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What is a Society of ‘Posthumans’?

Transhumanism is a field of philosophy that aspires to further the abilities of humans by utilizing opportunities of science and technology to enhance human life. Transhumanists see the human condition today as less than what it could or should be, and strive for society to become full of “[posthumans](http://humanityplus.org/philsophy/transhumanist-faq/#answer_19).” These philosophers believe that the next few generations will belong to those who want to advance human life conditions, rather than act skeptically towards the idea of change. These “Transhumanists” hope that this change in society will stem from a generation that will have been raised and assimilated with the ideas of Transhumanism. While for Transhumanists the concept of changing mankind in order to eliminate disease and enhance intellectual capacity is solely to better the world, their concept of change has sparked uproar among “bio-conservatives” throughout the world. These “bio-conservatives,” religious ethicists and philosophical ethicists, agree on two major principles regarding Transhumanism: that boundaries were set to keep humans as humans, and to try and pass those boundaries is ‘greedy.’

Max More, one “[philosopher and futurist](http://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-faq/#answer_19),” defines Transhumanism as “a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and [acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life](http://www.aleph.se/Trans/Intro/definitions.html) beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Max More, the Chief Executive Officer of [Alcor Life Extension Foundation](http://www.alcor.org), a world leading company in cryonics, proposed this definition of transhumanism in his essay: “[Transhumanism](http://www.aleph.se/Trans/Cultural/Philosophy/princip.html): Toward a Futurist Philosophy.” He also proclaims that “we have achieved two of the three alchemists' dreams: We have transmuted the elements and learned to fly. [Immortality is next](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_More). "

Three names, including Max More, stand out as leaders and innovators within the Transhumanist and post human movement. Fereidoun M. Esfandiary, more commonly known as FM-2030, distinguished himself inside of Transhumanism with [*Are You a Transhuman*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FM-2030)*.[[2]](#footnote-2)* When asked about his name and identification, Esfandiary explained that “In 2030 we will be ageless and everyone will have an excellent chance to live forever. [2030 is a dream and a goal](http://belog.jigaram.com/tag/fereidoun-m-esfandiary/).” FM-2030 died in 2000 and was [placed in cryonic suspension](http://belog.jigaram.com/tag/fereidoun-m-esfandiary/) at the Alcor Life Extension Foundation. Natasha Vita-More, often considered “the [first female philosopher](http://www.natasha.cc/bio.htmn) of transhumanism,” founded the Transhumanist Arts and Extropic Arts Movement in 1982: “designed to provide insight into the future directions of art and creativity of the 21st Century as well as a brief history of [Transhumanity](http://www.transhumanist.biz/welcome.htm), Transhumanist Arts, and Extropic Art.”

The leaders of the Transhumanism movement claim that the idea and goal of enhancement are not new to the twenty-first century—there are many texts written about the ideas of enhancement from before the 1800s. The French philosopher, Marquis de Condorcet, wrote in 1794 that “[no bounds have been fixed](http://www.gale.cengage.com/pdf/samples/sp657748.pdf) to the improvement of faculties…the perfectibility of man is unlimited” (Encyclopedia of Bioethics, p.2517). Kevin [Warwicks claim](http://www.gale.cengage.com/pdf/samples/sp657748.pdf)s in 2000 that, “[he] was born a human. But this was an accident of fate—a condition merely of time and place” (Encyclopedia of Bioethics 2518).

Current Transhumanists express their beliefs in multiple different ways. Some people do not openly live a life supporting Transhumanism due to the social stigma that may be associated with the movement, but they do their part. Others actively fund and investigate the science that might eventually lead to a reality full of “posthumans.” One of the major goals of that Transhumanists is to advance the human nervous system to enhance the capability of intelligence, and subsequently strengthen the defense system against disease. Through the [processes](http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/values.html) of nanotechnology, biotechnology, and cognitive science, Transhumanist scientists are attempting to further life span, eradicate diseases, and enhance intelligence.

[Nanotechnology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanotechnology) is a process in which scientists manipulate matter on a molecular level. A new piece of technology called the Nano-Bio Processor “[mimics responses of the human body](http://www.nanowerk.com/spotlight/spotid%3D5848.php) and aids the development of corresponding treatments.” Professor [Nick Bostrom](http://www.nickbostrom.com), director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University, believes that this technology “offers the [potential](http://hplusmagazine.com/2010/02/12/nano-bio-info-cogno-paradigm-future/) to alleviate human suffering.” Professor Bostrom claims that the [Nano-Bio Processor](http://hplusmagazine.com/2010/02/12/nano-bio-info-cogno-paradigm-future/) will improve human condition, and that humans have a fundamental right to develop this technology or “many preventable deaths might occur as a result of not developing NBIC.”

Scientists are also using biotechnology to investigate and further the Transhumanism movement. [Biotechnology](http://hplusmagazine.com/2010/02/12/nano-bio-info-cogno-paradigm-future/) is “the direct or indirect use of living organisms, or parts or products of living organisms, in their natural or modified forms.” Biotechnology is one of the processes more apparent in society, which bio-conservatives happily feel limits some of the risky actions by “lend[ing] credence to visions of transcendence and transformation” (Lilley Part 1). Meanwhile, biotechnology is a technology that is “backed by well financed research programs” while “corporations and nation states compete fiercely over them” (Lilley Part 1). One of the current uses of biotechnology that Transhumanists use is “DNA and related genetic structure” manipulation (Lilley Part 1). Currently, stem cells are being “coaxed from embryos, placentas, and skin and are being primed to promote regeneration” (Lilley Part 1). Transhumanists see the completion of the rough draft of the [human genome project](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Genome_Project), published in 2000, as a “[scientific milestone](http://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-faq/#answer_23),” and research is now focused on “decoding the functions and interactions of all these different genes” (Humanity+, Answer 23).

Other Transhumanist scientists are studying [cognitive science](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_transhumanism)—how information is processed in different ways including perception, language, and emotion. It is apparent that scientists hope this research will lead to the elimination of mental diseases, as well as a faster processing speed. These different technologies are quite controversial; Nancy Campbell claims that these different technologies in “their development, deployment, and effects are unevenly distributed, differential, and more likely to be socially unjust than not” (Lilley Part 1).

 Transhumanists often argue with bio-conservatives about the ethics of these practices. Transhumanists maintain that changing the genetics and human practices will not change the humanity of people:

“[we] read and write; we wear clothes; we live in cities; we earn money and buy food from the supermarket; we call people on the telephone, watch television, read newspapers, drive cars, file taxes, vote in national elections; women give birth in hospitals; life-expectancy is three times longer than in the Pleistocene[[3]](#footnote-3).” (Bostrom Ethics)

Bostrom, a prominent Transhumanist, explains in the quote above that nothing about everyday life will change due to the changes that Transhumanists bring about. This idea that nothing will change is hard for bio-conservatives to understand because of the fear of ‘unfair advantages’ that certain citizens will have over one another.

Transhumanists understand that bio-conservatives argue that these actions will change the dignity of moral status, as well as the quality of being worthy and honorable. In Stephen Lilley’s book *Transhumanism and Society*, he claims that the difference in a transhumanist definition might be “man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature” (Lilley Part 2). Lilley supplements the argument for Transhumanism by claiming that, “science can contribute greatly to making the world and mankind more human” (Lilley Part 2). While there is a line that bio-conservatives feel must not be crossed, because that line is not specifically defined, transhumanists often take this uncertainty into consideration when starting a new type of research (Chadwick 32).

Bio-conservatives believe in two major theories: there are some boundaries that keep humans the way they were made; and to try and pass these boundaries is greedy. One [theorist claims](http://philosophie.ens.fr/IMG/GOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf) that, “to bring about such radical changes in humankind…can only be described as the death of the species”(Goffi 8). They also believe that while medicine can be used for “[legitimate or illegitimate aims](http://philosophie.ens.fr/IMG/GOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf)” (Goffi 9), to enhance human life is an illegitimate use of medicine. Even Professor Goffi, however, understands that it is “[difficult to draw a sharp line](http://www.philosophie.ens.fr/IMG/GOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf) between therapeutic and enhancing procedures” (Goffi 10). Many theorists agree with M. Sandel that, “although more health is better than less, at least within a certain range, it is [not the kind of good](http://www.philosophie.ens.fr/IMG/GOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf) than that can be maximized” (Goffi 10). [Ruth Chadwick](http://cardiff.ac.uk/encap/contactsandpeople/profiles/chadwick-ruth.html), a distinguished research professor at Cardiff School of English, Communication, and Philosophy, claims that “if intervention restores a person species-typical normal functioning it falls within the ‘therapy’ category; otherwise it counts as enhancement” (Chadwick 28). Most bio-conservatives believe that human enhancement will eventually “[dehumanize](http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity.html)” (Bostrom 2) people. [Leon Kass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Kass), a prominent bio-conservative, claims that while biotechnology can produce "better children, superior performance, ageless bodies, and happy souls," it might “eventually be used as a [substitute for virtue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Kass), hard work, study, or love in order to "fulfill our deepest human desires. " Overall, bio-conservatives believe that “people have a common genetic endowment—and this implies, of course, a common [set of genetic limitations](http://www.philosophie.ens.fr/IMG/GOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf)—that they have a common nature and a common set of rights” (Goffi 11). Stephen Lilley warns against “transgression, or a point of no return from which humanity will suffer a most grievous, irretrievable loss” (Lilley Part 2).

While Transhumanists believe that they are advancing humans to a better point in life, one also might claim that advancing beyond a point can become dangerous to society. Paul Ramsey, author of *Fabricated Man: The Ethics of Genetic Control,* explains in his book that "[techno-theologians](file://localhost/ttp/%3A%3Aphilosophie.ens.fr%3AIMG%3AGOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf)" (Goffi 8) and “[supporters of neo-eugenics](file://localhost/ttp/%3A%3Aphilosophie.ens.fr%3AIMG%3AGOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf)” (Goffi 9) are willing to manipulate genetics, and “reconstruct mankind”, yet through this process they are subsequently putting the “[humanity of man](file://localhost/ttp/%3A%3Aphilosophie.ens.fr%3AIMG%3AGOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf)” (Goffi 9) at stake. Alan Padgett has a pessimistic view on this movement as well, claiming:

“The dream of a happy and harmonious techno-secular future is based on false hopes in infinite energy, infinite human potential, infinite human progress, and complete human good will. Such a techno-secular dream, even if it comes about, will self-destruct after a few centuries, inevitably smashing on the rocks of our finitude and sin.” (Lilley, Part 2)

Paul Ramsey explains that he sees transhumanist dreams as “well-meaning but all the more dangerous [attempt to raise human beings above their own condition](http://philosophie.ens.fr/IMG/GOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf).” Both George Annas, chair of Bioethics and Human Rights at the [Boston University School of Public Health](http://www.bu.edu/sph/?option=com_sphdir&id=239&itemid=340&index=577), and [Rosario Isasi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosario_Isasi), a health and human rights attorney, understand and explain that “[human cloning](http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity.html)” and “[genetic modification](http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity.html)” are both considered “[crimes against humanity](http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity.html)” (Bostrom, Ethics). Some scientists even argue that this genetic manipulation will cause a “[GATTACA-like society](http://www.philosophie.ens.fr/IMG/GOFFI%20JEUD%20HPS%20ENS%20ULM%20S2%202012%202013.pdf), or even the emergence of old fashioned eugenics” (Goffi 11).

Not only do people criticize Transhumanism because of its threats to science and humanity, but there are also many religious objections that people find with the transhumanist movement. [John Jefferson Davis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jefferson_Davis), a Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at [Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordon-Conwell_Theological_Seminary), claims that, “all of God’s creation, including the human body, is good (Gen. 1:31; Tim. 4:4) and as such is worth of care and respect” (Lilley Part 2). Often Christians disapprove of Transhumanism because of the stance that most transhumanists take on cloning. [Ironically,](http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Transhumanism#Religious_objections_and_relations) Transhumanism itself has been classified as a religion, and some of the rhetoric is often compared to Christian apologetics.

Transhumanism is a larger part of the media than most people usually notice. Gattaca, the 1997 film staring Ethan Hawke and Jude Law, is a movie, based in a time where eugenics are common, about a “[genetically inferior man](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119177/) who assumes the identity of a superior one in order to pursue his lifelong dream of space travel.” This movie includes genetic manipulation, [genetic discrimination](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetic_discrimination), and unfair advantages due to these manipulations. This movie is a prime example of bio-conservatives fear for human society. Another example of transhumanism in the media is [Dan Brown’s 2013 novel Inferno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferno_%28Dan_Brown_novel%29). This trilling fast pace novel incorporates the Zobrist, an active Transhumanist, who threatens an unknown plague upon the world. Finally, [I am Legend](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Am_Legend_%28film%29) is another movie with transhumanist values etched into it. A genetically engineered vaccine is created and distributed to people in order to cure cancer, and ends up spreading through the air and killing 90% of the population. This movie then turns into a [post-apocalyptic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-apocalyptic) science fiction horror film, in which the 588 million survivors become “Darkseerers” that prey on people immune to the virus. Clearly this movie shows some of the issues that bio-conservatives fear—the worry of creating viruses that manipulate human genes to a point of no return. Overall, these three examples show that Transhumanism is in our culture more than we notice or even understand—soon transhumanism will be completely immersed in our society without us even noticing.

Overall it is evident that there are multiple different opinions and views someone may have concerning the debate of Transhumanism and genetic manipulation. One may accept in part of the Transhumanist movement, some of its scientific methods but not others. Or one might reject any and all manipulation. Some people think that a genetically manipulated society will cause large differences in out society; but one might become more accepting, such enhancement as eradicating diseases. As the technology continues to develop even more areas of concern and disengagement are sure to arise between Transhumanists and bio-conservatives. But the fact that bio-engineering from vaccinations and flu shots to the potential eradication of aids is likely to find multiple points where one draws his or her ‘No Trespassing’ Line!

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1. <http://www.aleph.se/Trans/Intro/definitions.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Are You a Transhuman?: Monitoring and Stimulating Your Personal Growth in a Rapidly Changing World (1989) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)