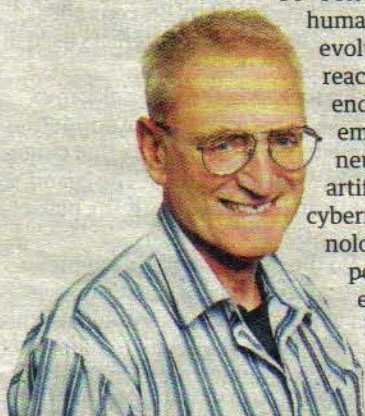


The ideas interview Nick Bostrom

John Sutherland meets a transhumanist who wrestles with the ethics of technologically enhanced human beings

The World Transhumanist Association was founded in 1998 by the philosophers Nick Bostrom and David Pearce. It describes itself as “an international nonprofit membership organisation which advocates the ethical use of technology to expand human capacities.” Its proclaimed goal is that people should be “better than well”, and that human development, in evolutionary terms, has not reached anything like an endpoint: all kinds of emerging technologies – neuropharmacology, artificial intelligence and cybernetics, and nanotechnologies – have the potential, it says, to enhance human abilities. In effect, it is interested in self-improvement



and human perfectibility through the ethical application of science.

In a world suffused with gloom, is the WTA project not wildly utopian, I ask Dr Bostrom, who is the association’s principal spokesperson and teaches at Oxford University.

“That might be true for some transhumanists,” he replies. “I personally don’t think of myself as either an optimist or a pessimist. I believe that if you look at the best-case scenarios, the upside is enormous. But there are clearly major risks that humanity will have to confront in this century. I can see a downside scenario as well, reaching down as far as the level of total human extinction. The possibilities range from the wonderful to the horrible. If I had to pull a number out of a hat, I’d say a 20% probability of extinction. Non-trivial.”

How is transhumanism different from discredited notions of “creative evolution” – the idea that mankind, as a species, was evolving ever higher up the ladder, passing on its acquired traits to succeeding generations?

“Creative evolution, as propounded by Lamarck, was discredited by Darwin. Traits acquired during one’s lifetime – muscles built up in the gym, for example – cannot be passed on to the next generation. Now with technology, as it happens, we might indeed be able to transfer some of our acquired traits on to our selected offspring by genetic engineering.”

Transhumanism, as I understand it, is moving its focus on to ethics, regarding many of the technological enhancements as being in place. Is that the case?

“When I first got interested in this area a few years ago, the discussions would typically revolve around the question, ‘Is this science fiction? Or are we dealing in realistic future possibilities?’ Now the discussions tend to start from the position that, yes, it will be increasingly possible to modify human capacities. The issue now is whether we should do it. And, if so, what are the ethical constraints?”

When you say “modify human capacities”, are you thinking of prenatal, postnatal, or midlife interventions? Prosthetic devices, for example?

“Prosthetic devices don’t come into it except for people who happen



to have some specific disability. For healthy adult people, the really big thing we can foresee are ways of intervening in the ageing process, either by slowing or reversing it.”

How will technology achieve this?

“In the case of ageing, what you would need to do is either slow the rate at which this damage accumulates, or, even better, go in after the damage has accumulated and remove it. Stem cells, for instance, can be used to regrow cells that we have lost. And we might develop new enzymes which could break down those substances that the body, unaided, cannot deal with.”

Transhumanist discourse often uses the term “post-human”. What precisely is that?

“‘Post-human’ is a vague concept and people have used the term to mean entirely different things. It tends, in my opinion, to introduce more confusion than clarity. But one central meaning of the word would merely be an optimally enhanced human being.”

Would this enhanced human being be what Nietzscheans call “the superman”?

“Nietzsche had a different view. He envisaged a moral and cultural transcendence: a very few people endowed with strong willpower and great refinement would throw off the shackles of traditional morality and

the guardian reader offer

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Briefing

Who should you trust more – the media, the government, or neither?

Who we should trust is often quite different to who we actually do trust. But a 10-nation survey by the BBC, Reuters and the Media Centre last week provides interesting evidence for those seeking to make a connection between what is and what ought to be.

The survey found that in six countries the media were trusted more than governments, in three it was the other way around, and in Egypt they only had half the data and couldn't tell, which is the sort of fundamental design flaw that can only decrease our confidence in the media behind the study.

The three countries that trusted governments more than the media were the UK, the US and Germany, while South Korea distrusted both equally. What do these countries have in common? Not overall levels of credulity. Adding together the percentages that trusted both media and government, the UK, Germany and Korea scored low, but Americans were the third most trusting nation, and the least trusting was Brazil, which put much more faith in the media than government.

But a pattern emerges when you compare the results of

this survey with Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index: the greater the perceived corruption, the more people trust the media over the government. So, for example, Nigeria comes almost bottom of TI's ratings, and only 34% of Nigerians trust their rulers, the lowest proportion but for Brazil. But 88% of them trust the media, more than in any other country. And the three countries that trust governments more than the media are the three highest

ranking of the 10 in the TI table, with South Korea as the fourth.

This could be an example of what author James Surowiecki calls "the Wisdom of Crowds". In countries where there is corruption, the media play a vital role in exposing the truth, so clearly they should be trusted more. However, in countries like ours, with less real dirt to dig, the media has to make do with spreading as much muck as it can, and so people are less inclined to see it as more trustworthy than the government.

But given the low levels of trust in both media (47%) and government (51%) in this country, you probably won't believe a thing I've written anyway. I mean, how can you trust anyone who says our government is relatively incorrupt?

Julian Baggini



convention, and so rise above the rest of humanity. That's a very different mission from transhumanism where, ideally, everybody should have access to enhancement technologies."

Everyone their own superhuman? "Well, it would be good if everyone had the option of, say, sharper memory and better health and longer life."

What are the ethical dilemmas that need to be solved?

"It's one thing if we are talking about adult, competent citizens deciding what to do with their own bodies. If, on the other hand, we are thinking of modifying children, or selecting embryos, then there is another set of ethical questions that arise. There is a further set of ethical questions relating to access. If some of the technologies, as they well might, turn out to be very expensive, then what mechanisms should be in place to ensure fairness?"

Surely the mechanisms are already in place? The rich will be able to afford them; the rest of us won't.

"One must ask, when these enhancement technologies are available and have been proven to work, whether they should be included in the package of treatments routinely offered to all by the NHS" ●

Nick Bostrom is the director of the Oxford Future of Humanity Institute. A list of his publications is available at www.nickbostrom.com

Bostrom ...
'It will be increasingly possible to modify human capacities. The issue now is whether we should'

Food for thought

The week in ideas

Today

The search for life on other planets

Glenn White of the Open University on planned missions to study planets outside our own solar system. *Church Lecture Theatre, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, 7.30pm. 01908 655 253*

Edward Stourton

The BBC radio presenter (right) discusses the place of religion in 21st-century journalism. *Regent's Park College,*

University of Oxford, Pusey Street, Oxford, 5pm. 01865 270000

Suicide of the west

Lord (Chris) Smith, the former secretary of state for culture, and Richard Koch, his co-author, discuss their new book, which contends that westerners have lost faith in the values that made them so successful. *Demos, Magdalen House, 136 Tooley Street, London, 6pm. suicideofthewest@demost.co.uk*

He Fouad Siniora
The Lebanese



prime minister analyses the challenges faced by his country following the assassination of its former PM and Syria's withdrawal of its troops. *Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London, 5.30pm. meetintern@chathamhouse.org.uk*

Wednesday

Multiculture in times of war

Paul Gilroy of the London School of Economics discusses ways forward for the UK's diverse population in the wake of the supposed "death"

of multiculturalism after the 7/7 attacks. *London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, 6.30pm. 0207 955 6043*

Thursday

Lord Hurd

The former foreign secretary explores the ethics of decision-making in foreign policy with philosopher Sir Anthony Kenny and Alan Montefiore of Middlesex University. *London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, 12.30pm. 020-7955 7539*

To include your event in Brain food, email ideas@guardian.co.uk