RADICAL DESIGN: HUMAN ENHANCEMENT AND THE ICONISTIC POLIS

Theofanis Tasis
Lecturer of Contemporary Philosophy, Alpen-Adria University
theofanis.tasis@aau.at

Abstract

Transhumanism developed as a philosophy that became a cultural movement and is now regarded as a growing field of study. It is a complex mix of philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology that brings together diverse problems from various fields such as philosophy, social sciences, cultural studies, neuroscience, information science, biomedical science, molecular biology and artificial intelligence. Transhumanism aims at modifying and upgrading human beings through technology claiming that biological evolution is incomplete and without direction. Although it adopts elements of humanism such as rationality, self-knowledge, self-care, autonomy and self-creation it does so with reference to the ideal of the creation of a new human species. The aim of the paper is to understand transhumanism in the context of the iconistic polis.

The term iconistic polis describes a society based on amode of production of images as icons. This mode tends towards the dematerialisation of goods and services, and the fusion of the private and the public sphere. Dematerialisation means that books, newspapers, magazines, records, movies, money, work, communication, education, and social relations become increasingly digital. This dematerialisation process through virtualization constitutes a sophisticated defence mechanism fashioned by iconistic modernity against the collapse of meaning in late industrial society. Iconistic polis requires this sophisticated defence mechanism due to its rejection of death.

The collapse of meaning is understood as the impossibility of conserving key values of the Western tradition such as those of humanism for example. This becomes apparent in the case of education, which has been instrumentalized in terms of its financial benefits. The economic criterion, not the production of democratic citizens, is the primary principle when it comes to designing educational policies and research programs. The collapse of meaning is also evident in the incapability of western societies to produce social significations adept at giving meaning to collective and individual life.

However, iconistic polis cannot manage to overcome the collapse of meaning, because of its inability to produce an anthropological type capable of reproducing its institutions. It cannot overcome the collapse of meaning precisely due to its intrinsic rejection of mortality. This rejection is brought about by the fact that the recognition of mortality reveals the contingency of iconistic society's own institutions, hence undermining its legitimization and its claims for their universal validity. But the increasing virtualization through digitalization in iconistic society is an a priori doomed project: to visualize what is impossible to be visualized. In short, the unrepresentability of death is the insurmountable limit of the virtualization process of iconistic society and the source of its inconsistencies and antinomies. At the same time, it constitutes its ultimate aspiration and conquest strategy, since achieving it would mean nothing less than accomplishing immortality.

But the rejection of mortality is not due to death's unrepresentability. It is a uniqueness of the societies of iconistic society that distinguishes them from all societies that came before them. Previous societies attempted to visualize the unrepresentable by self-instituting, explicitly or implicitly, with regard to mortality. In other words, the great civilizations of the past were built, more or less, in the face of death. Their creations, arts and letters included an awareness of and anguish about mortality, as well as the longing of the mortal subject for immortality. They would also provide the subject with ways and means for striving and claiming immortality. Gottfried Benn puts it vividly when he writes that "All the great spirits of white people [meaning: from the Renaissance onwards] - this is quite obvious - not only felt an inner mission to fulfill their creative nihilism. This fundamental feeling that permeated the most diverse currents of modernity - the religious feeling in Dürer, the morale in Tolstoy, the epistemic in Kant, the anthropological in Goethe, the capitalistic in Balzac - was the fundamental element of all of their work. With tremendous attention it reappears constantly. With ambiguous queries and phrasings they are closing in on it on every page, on every chapter within each line. Not a moment they are not mistaken about the essence of their creative inner being. It is the abysmal, the void, the without purpose, the cold, the inhuman." (Benn, 1989, p.145

In Western civilization, the encounter with the abyss and the striving for immortality took place simultaneously on the public sphere arena. This public sphere emerged for the first time in Athenian democracy, securing a space of visibility of all citizens by all citizens. This visibility was the condition for the pursuit of posterity, which was deemed to be achievable through extraordinary, hence memorable, actions.

The unique relationship between vision and democracy, through the establishment and functioning of a public sphere, is not found in other cultures. In the Jewish or Islamic cultures for example the dominating sense is hearing. Here in the epicentre of social institutions lies not the image, but the word of the Lord or his prophet. It is for this reason that these cultures produced neither theatre and painting, nor a democratic public sphere. In this context it is not accidental that the fertile assimilation of ancient Greek culture by the Arabs did not include tragedy. In the phonocentric Arab culture stories are narrated and heard; they are sound, so they require only a narrator. These stories have no need of actors or ηθοποιοί, meaning "creators of an ethos" in ancient Greek.

The concept of the viewer, as opposed to the concept of the listener, already contains a certain perception of the public based on a preference of vision over hearing, which occurs early in the idolatry of the ancient Greeks. Once Christianity became prevalent in the West, with its promise of an afterlife, the relationship between vision and hearing was disrupted. At the same time, the public sphere and the possibility of achieving immortality through it, which had served as an incentive for political action, both disappeared. Nonetheless, the public sphere does re-emerge several centuries later in the form of cities like Venice and Florence. The remaking of the public sphere in the West, following the discovery of Greek antiquity, is accompanied by a restoration of image and vision as important. Renaissance painting and Renaissance theatre are characteristic manifestations of this process of restoration. This time, however, the importance placed on image and vision is no longer accompanied by a similar corresponding function of the image towards mortality, by that I mean that our image as perceived by others in the public sphere was the condition for posterity. Others would remember us as an image not as a voice or scent, either in the political field or at the level of the subject.

Hereafter the peculiar feature of modern society will be the fact that it will institutionalize increasingly through virtualization in order to compensate for its intrinsic denial of death. The gravitational attraction of this repudiation is expressed as the growing inability to create social significations capable of allowing the subject to experience his life as the life of a citizen. Such an experience would entail the possibility of immortality and ensure a symbiosis (in the sense of living and experiencing together) through meaning, and not merely the coexistence through icons.

The aforementioned gravitational attraction transformed citizens to subjects by causing the collapse of social significations that emerged during modernity. This collapse caused the acceleration of the succession of historical events because of the contraction of social-historical time. This contraction refers to a denser and accelerated creation and destruction of political, social and economic events. In short, iconistic society is the most recent form taken by the hyper-sphere of modernity where death – as its unrepresantable core – shrinks, pressing and reshaping the public and the private sphere, economy, religion and culture.

In this context, the free market economic sphere's increased domination corresponds to its intense resistance to the gravitational attraction due to its material background. The economic sphere is founded primarily in zoe and secondarily in bios so the importance of icons was limited in its functioning until the rise of iconistic society and the transformation of the financial markets. The economic sphere does not expand colonizing the lifeworld (die Lebenswelt) as Habermas argues, but shrinks as well, like all the other spheres, although at a much slower pace.

This shrinking hyper-sphere displays the realm of free market colonizing the lifeworld because the latter is contracted at a much lower rate. However, as the economy is increasingly reliant on financial markets and the trade of finance products, and not on the production of goods, we can observe the deformation of the economic sphere in to a bubble. In other words the dematerialization of the economy creates a bubble economy. Such an economy cannot resist the gravitational pull of iconistic society and its rejection of death. The only sphere capable of expansion during the shrinking process of the hyper-sphere is technology science. The Internet is a characteristic expression of this expansion. As it expands, it also undermines the distinction between the private and the public sphere and creates a virtual space of public privacy.

This virtual space of public privacy diffuses increasingly in the real world first as a bubble, then by creating a hybrid sphere inhabited by bodyless subjects who interact only through sight and hearing. A fundamental feature common to these residents, either as spectators, readers or listeners, is their gradual transformation to an atopos, as the internet is literally a utopia (non topos).

The internet as a hybrid sphere tends to homogenise all previous spheres but primarily, which interests us here, the public and the private. In the private sphere, the internet homogenises by attempting to gradually exclude labor, but also by radically transforming many of the new activities which characterize the advent of modernity: reflection, either in the form of diary writing or by writing generally, the cultivation of a friendship and artistic creation by replacing them with messaging, status updates on social networking sites and posting video, photographs and music. In the public sphere, social media are eroding that sphere's political function, transforming icons into spectacles, and the public sphere into a space of public privacy and digital surveillance.

The trend towards virtualization is intensified through the Internet. It constitutes iconistic modernity's defense mechanism and it corresponds to the increasing dominance, in modernity, of vision over the other senses, as well as the gradual prevalence of the icon in the public sphere. In this context the icon prevails, not as an image of the active subject as citizen, but as a substitute for meaning.

A reaction to the virtualization process promoted by the Internet is the emphasis on zoe – life as the material dimension of mortality – versus bios – life as the poetic dimension of mortality, and the consequent emphasis on the body. The body is no longer perceived through the mere satisfaction of biological needs, as it was more or less in earlier historical periods, but as a source of pleasure achieved through the consumption of both material goods and services.

From tattoos to cosmetic and sex reassignment surgery, from health food, organic food and veganism to vitamins and other diet supplements, from the apparent democratization of haute cuisine to the advance of multinational fast food chains, from fashion and the use of new materials for textiles manufacture to the massive fitness and sport industry, from the saunas, spas and massages to hairdressing, bejeweling, not to mention the sex industry and the modern slave prostitutes, we are witnessing the return of the body. This return, if not celebration, questions the de facto sovereignty of vision and icon. In this context, consumption that addresses all the senses, confirms through the physicality of the body the fragile reality of the subject in iconistic society.

We can understand devices like the Ipad or Iphone, in short devices where vision meets with hearing and touch as an attempt to engage all the senses to experience the internet so that the residents of the hybrid sphere can reclaim their bodies. The overwhelming success of these devices is somehow reassuring in the sense that traditional practices of the subject's interaction with the material world, such as the reading as a process of vision, will never disappear. Handwriting on the other hand is likely to vanish, substituted by typing – an abstract undertaking when compared to handwriting, a process where the whole hand and not only the fingers is engaged. Handwriting with its fluidity of motion as a result of the constant contact between the body and the writing surface engages the body through touch in a more intimate way in the writing process. This is why typing as the iconisation in the form of immaterialization advances in iconistic society may as well be replaced by voice dictation in the continuing effort of iconistic society to generate novel and more attractive products. This is an effort in which consumption naively promises a sustained maximization of pleasure with each new product or service. This is of course impossible since such gradual mitigation leads to an inevitable saturation of the consumer and his senses. A direct consequence of this is the demand for increasingly stronger stimuli for a gradually weaker pleasure.

But the promise of pleasure offered by iconistic society through consumption fails for another reason. On the one hand, it fails to provide meaning, except scarcely and negatively. It is incapable of transforming life as zoe into meaningful life, life as bios, since it does not provide any prospect of immortality for the consuming subject. On the other hand, it offers only a transient palliative effect against the subject's mortality. Respectively, at the level of society as a whole, when we talk about the dominance of market economy over politics we describe nothing more than a problem of temporality, i.e. an unconditional sovereignty of the present over the future and the past as a consequence of the absence of a politics of mortality.

A symptom of this sovereignty in iconistic society is that the past and the future exist only as projections of the present. This means that the principle of short-term benefit or management of direct and everyday issues, in conjunction with the complexity of the different interests, but also the liquidity (i.e. rapid change in economic, geopolitical and internal power relations) of situations ultimately undermine the planning and implementation of any long-term policy. So, there is an absence of a politics of mortality, where the subjects as actors and society as a whole are aware of their own mortality. The existence of this recognition alone would enable the public sphere to take the past into consideration through history, to act in the present, and plan for the future while enhancing the democratic ethos of citizens through the cultivation of self-limitation. For this reason, politics worthy of their name always emphasizes mortality and therefore produces meaning and not mere icons.

Unable to offer the social significations necessary for the shaping of life into bios i.e. a possibility for immortality, iconistic society – despite the domination of icons and due to the merging and the homogenization of the public and the private sphere – is ultimately unable to reproduce itself in the hybrid

sphere of the internet. Hence it attempts to offer a material immortality, an immortality in the dimension of zoe that makes the body immortal. The next stage, in a desperate attempt to face the inability of producing social significations capable of giving meaning to mortality, is an evolutionary project of transforming the human species in order to quasi abolish mortality: Cyber organisms, robots and genetically engineered humans are three versions of the future of humanity in iconistic society aiming to claim immortality in the future hybrid sphere.

Transhumanism is a complex heterogeneous movement that combines philosophical anthropology, philosophy of mind and philosophy of technology. It advocates radical human enhancement by bringing together various problematics from disparate fields such as medicine, social sciences, physics, cognitive science, neurotechnology, computer science, molecular biology, robotics, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence. One of the most prominent transhumanists, Nick Bostrom, defines transhumanism as "the intellectual and spiritual movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of radically improving the human condition through applied reason, in particular by developing and making widely available technologies that eliminate aging and significantly enhance the intellectual, cognitive and physical capacities of man". (Bostrom, 2014, p.1) According to transhumanists Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipińska transhumanism is "the perpetual development of the capacities that historically distinguish humans from other beings, namely, the seemingly limitless capacity for self-transcendence, our godlike character if you will." (Fuller/Lipinski, 2014, p.1) Hava Tirosh-Samuelson defines transhumanism as "an ideological movement that advocates the application of science and technology to improve the human condition through genetic engineering, robotics, informatics, and nanotechnology. The convergence of these technologies and advances in the life sciences, neuroscience, and medicine are being harnessed to facilitate the enhancement of human physical and cognitive characteristics, the elimination of disease, pain, and the radical extension of life expectancy." (Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, 2014, p.49) Finally, for the transhumanist philosopher Max More, transhumanism "is both a rational philosophy and a cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of a fundamental improvement of the human condition through science and technology. Transhumanists seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its present human form and human limitations through science and technology guided by pro-life principles and values." (More, 2009) Although due to the variety of both theoretical and practical expressions of transhumanism it would perhaps be preferable to speak of transhumanisms we can describe it as a worldview centered on an inescapable destiny of transcending human nature through technical enhancement. It constitutes at the same time a cultural, political, artistic and spiritual movement with its ideas gaining ground both in a wider audience through the culture industry or marketable popularizations, as well as in the academic community, say especially in bioethics and legal science where the discussion focuses on the non-therapeutic use of biomedical technologies such as for example the use of psychotropic drugs by the healthy to improve cognitive or emotional abilities. As a hybrid movement embracing a grand narrative of man's technical redemption, a historical-philosophical narrative based on an eclectic mix of often pseudoscientific positions or currently unproven or highly controversial scientific theories, transhumanism, which aims to enhance existing human capacities as well as to create new ones, it is difficult to define as it also contains a strong religious dimension, but also practical, i.e. political, social and moral, vision.

Transhumanism aims to liberate man from biological limitations through physical, cognitive, emotional and moral enhancement via technology. It advocates that biological evolution is imperfect, without direction, and therefore we should control it ourselves. Adopting elements such as rationality, self-knowledge, self-care and autonomy from both humanism and the Enlightenment, transhumanism reinterprets them in a neo-Darwinian perspective with reference to the ideal of creating a new human species. Thus he "places himself as the next stage of humanism. Not only does man become the 'measure of all things', but our capacity for intelligent and rational thought is seen to lead to drastic changes for the future of humanity. Technology will one day allow us to transcend our non-intelligent design by transcending the limitations of human existence which for too long have made it ugly, brutish and short. The future of the species rests on the shoulders of humans. If nature is indeed immoral and cares only for its selfish perpetuation, then it is man's moral responsibility to transcend it and through his capacity for rational thought to put an end to the needless suffering it causes." (Carrigan, 2019, p.472) In short, for transhumanism, just as man overcame his animalistic nature, so he must enhance himself to a transhuman until he transcends human nature in its present biological form. To support their position, transhumanists use a variety of arguments such as "upgrading is inevitable because it constitutes the next stage in human evolution, that it is a moral duty because it will cure diseases, reduce inequalities, make us smarter and happier». (Franssen, 2014, p.78)

Or they emphasize, as Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) believed, that "the history of mankind consists of nothing else than a continuous transcendence of the limits which in earlier times were always regarded as the limits of humanity and therefore as absolute, insurmountable limits." (Feuerbach, 1841, p. 201) Despite the fact that transhumanism does not have a coherent, universally accepted by its followers set of principles displaying instead a multitude of theoretical variations and associations with a common belief in the technical enhancement of man for the radical transformation of the human condition, a significant number of transhumanists belong to either the non-profit organization Humanity+ (H+) or the Russian transhumanist organization both of which, despite their theoretical differences, systematically promote transhumanist ideas both domestically and globally. These include the respect of all species, races, religious denominations, sexual orientations, ways of life and sentient beings, but also the strengthening of international cooperation for the purpose of world peace. It is worth noting here that the followers of transhumanism, which has developed into an international movement, include, in addition to scientists and philosophers, mainly from the analytical and utilitarian tradition, also politicians, economists, artists, futurists, businessmen and even writers work of science fiction or illustration.

On the other hand, the opponents of transhumanism are characterized as bioconservatives because they reject radical enhancement in order to protect human nature. Among them is Jürgen Habermas who describes transhumanists as a set of eccentric intellectuals who reject equality as a delusion by instrumentalizing biotechnology in the service of Nietzschean-inspired phantasies of omnipotence. Habermas believes that "regardless of whether their speculations are nonsense or predictions to be taken seriously, repressed eschatological needs or new variants of a Science-Fiction-Science they serve to me as examples of a technicalization of nature caused by a modified moral self-understanding of the human species that does not harmonize with the normative self-understanding of persons who live their lives self-determining and acting responsibly." (Habermas, 2001, p.43) More categorical Francis Fukuyama considers transhumanism as the most dangerous idea in the world: "No one knows what technological possibilities will arise for human enhancement. But we can already see the turbulence of Promethean desires in how we prescribe drugs to change our children's behavior and personalities. The environmental movement taught us humility and respect for the integrity of non-human nature. We need a similar humility about our human nature. If we don't develop it soon, we may unwittingly pave the way for the posthumans to deprave humanity with their genetic bulldozers and psychotic malls." (Fukuyama, 2004) More moderate in style, but equally critical, Michael Sandel believes that "the main problem with human upgrading and genetic engineering is that they undermine effort and erode human agency. The deeper danger is that they represent a kind of hyperactivity—a Promethean ambition to reshape nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires. The problem is not the slide toward reductionism, but the push toward dominance. And what the drive for dominance ignores and may even destroy is an appreciation of the giftedness of human powers and achievements." (Sandel, 2007) Regardless of whether or how much one agrees with transhumanists or endorses bioconservative positions on human enhancement it is difficult to deny that the rapid progress in enhancement technologies has brought to the surface ethical, legal, social and political issues which "touch the moral self-understanding of humanity as a whole" (Habermas, 2001) creating critical theoretical disagreements as to the utility and desirability her.

On the contrary, the discussion of human enhancement in this paper is not only aimed at elucidating its benefits for the individual or contributing to academic research, but at the same time hopes to contribute to the preparation of the public sphere so that citizens will be able to decide with an awareness of the opportunities, as well as the risks, as to whether resources should be devoted to human enhancement so as to design the appropriate institutions and necessary legislation to govern scientific research. But the seemingly premature critique of human enhancement is important not only because it determines the directions and funding of scientific research, but because it simultaneously equips democracy to deal with the looming social and political consequences of the exponential progress of technoscience. Regardless of whether and when the predictions of transhumanism or technical transhumanism come true, it is better to have principles to cover impossible situations than to have no principles for unexpected situations. Moreover, as Habermas advises, "as long as we take into account in time more dramatic limits that may be overcome the day after tomorrow, we can manage today's problems more calmly." (Habermas, 2001, p.40) Finally, if criticism of transhumanist positions is not developed in time, then perhaps when the first upgrades begin to be widely circulated, they will be willingly and unexamined accepted by citizens with a moral intuition that has been gradually dulled, resulting in society becoming gradually more and more bioliberal ending up transhumanist. After all, industrial modernity has an inherent inclination towards this direction in the sense that it promotes at a rapid pace the development of technoscience in order to improve the human condition, usually underestimating the risks to the natural environment, but also to ourselves.

If we consider that there is no limit to technoscientific progress, then do we not accept the transhumanist worldview while simultaneously neglecting the moral improvement of man?

I would like to propose the thesis that transhumanism accompanies the emergence of the iconistic polis whose hallmarks are uncertainty, complexity, fluidity, ambiguity, and acceleration along with the struggle for visibility. More specifically, transhumanism is considered here as: a) A set of pseudoscientific, sometimes antiscientific or often scientifically controversial theories that, centered on overcoming the human condition via technology, constitute an anti-humanist and utopian worldview with an ideological function in the iconistic society. b) A techno-religion, i.e. a potentially new kind of religion with soteriological elements that satisfies the symbolic subject's need for spirituality and evangelizes his deification. In particular, with regard to the ideological function of this techno-religion, it lies in the fact that despite the self-identification of transhumanists as rationalists and the persistent defense of the scientific nature of their positions, their pursuit of immortality, omnipotence, dominion over the universe and the deification of man refers more to ancient mythologies as well as to the purposes of magic and alchemy rather than to those of science thus contributing to a re-enchantment of the world. This conceals the competitive nature of the iconistic society which is expressed in the subject's perpetual pursuit of visibility for the purpose of recognition. In this context, continuous self-improvement is a necessary condition for highlighting one's uniqueness as a means of securing the attention of others. Transhumanism as an ideology legitimizes the competitive relations in the claim of visibility as well as the further individualization of society, alleviating, while offering meaning, the insecurity of the iconistic subject due to the endless digital representation of institutions and the self. It casually simplifies the complexity of the present and frees the iconistic subject from the burden of moral choices by imparting a sprinkling of spirituality to the empty immensity of technoscientific development where it proclaims the reconciliation of necessity with freedom. Moreover, it expands the social imperative for continuous self-improvement by including the body as the material background of the shaping of life as zoe into life as bios so that the genome becomes a field of self-creation of the iconistic subject who becomes simultaneously an artist and an entrepreneur of the self. In particular, the perception of the genome as private property and the transformation of the ethical issues arising from genetic interventions into aesthetic issues that concern personal preferences reifies the body by concealing its social dimension with the result of shrinking the state's ability to legislate regulatory towards it. Finally, as an ideology, transhumanism is adopted mainly by social classes with high, economic, social and cultural capital who feel familiar with new technologies, integrating them faster into everyday life compared to lower social classes who are often technologically illiterate or technophobic.

References

Benn, Gottfried (1989). «Weinhaus Wolf», Prosa und Autobiographie in B. Hillebrand, Fischer, Frankfurt, 1989, pp. 129-148:145

Bostrom, Nick (2014). Introduction—The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction στο Calvin Mercer/Derek Maher (Eds) Transhumanism and the Body. The World Religions Speak, Palgrave Macmillan.

Carrigan, Kali (2019). Taking Up the Cosmic Office: Transhumanism and the Necessity of Longevity in Newton Lee (Ed.), The Transhumanism Handbook, Springer.

Feuerbach, Ludwig (1841). Das Wesen des Christenthums.

Franssen, Trijsje (2014). Prometheus: Performer or Transformer? in Robert Ranisch /Stefan Sorgner (Eds.), Post- and Transhumanism: An introduction, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften.

Fukuyama, Francis (2004). Transhumanism- The world's most dangerous idea, Foreign Policy, https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/23/transhumanism/

Fuller, Steve / Lipinski, Veronika (2014). The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism, Palgrave.

Habermas, Jürgen (2001). Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?, Suhrkamp.

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (2014). Religion in Robert Ranisch / Stefan Sorgner (Eds). Post- and Transhumanism: An introduction, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften.

More, Max (2009). H+: True Transhumanism, 2009 στον ιστότοπο https://www.metanexus.net/h-true-transhumanism/

Sandel, Michael (2007). The Case Against Perfection, Belknap Press.