no idea whether or not the suggested transformations of the human body and mind will really work out the way it is suggested. Yet by dwelling on the glorious future that allegedly awaits us, transhumanists make the risks of such an enterprise appear negligible or at least acceptable, which is not only intellectually dishonest, but also impedes a fair and rational assessment of the actual desirability of radical human enhancement. One striking example of this strategy at work can be found in Nicholas Agar's earlier book on *Liberal Eugenics,* where he briefly discusses the risks that radical

enhancement may pose, and then quickly comes to the conclusion that the precautionary principle can be safely disregarded because enhancement technologies "actually do present potential benefits of a magnitude comparable with the nearly infinite potential penalties imagined by opponents."[31] In other words, our enhanced future existence is going to be so good that it is worth taking any risk at all to get there. For the argument to work, the benefits of radical enhancement must be pictured as so immense that a radical transformation of our very nature can plausibly be regarded as worth attempting. And the greater the benefits that are being promised to us, the more likely it may seem to us that at least *part* of what is being promised will actually come true. The need to greatly exaggerate the expected (or promised) gains becomes even more pressing when, as some philosophers do, radical enhancement technologies are described as something that we actually have a moral *duty* to develop, promote and apply.[32] The declaration of a moral duty reaffirms the order-character of the utopian description. We are told to act in a particular way because a) it will help bring about a "better world" (which mostly means one that perfectly responds to all our desires), and b) we have a moral obligation to bring it about, precisely because it is a *better* world. In other words, our posthuman future is going to be so good that it would not only be foolish to relinquish it, but moreover a *crime against humanity*.

Second, by reconnecting with the crypto-Aristotelian faith in the "vocation of man" (Fichte), which was prevalent in the late 18th century, but goes back at least to the Renaissance and in particular Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, transhumanists successfully lend an air of inevitability to the utopian scenarios they describe. The utopia of a radically enhanced posthumanity is not only presented as achievable, but as the natural destination of a journey that humanity has been on right from the start. The future paradise is a paradise regained: the place where we are meant to be and where, precisely for that reason, we eventually *will* be. Paradoxically, becoming *more* than human is what *being* human is thought to be all about. "To choose to be better is to be human."[33] We can certainly slow down the progression towards posthumanity, perhaps even suspend it for a while, but ultimately we cannot prevent it. "We must progress on to transhumanity."[34] The upshot is that we have no choice but to go along with the suggested transformation and that therefore we can spare ourselves the trouble of

thinking about whether we really *want* this to happen: it is going to happen anyway, so that all resistance is futile.

Third, the strong emphasis on the wonders that allegedly await us in our future posthuman existence makes our present condition appear far worse than it would if we didn't compare it with an imaginary future in which all our dreams have come true. In comparison with such a future our present life is bound to appear rather miserable. Think of Bostrom's claim, cited above, that each day will be a joy and that we will listen to music that is to Mozart what Mozart is to bad Muzak. The comparison effects a *conceptual devaluation* of the present. Mozart may not yet sound like bad Muzak to our merely human ears, but prompted by the mental image of the vastly superior music of the future we have already begun to *think* of it as inferior. This conceptual devaluation of the present considerably increases the desirability of radical enhancement and a posthuman future. In other words, the intended posthuman condition does not appear so incredibly attractive because we find our present human condition so deficient, but rather we find the latter deficient precisely because, and to the extent that, the former is depicted in such bright colours. The brighter we make the future shine, the duller the present will appear.

To conclude: I have argued that the plausibility of transhumanist arguments concerning the desirability of radical human enhancement crucially hinges on utopian ideas that are deeply rooted in our cultural imagination and have a long history that links them to ancient dreams, hopes and fears. We would do well to be aware of these roots, to reflect critically upon them and the ideals that they promote, and to ask to what extent, and with what final purpose, transhumanist arguments tacitly appeal to particular conceptions of human nature, rely on deeply ingrained understandings of what we should strive to be and how we should act. It seems to me that if we look behind the arguments, it is not pure reason that we find, as transhumanists are fond to point out, but rather a particular set of stories: about what it means to be human, what life is all about, and what the ultimate good is for beings such as us. And we may well think differently about that, or at least we might if we only had a clear grasp of the ideas that are being promoted in transhumanist versions of the Land of Cockaigne, which, it appears, is still haunting our dreams.

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