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Transhumanism: Origins, Concepts, Limitations

The subject of this doctoral dissertation is transhumanism as a certain social and intellectual movement. The dissertation has two primary aims: to methodologically organize the dynamically developing "ideological crucible" in which, as if through a lens, the hopes and fears concerning the future of humanity are exposed in the context of its relations with an almost hypostatically understood technology, and – based on the research hypothesis which implies the lack of axiological completeness of transhumanism – to propose a variant that might be desirable from the point of view of a certain classically understood vision of the good life. The former aim is located on a meta-level, the latter is object-oriented because in pursuing it the author joins the substantive discussion of transhumanists. For the research on transhumanism, the scheme proposed by Stanisław Kamiński for analysing humanistic phenomena was applied: indicating its origins, structure and function, and this scheme determines the structure of the dissertation.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters and concluding remarks, followed by bibliography and netography.

The first chapter outlines the historical and semiotic background of transhumanism. The richness of associations of transhumanism with mythological, literary, scientific, or broadly popular culture themes is presented. Transhumanist reflection shows itself as highly diverse, but its essence is fairly limited in its content. Ultimately, it simply boils down to an affirmation of scientific and technological progress as a means to an unspecified end. Behind this affirmation there is a certain notion of progress and assumptions about the nature of the world and humanity. Understanding the goal of progress makes transhumanism a kind of umbrella term, a label for very diverse currents. The multiplicity of these currents comes from accepting certain aspects of scientific progress as more important and highlighting and attributing to them particular goals. The institutional development of the movement and the dissemination of a number of its concepts into public discourse testify to its current cultural attractiveness. The dynamic and intellectually unstructured nature of transhumanist discourse suggests that transhumanism is more a social movement than a mature and coherent

philosophical concept. Hence, one cannot conduct an effective analysis of transhumanism without separating and typologizing the concepts that transhumanism is composed of or which transhumanist thinkers incorporate into it. The typologisation of transhumanist concepts proposed in this dissertation results from the fact that the analysed phenomenon is largely an eclectic amalgam of ideas that share a very broadly understood affirmation of technology as a means of human improvement. In addition, it is semantically too vague to make a reliable division that would be satisfactory from a methodologist's point of view. While the considerations themselves may be inspiring as such, on a meta-level it turns out that the relations between individual concepts and their authors are very superficial. This clearly shows that transhumanism is a movement and not a scholarly conception.

The aim of the second chapter is to present the key assumptions about the nature of the world, humanity and society together with the postulates raised by transhumanists. These assumptions are arranged in accordance with the classical division of philosophical disciplines into three groups: ontological-epistemological, anthropological-ethical, and socio-political. The first group covers not only methodological but also ontological naturalism and the reductionism and materialism that followed it as well as convergent evolutionism, in which evolution includes not only biological but also cultural entities. The consequence of this is a specific form of determinism. A further assumption is the possibility of creating a powerful artificial intelligence that exceeds human capabilities in many ways. Transhumanism also presupposes the non-linearity of its evolution, which, especially at the level of culture, and more specifically of the computational potential of computers, will lead to the so-called technological singularity. This may result in transformations of a quantitative nature that will be incomprehensible from the perspective of current human intellectual capabilities. Four assumptions belong to the second group. The first concerns the axiological plane, where the so-called transhumanist values are discussed, while the second takes for granted the fact of human imperfections and formulates the postulate of its improvement in the physical, intellectual, emotional and moral aspects. The human being appears as a malleable being that can be freely modified with the use of scientific and technical means. This is connected with the assumption of morphological freedom, i.e. the right to unlimited interference in one's own naturalistically understood being (body as well as psyche). A special case of such an improvement is so-called *mind-uploading* which is supposed to guarantee relative immortality to humans as well as an almost unlimited range of possible modes of existence. Similar modifications may also apply to so-called non-human animals in the form of uplifting. The

postulated formulas of social order are discussed within the third group, including the model of economy of abundance allegedly guaranteed by scientific and technological development, the singleton as a way of governing the world after the realization of transhumanist postulates and cosmic expansion as a necessary condition for the realization and long-term maintenance of this order.

The third chapter presents a critique of transhumanist concepts. The criticism of transhumanism as a whole and of specific transhumanist concepts are not evenly distributed. As far as the criticism in the ontological-epistemic aspect is concerned, doubts about the probability of the realisation of the most daring concepts, concerning both human individuals and civilisations, or such postulated phenomena as super artificial intelligence, are put forward not only by the declared opponents of this trend but also by its supporters as possible obstacles to overcome. This criticism concerns the naturalistic understanding of the genesis of such key phenomena as intelligence, consciousness, or the self, and the possibility of technical emulation of these phenomena on non-biological bearers. There is also scepticism about the possibility of our civilisation developing in the direction described by transhumanists. In the literature on the topic, however, most considerations focus on the anthropological-ethical aspect. This criticism is varied, because its central point is the concept of the human, or more precisely human nature, which according to critics can be on the one hand violated, destroyed or instrumentalized, and on the other hand – divinized, exalted in a manner harmful to the environment. Criticism in the ethical-anthropological aspect is essentially a criticism of transhumanism as a specifically understood idea of human and world progress understood in a naturalistic way by means of methods developed by the present and future technical civilization. Any criticism of the technicisation of life, but also of the environment, falls into this category. Bioethical issues are intertwined with the ethics of artificial intelligence and critical theory derived from the philosophy of technology. The last type of critique – in political and social terms – is not a critique of transhumanist social order as a goal, but rather of the means leading to this goal. It does not prejudge whether the ultimate or far-reaching goals of transhumanism are right or wrong, they might be even beneficial, but the methods of distributing the results of this progress are in some sense detrimental to society as a whole. The analysis shows that transhumanism is not a complete socio-political doctrine and the concepts it postulates can be implemented both in a socio-political environment with a good deal of state interventionism and social redistribution, and in a laissez-faire economy – hence libertarian, social democratic, or even communist variants

are proposed. Most transhumanist visions present some target state for the availability of particular types of technology but do not delve further into the social context in which particular artefacts will develop and do not pay attention to the consequences that may arise on the way to the goal. The critique of this subtype is primarily concerned with the ways in which technological solutions will be implemented in the near future, and particularly with such phenomena as technological unemployment, a society of universal surveillance, and the ecological costs associated with technological progress.

The aim of the fourth and concluding chapter is an attempt to clarify what transhumanism is by asking whether it can be treated as another utopia, ideology or classically understood concept of the good life. The answer to this question turns out to be currently negative due to the inability to define ultimate values. There is no answer to the question of what the meaning of this improved life is or can be. Improvement turns out to be of a quantitative nature, creating a certain sphere of freedom: one being able to do certain acts without bearing the consequences of the current world. Transhumanist happiness is not a state, but a constant striving for the realisation of these possibilities without answering the question why one should do so. Axiological replenishment can be provided by an external source of absolute values. Albeit not yet sufficiently developed, Christian transhumanism may be an example of such complementation.