

Ephemeroid – Human Vulnerability, Transhumanism, and the Meaning of Life

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Abstract. In this article I try to understand transhumanism from the phenomenological perspective of lived experience. Asking *what it is like* to be a transhumanist, I first interpret the transhumanist agenda of using technology to overcome the human condition as a reaction to the experience of our human weakness, vulnerability, and mortality, and then sketch an alternative *positive* account of human vulnerability, which connects precisely those experiences to what makes human life valuable and meaningful.

Keywords: existential vulnerability; mortality; phenomenology; meaning in life; transhumanism; radical human enhancement.

Introduction

In summer 2018 I attended a conference in Stockholm, the overarching theme of which was the phenomenology of medicine and bioethics. According to the conference website, a phenomenological approach, in the context of this event, was to be understood as following the imperative

to “return to lived experience in a reflective manner”. It is perhaps worth noting that this may not be as easy as it sounds, because if you return to lived experience in a reflective manner, you do not really return to lived experience at all, unless perhaps the lived experience in question is that of doing philosophy. The problem is that most other kinds or instances of lived experience just happen to be rather unreflective, and when you start reflecting on it, you have already created a distance between yourself and the living of the experience. So the best we can do in terms of fulfilling our phenomenological aspirations is, when we reflect on certain aspects of our world, to keep a close eye on lived experience, to pay attention to how it is like for someone to be in a situation in which those aspects of the world become pertinent.

With this in mind, what I want to reflect upon in this essay is our lived experience of being human, or of some prominent aspects of being human, and to do this in light of rising demands to use already existing and soon to be developed technologies to fundamentally change what we are. The aspects that shall concern us here are, for one thing, our existential vulnerability and, for another, our desire to live a life that, in some way or another, *matters* and is in that sense *meaningful*.

1. Existential Vulnerability

Let us talk about vulnerability first. The Oxford online dictionary defines ‘vulnerable’ as “exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally”. Now, if you are reading this, you probably find yourself in a pretty safe environment and may not feel very vulnerable right here and now. It is, after all, unlikely (though by no means unthinkable) that someone or something will burst through the door and attack you and thus harm you physically.

Still, we know very well that however safe a given environment may appear to us, we are both on the surface and down to our very core vulnerable beings. We are all eminently attackable, harmable, hurttable, injurable, and ultimately destructible and killable. Our vulnerability is a function of our

mortality. All harm that we suffer is in some way an incapacitation, and death can well be understood as a complete and irreversible incapacitation.¹ Most of the things that can harm us can also kill us, and since virtually everything we encounter in this world can harm us, virtually everything can kill us if the circumstances conspire against us. Cold can kill us, and heat can kill us. The air that we breathe can kill us. Food can kill us. The absence of air to breathe and the absence of food both *will* kill us. Invisible little creatures can kill us. Bigger ones can too. Machines can kill us. A brick falling on our head can kill us. A spot of black ice beneath our feet can kill us. Other people can. Our own stupidity can. Even emotions can: love and hate, jealousy, or grief, they are all known to have propelled various people into an early grave. Pascal was surely right when he declared man to be “only a reed, the weakest in nature”. “There is no need”, he famously remarked, “for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him.” Of course he added, which was the whole point of his musings, that “even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this.” Yet even if that happened to be true, it doesn’t change anything about the fact that the universe *will* eventually crush us, and when it does, then our alleged superiority over it won’t be much of a consolation. Things conspire against us. The world really is out to get us, and it *will* get us in the end. “You can run on for a long time, run on for a long time, but sooner or later God’s gonna cut you down.” The great Johnny Cash once sang this, not long before he died. Unfortunately even thinking (and singing) reeds are still reeds and easy to cut down. Thinking or not, we don’t stand much chance against the universe. Die we must, and die we will. And it won’t be long until then, a few decades at most. This is why the ancient Greeks used

¹ As has been argued by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Franklin G. Miller in “What Makes Killing Wrong”, *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39/1 (2013). The authors’ main theoretical claim is that what makes killing wrong is that the resulting state is that of a “total disability”. “Total” is taken to mean universal and irreversible.

to call us *ephemeroi*, the short-lived ones, or more precisely those who live only for a day (*epi hemera*).

But there is more to our vulnerability than the fact that we can easily be damaged and destroyed. Inanimate things can be damaged and destroyed, too, but they cannot be harmed, or hurt, or killed. They are not vulnerable, which means woundable (from the Latin *vulnus* = wound), because their existence doesn't matter to them and they cannot really lose their existence because they don't really have one in the first place. Only things whose existence can be taken away from them are vulnerable, and you cannot take existence away from a rock, or a car, or a computer, because whatever existence these things have, they don't exist *as* rocks, cars and computers. Their existence, if we want to call it that, is fundamentally different from the existence of living beings, because they cannot *own* their existence. We on the other hand *do* own our existence. We are vulnerable because we *suffer* our damages and our destruction. We are vulnerable precisely because the damage and destruction inflicted on us is something we *experience*. In the experience of it, it becomes *our* damage and *our* destruction. And we do experience it not as spiritual beings, but as embodied beings, as beings whose existence is tied to, or woven into, a particular material substrate. We are vulnerable because we own our existence *and* because we are bodies. In other words, we are vulnerable because and insofar as we are animals: we *breathe* our existence. Rocks are not vulnerable, and immortal Gods aren't either. They don't breathe, they don't suffer, they don't care, because they have got nothing to lose.

Yet even though we are all vulnerable, and vulnerable because we are mortal, and even though we are generally aware that we are, it requires particular circumstances for our vulnerability to assume a prominent role in our lived experience. Right now for instance, although I know that I am vulnerable, that I could theoretically get seriously hurt or even killed any second, I do not really *feel* very vulnerable at all. My mortality is a fact I acknowledge, but my acknowledgement of it does not affect me. It is true I don't exactly feel *invulnerable* or *immortal* either, but the possibility and indeed certainty of my death has a certain remoteness to it, as if it were not

quite real, or as if the death whose certainty I acknowledge is somehow not going to be *my* death after all. I know that *someone* will eventually get hurt, that someone will eventually die, and I have no doubt that that someone will have been known by my name, will leave behind my books and other things that I own, and will be mourned by the ones who loved me, but despite all those striking similarities between that person and me, it won't really be me. Because how can it? To me my own existence is so self-assertive, so all-encompassing, so much the basis of all reality, that the idea of me not being around anymore is literally unimaginable. Unimaginable for me, of course, not for you. *You* can easily imagine my not being there anymore, because I have never been fully there for you in the first place, at least not the way you have been there for yourself. You acknowledge my existence as I acknowledge my death, out of a certain politeness, an unwillingness to give offence by upsetting the common view. And as my existence does not have the same significance for you as it does for me, my existential vulnerability becomes all but invisible to you: the harm that befalls me is a mere damage to you, and my death a mere destruction, not significantly different from the destruction of any other thing in the world.

What helps us to remain largely unaffected by the knowledge of our mortality is the difference between acknowledging a truth in the abstract, and acknowledging the same truth in the concrete. That there is a world of difference between the two, Leo Tolstoy brilliantly captures in his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886). We all know that we are going to die because we know, or at least are willing to accept, that *everyone* dies, from which it logically follows that we, too, are going to die. But when we accept this, then we regard ourselves as nothing more than a particular instance of a general rule that we have no rational reason to contest. If all men are mortal, that particular man that I happen to be is mortal too. I know, for instance, that Michael Hauskeller is mortal, just as I know that, say, the King of Sweden is mortal. But that *I* am mortal is an altogether different proposition, one that for most of the time I refuse to entertain. Ivan Ilych, in Tolstoy's story, learns that the hard way (as we all must in the end). He is dying, and, after initially refusing to acknowledge that he is, he eventually accepts it as a fact. However,

he does not understand how this is possible, and does not accept it in the sense of being okay with it, on the contrary. He suffers immensely, simply because he knows that he is going to die very soon now, and even more so because nobody else, including his family, seems to realize the immensity of what is happening, the moral outrage that his death constitutes. Thus he longs for a pity that he does not get, because for everyone else his death is far less significant than for him: for them it is not, after all, as it is for him, the end of everything. While he wants to be petted and comforted like a sick child, everyone else just wants to get on with their life. This, of course, only heightens his despair: “He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God.” (Tolstoy 2001: 162) He is helpless because he cannot do anything about it. He is lonely, terribly lonely, because only he himself dies while the world carries on with not even a glitch. Man is cruel because nobody seems to care or understand, at least not to the degree that the occasion would require or deserve. God is cruel because he lets it happen, and God is absent because he is not there to provide solace. Ivan Ilych has been left all alone to deal with his imminent parting and the full realization of his existential vulnerability.

It is, for much of the time, easy for us to ignore our own vulnerability, and even more so to overlook or forget the vulnerability of others. Even if we don’t, there is always a mismatch between the way that someone’s suffering or dying is experienced by the one who experiences it as his or her own, and the way everybody else experiences it. Sometimes the contrast is so stark that it becomes a source of additional humiliation for the sufferer who is given to understand that his suffering and dying does not mean anything to anyone but himself, which is to say that, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t matter much at all. Although the realization that nobody else gives a damn about what happens to me does not stop me from caring about it myself, it still isolates me, sets me apart, and ultimately removes me from the common, communal world of shared meaning, which is a requisite of our sense of living a meaningful life (and dying a meaningful death). George Orwell, in one of his wonderful essays, *How the Poor Die*, describes the

indifference that patients would encounter in a French hospital in which the 25-year old Orwell had the misfortune of spending several miserable weeks in 1929 (Orwell 1950, 18–32). “I had never been in the public ward of a hospital before, and it was my first experience of doctors who handle you without speaking to you, or, in a human sense, taking any notice of you.” People die constantly without anyone bothering to sit with them. They suffer alone and die alone, among strangers. Only interesting cases receive any attention from the medical staff, and even then that attention is marked by a complete lack of human empathy. Some painful procedures attract interest because they are apparently amusing to watch, though they are by no means amusing to be subjected to. One of them is the mustard poultice, which Orwell is also treated with. Here is how he describes the procedure: “Two slatternly nurses had already got the poultice ready, and they lashed it round my chest as tight as a strait-jacket while some men who were wandering about the ward in shirt and trousers began to collect round my bed with half-sympathetic grins. I learned later that watching a patient have a mustard poultice was a favourite pastime in the ward. These things are normally applied for a quarter of an hour and certainly they are funny enough if you don’t happen to be the person inside. For the first five minutes the pain is severe, but you believe you can bear it. During the second five minutes this belief evaporates, but the poultice is buckled at the back and you can’t get it off. This is the period the onlookers enjoy most.”

This, or something like this, can happen to each one of us. Life puts us in a situation where we are suddenly forced to acknowledge our vulnerability because it is no longer an abstract possibility, but instead has become part of our lived experience, while for others the vulnerability that we experience may well be nothing but a mildly interesting diversion or at best an engrossing spectacle.

2. What it is like to be a transhumanist

So how does all this connect to transhumanism? Transhumanism is an increasingly popular philosophy and cultural movement that urges us to no

longer accept our existential vulnerability as an integral and non-negotiable part of the human condition and, instead, to use science and technology to make us less vulnerable and, ideally and in the long run, to cure us of our vulnerability once and for all. The fight against human vulnerability is at the heart of the transhumanist enterprise. If we were not vulnerable, there would be no transhumanism because there would be nothing to fight against, and nothing to fight for. In the transhumanist worldview, human vulnerability is the enemy, which comes to us in various disguises, which all ultimately lead to the greatest of evils, which is death. We are vulnerable to it because, for one thing, we are condemned to live with these “meat-bag” bodies that are all too easily destroyed by external forces (such as lorries and microbes), and for another because even if we survive all other attempts on our life, our bodies are still pre-programmed to age and decline and eventually fall apart all by themselves, without any external causes. Therefore, the ageing of the human body needs to be stopped and, if possible and where needed, reversed, and the organic body that we currently inhabit fortified or replaced.

Another aspect of our vulnerability concerns the limitations of our cognitive capacities. There is so much that we don’t understand, so much we don’t know. Our attention span is too easily exhausted, and our memory is laughably selective and unreliable. This is not only annoying; it is potentially very dangerous because it prevents us from figuring out how to effectively protect ourselves against all kinds of potentially destructive things such as climate change or evil terrorists. Then there are our emotions. Love and affection for instance make us dependent on the fate and the actions of other people. They make us vulnerable. If we could only stop loving each other, that would go a long way to make human existence safer.

Central to transhumanism is the belief that human vulnerability in all its forms is a huge problem and that we should no longer put up with it because it may no longer be necessary to do so. Science and technology promise a way out, a way to overcome the human condition and become something better, something other and more than human, something less vulnerable. Transhumanists welcome the prospect of soon being able to leave our human condition behind. Now, in accordance with the phenomenological

principle we have committed to, namely to return, whenever possible and in a reflective manner, to lived experience, we will now, instead of discussing any further what transhumanism is, pursue a different angle and ask instead *what it is like* to be a transhumanist. Hopefully this question will prove easier to answer than Nagel's question what it is like to be a bat, although I must confess that for me both bats and transhumanists are strange, alien creatures. Yet since transhumanists can talk, while bats can't, it should prove much easier to figure *them* out than to figure bats out.

So, what is it like to be a transhumanist? One determining factor in the transhumanist mind-set is clearly a fascination with science and technology and the positive changes they can bring about. When a transhumanist looks at a new gadget I imagine them to perceive it as a beautiful and alluring messenger from the future, a thing that is bright and shiny and heavenly, the embodied promise of a better world, all accompanied by some piece of music resounding in their soul's ear, something uplifting like Richard Strauss's Nietzsche-inspired tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra*. I know this is a cheap shot, and I do apologize, but my point is that the transhumanist's relationship to technology is not a pragmatic relationship at all: for a transhumanist, technology is more than just useful. It is a utopia in the making. As such, it must feel very different from the way it feels to someone like me who is happy to use it when it appears to make life easier, but is pretty much deaf to its lure.

In addition to that fascination, there is, perhaps rather surprisingly, also a conservative streak in the transhumanist attitude towards the world. Transhumanists like to berate those who are less keen than they are on leaving the human condition behind as cowards who are so fearful of change that rather than do something about it they prefer to insist, against all reason, that what is clearly bad is in fact good. Transhumanists call them, rather derisively, "bioconservatives". However, it is in fact the transhumanist who, on a very fundamental level, refuses to accept change. For what is the ageing process that they are so keen on stopping, if not a constant, slow change of what we are, and what is death, which they see as the greatest of all evils, if not the ultimate change, a transition from one particular state

(namely life) into its opposite (non-life). Transhumanists strongly resent this change. They would much prefer for things to stay as they are: for the living to stay alive, the healthy to stay healthy, the young to stay young. A desire and determination to stay “forever young” is the epitome of a truly bioconservative, change-resisting attitude to life.

This particular transhumanist fear of change certainly speaks of a keen appreciation of the value of living and the value of being young and healthy and at the height of one’s powers. Yet it is also expressive of a heightened sense of one’s own personal vulnerability. Unlike the rest of us who are not overly bothered by our various human limitations and incapacities, transhumanists seem to suffer immensely from them, much like Tolstoy’s Ivan Illych, for whom his own death, because of its imminence, had transformed from an abstract truth into a concrete reality. In the eyes of a transhumanist, our mortality is not merely an unfortunate, regrettable feature of life, but something positively horrifying. It is the greatest evil, the scourge of humanity. It is a moral outrage, a scandal of cosmic proportions. Transhumanists feel positively *offended* by their mortality. They take it as a personal affront.

There is an almost hysterical rejection of all weakness and vulnerability in much of the transhumanist rhetoric, which I find rather peculiar because this very rejection strikes me as an even greater weakness than the weakness that is being rejected. It indicates an inability to live, or at any rate to live comfortably, with one’s own existential vulnerability. All this constant moaning what a poor hand life has dealt us, how badly we are being treated by a stepmotherly nature, how horrible our lot really is (much more horrible than we commonly realize), all this evokes the image of a pampered child wailing about the unfairness of it all: Why am I not smarter than I am? Why can I not control my emotions? Why do I have to get attached to other people? Why do I have to get hurt, why do I have to feel pain? Why do I have to get old? Why do I have to die? I don’t want any of this, and you can’t make me. It’s not fair. Why am I not God? – In response to all this egotistic wailing I feel an urge to exclaim: For Pete’s sake, pull yourself together, man up, get a grip, it’s not such a big deal. Do I really have to remind you how privileged you are? How good your life is? Can that not be enough? Who has

ever been a god anyway? And why would one want to be? We are not meant to be gods, nor is it particularly desirable. And fair or not, all the things that the transhumanist keeps complaining about have always been part of the human (and not only human) condition, and people have managed to live with it just fine. In fact, many great people have died, most of them after suffering some degree of pain and loss in their lives, and lo and behold, even though they have ended, the world has not. In fact, it has been moving on smoothly without skipping a beat, and if it was able to do that in the past, then it will also be able to do it when we are gone. I readily confess that, just like the transhumanist, I don't particularly welcome the prospect of not being around anymore some day in the not too distant future, but I also understand that nothing much depends on me, that life goes on even when I am gone. And nothing much depends on you either. So why should we be spared? What would be gained by it? We are going to die: I am going to die, and you are too. That is okay because we have lived, and because life will continue in other forms. And most of us are not going to die right now, so we can put our cants of mortal terror on hold. Now we are very much alive. Now we can enjoy and celebrate being alive. And to the extent that being vulnerable in many different ways is part of being alive, we can also enjoy and celebrate our very vulnerability. Instead of constantly dwelling on our own finitude and letting ourselves be dragged down by it, it is much wiser to just live with it, incorporate it in the way we live our lives and the way we interact with other people. That requires courage and a different sort of strength, not the strength of the autonomous and self-sufficient being that transhumanists long to become, but the strength of those who are brave enough to live with imperfection and adversity, who don't shy away from the risk of getting hurt and who are mindful of the suffering of others. It is the strength of a vulnerable being that is not afraid of its own and others' vulnerability. It is the strength of self-affirmation, rather than self-denial, and by 'self' I mean the whole self, the full package, body and soul. The German philosopher Gernot Böhme, who used to be my teacher a long time ago, used to call this sort of strength *Souveränität*, which I suppose could be translated as sovereignty, but a better translation is probably *poise*. Going

back to Pascal's representation of the human as a thinking reed, poise is not what a reed has that no longer wants to be a reed. Poise is what a reed has that never wants to be anything but what it is: immensely vulnerable perhaps in many ways, but full of joy about its ability to think, and perhaps more importantly to sing and to dance, like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, affirmative of life in a Nietzschean sense, not longing for an eternally boring heaven that provides total security and endless pleasure, but for a life that is a true adventure. And what kind of adventure would it be if we couldn't be hurt, if nothing could be lost? To be able to sing and dance, to be able to find meaning in life, we don't need invulnerability. We don't need eternal life. Only if we don't know how to seize the present, don't know how to make something out of our lives in the here and now, do we need life to carry on endlessly. But if we don't know that, what would we do with eternal life? Would life be more meaningful if we did not have to die? Why would that be? We could of course do more things, but our life does not appear to be meaningless because there are so many things we cannot do. If it appears meaningless and not worth living, it is because the things we can do strike us as not really worth our while, which is exactly the attitude toward life that transhumanism encourages: nothing is ever good enough, or there is never enough of the good that there is. All things considered, life is bad, and death is bad too, so there is no way out. David Benatar calls this "the human predicament" (Benatar 2017)

But there only ever is a human predicament if we agree with the premises: that both life and death are bad – death, because it brings our individual life to an end, and life because it cannot protect itself from death. But surely our existential vulnerability is not all bad. It connects us to the world, connects us to other people. It opens up opportunities. We are all vulnerable, we all have to die. This is the price we pay for living. Knowing this, we should not try to prolong life as long as possible, neither our own nor that of others, which all too often seems to be the sole goal of medicine if a cure is no longer an option. There is no value in life as such. There is, however, value in living, or there can be, depending on what kind of living it is. Our dying is part of our living. The way we die is part of the way we

live. How we die is important because it is important how we live. Important for us, that is. It makes a difference. To acknowledge that difference, to acknowledge our mutual vulnerability, is what we owe to each other. We are the ones who live only for a day and who know it. We are the ones who live on top of the day. We are *Ephemeroi*.

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