

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

How to Become a Post-Dog: Animals in Transhumanism

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses and deconstructs the transhumanist commitment to animal rights and the well-being of all sentient beings. Some transhumanists have argued that such a commitment entails a moral imperative to help non-human animals overcome their biological limitations by enhancing their cognitive abilities and generally “uplifting” them to a more human-like existence. I argue that the transhumanist approach to animal welfare ultimately aims at the destruction of the animal as an animal. By seeking to make animals more like us the freedom to live their life as the kind of creature they are is being denied to them. It is an attempt to tame the beast, to make it less alien and more acceptable to us, thus reaffirming the myth of human superiority.

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In many respects transhumanists, who advocate the use of new technologies to overcome our human condition, are humanists. However, they do not usually believe that humans are the only beings worthy of moral consideration, the only ones that have true moral standing. In other words, they do not subscribe to the kind of *ethical* humanism that characterised the philosophy of, for instance, Thomas Aquinas or Immanuel Kant. Instead, most transhumanists follow the utilitarian tradition, which emphasises the ability to suffer as a normatively relevant common ground between humans and animals. Since animals are sentient creatures, they do deserve at least *some* moral recognition. Thus David Pearce, author of the transhumanist manifesto *The Hedonistic Imperative*, in which he argues for the biotechnological abolition of *all* suffering, including that of nonhuman animals (Pearce 1995), states that from “a notional God’s-eye perspective, I’d argue that morally we should care just as much about the abuse of functionally equivalent non-human animals as we do about members of our own species — about the abuse and killing of a pig as we do about the abuse or killing of a human toddler.” (Pearce 2007). Along the same lines, the *Transhumanist Declaration*, crafted in 1998 by Nick Bostrom, David Pearce, Max More, and others, and later officially adopted by the world transhumanist association *Humanity Plus*, explicitly commits transhumanists to the advocacy of “the well-being of all sentience, including humans, non-human animals, and any future artificial intellects, modified life forms, or other intelligences to which technological and scientific advance may give rise.” (Humanity Plus 1998). Other transhumanists emphasize the fact that at least some nonhuman animals qualify as (Lockean) persons, and demand that human-level legal rights be conferred to them (or in general to all “non-human persons”, which of course also includes, or would include, intelligent, self-aware machines). Under the

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leadership of George Dvorsky, the *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies* promotes a “Rights of Non-Human Persons” program, which aims at defending “the rights of non-human persons to live in liberty, free from undue confinement, slavery, torture, experimentation, and the threat of unnatural death. (ieet.org)

However, transhumanists still believe that only humans possess the ability to self-transform under the guidance of reason and in accordance with goals derived from a rational assessment of what matters in life and what is objectively good and worth having and being. We alone can make that assessment, and we alone can use our insight to redesign a suboptimal world, which includes redesigning our suboptimal selves, as well as those of others. This is our main obligation, our mission on earth. Non-human animals cannot take on that mission because even the most intelligent animals are stuck in the natural world, forever confined to the specific bodies and minds that they have been given by nature, condemned to accept their various inabilities: their comparative lack of understanding, the shortness of their lives, the inevitability of their deaths, because they have no choice in the matter. But *we* do. Our ability to reason makes a huge difference. While it does not make us autonomous, it gives us the *potential* to free ourselves from the confinements of nature. Just like nonhuman animals we are currently still “slaves to our genes” and subject to “the tyranny of aging and death” (More 2013, 450), but at least we have a good fighting chance to pull free of all that if we only put our mind (and its offshoot, science and technology) to it. To finally take up that fight in earnest is what transhumanists urge us to do. Thus Max More, in a “Letter to Mother Nature,” which starts with an acknowledgement of “the many wonderful qualities” that Nature

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has bestowed on us and ends in what looks more like an outright declaration of war on her, programmatically proclaims:

We will take charge over our genetic programming and achieve mastery over our biological and neurological processes. We will fix all individual and species defects left over from evolution by natural selection. Not content with that, we will seek complete choice of our bodily form and function, refining and augmenting our physical and intellectual abilities beyond those of any human in history. We (...) will not limit our physical, intellectual, or emotional capacities by remaining purely biological organisms. While we pursue mastery of our own biochemistry, we will increasingly integrate our advancing technologies into our selves. (More 2013, 450).

This envisaged act of deliberate self-creation is what, in the transhumanist understanding, marks us as human. What we shall leave behind us by cutting all ties to Mother Nature is precisely everything that we have in common with nonhuman animals, with what is *not* distinctly human about us. What we shall leave behind, or “fix,” is, in other words, the *animal* in us. We kill the mother so that we no longer have to be her sons and daughters, as all the other animals continue to be. Unless of course we do something about it. If we accept that our lives are poor and unsatisfactory, that we live the life of slaves (to our own biology) because we are ultimately (still) animals (or perhaps transanimals), then the lives of nonhuman animals must be judged the same. Severely limited in their possibilities as nonhuman animals are, which is even more limited than we are, their lives must be understood as even poorer than ours. While we at least have *some* degree of self-determination and

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potential for self-creation, they have none. Yet if we are fixable, then they may be too. And since transhumanism is a philosophy that officially subscribes to the view that all sentient creatures deserve moral consideration and, if needed, our help and support, as transhumanists we have a duty to step in and not only fix ourselves, but also all other animals. Thus, according to James Hughes, we “have an obligation to children to provide them with education and secure homes so they can realize their abilities. We have an obligation to the mentally ill to provide them with treatments that return them to sanity. Alongside the provision of basic needs, education and a caring community, we also are increasingly able to offer technology as a means for people to reach their fullest potentials. (...) I think we have the same obligation to uplift ‘disabled’ animal citizens that we have to disabled human citizen.” (Hughes 2004, 224).

The sentiment is noble perhaps, but also quite patronizing. It is not compassion, but pity, that is being shown here, of the kind that we would resent if expressed towards us, because it always involves condescension, the presumption of superiority. Poor brutes, such lowly lives they have; let us take pity on them and lift them up to our own lofty heights! This is a far cry from what Donna Haraway describes as the meeting of species, which involves the practical recognition of the animal as a companion, as an equal, responsive and active partner in the muddy dance of life. “I am a creature of the mud, not the sky”, says Haraway (2008, 4). Not so the transhumanist, who decidedly leans towards the sky as her (and our) true home. Animals live in the mud, and children play in it. They know nothing of the sky. For Hughes, animals are like human children who are deficient because they have not developed their full potential yet. But at least children will one day grow up, nearer to the sky, whereas animals never will, or at least not without a little

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help from their friends, namely us. Animals are in a *permanent* childlike state, which here does not signify innocence, but immaturity and dependence. Only we can save them from the misfortune of a permanent childhood. And to add insult to injury, animals are also likened to the mentally ill and mentally disabled. Something significant is missing from their constitution, something that they ought to have but cannot acquire by themselves. We need to jump into the breach and help them, restore them to sanity.

The human is here figured as the better animal (precisely because we are less animal, or transanimal), just as the posthuman is figured as the better human (because they are less animal even *more*). What the posthuman is in comparison to us, we are in comparison to nonhuman animals. They are conceived as *prehumans* (in the same way that we are conceived, teleologically or at least trajectoryally, as pre-posthumans). Consequently, we look after an animal's well-being by helping it to become something that is no longer animal. What is good for the animal (be it non-human or human) is that it disappears *as* an animal. The enhancement of the animal lies in its elimination; the only good animal is an ex-animal. This is, ultimately, what all proposals for animal enhancement suggest. Transhumanist uplifting simply follows that tradition. What is different is merely the *kind* of elimination that is suggested. What it has in common with those other proposed ways to enhance or (dis-)enhance animals is the determination not to let the animal be what nature has made it. In one way or another the unenhanced animal or the animal *qua* animal is always a nuisance. Thus David Pearce (1995, Section I.10), in his eagerness to free the world and all sentient beings in it of all suffering, outlines his plan to turn all carnivorous animals into herbivores or, if that is not possible, to get rid of them altogether. It is the transhu-

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manist version of the biblical prediction (if taken literally) of a coming golden age, when “the wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent’s foe.” (Isaiah 65:25). Except that it is less forgiving and more inclusive. Cats and other carnivores, declares Pearce, are in fact nothing but the animal equivalent of psychopaths (hence insane, once again). They are “pre-programmed killing machines” (which, apparently, is the wrong kind of machine), which we should not allow to continue to exist. In fact, it is our moral *duty* to make sure that they do not exist. Any desire to preserve them is nothing but a “misguided romanticisation.” “In future,” he says, “the life-forms which exist on this planet will be there purely because we allow them to be so, or choose to create them.” Pearce realises that all this talk about *allowing* and *not allowing* living things to exist “smacks of hubris,” but he is fine with that because he thinks it is both *true* and *right* that this is going to happen. His fellow transhumanist and fellow animal rights advocate George Dvorsky shares Pearce’s unabashed “technovisionary paternalism” (Ferrari 2015), the conviction that we know best what is good for nonhuman animals, and indeed what is good and desirable in general and for everyone. Besides, we have the power, and with power comes responsibility, which we shouldn’t shy away from. Hence the uplift imperative. Dvorsky defines animal uplifting — a term borrowed from David Brin’s 1980s *Uplift* novels — as “the theoretical prospect of endowing nonhumans with greater capacities, including and especially increased intelligence” (Dvorsky 2008, 130) and claims that we “are morally obligated to biologically enhance nonhuman animals and integrate them into human and posthuman society” (Dvorsky 2008, 129). The assumption behind the postulated “ethical imperative to uplift” is that a nonhuman animal’s life generally resembles more a Hobbesian nightmare than a Rousseauian Garden of Eden: it is

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“nasty, brutish and short.” Also, they lack political participation and what comes with it, namely liberty and justice. By uplifting them to a human (or, if we also uplift ourselves, posthuman) level of intelligence, we would empower nonhuman animals “to participate in the broader social community” (Dvorsky 2008, 137) and to live “a more dignified and fulfilling life” (Dvorsky 2008, 132) than is currently, due to the limitations of their nature, available to them. Uplifting will allow both us and them to transcend those biological limitations. However, since those limitations are much more severe and inflexible for them than they are (normally) for us, so that they never really reach “minimally acceptable modes of functioning,” nonhuman animals can be “construed as disabled humans” (Dvorsky 2008, 138). Dvorsky thus adopts and reaffirms Hughes’s disability narrative. The term ‘disability’ suggests not only an absence, but the absence of something that *should* be there. *They* lack something important that *we* have.

Despite protests to the contrary (Dvorsky 2008, 138), the uplift project is inherently anthropocentric. The very word ‘uplifting’ suggests a hierarchy, a difference between lower and higher states of existence. We can only *uplift* what is on a lower level, and *we* can only do the uplifting if we are on a higher level already (which does not preclude the possibility of even higher than human levels). Dvorsky (2012) approvingly cites David Brin, the author of the *Uplift* saga and like Dvorsky and Hughes fellow at the *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technology*, who in an interview accuses evolution of being “stingy” for not letting nonhuman animals crash through the “firm glass ceiling” of limited abilities under which they are stuck. (We on the other hand have, somehow, crashed through, although we may have a, somewhat less firm, glass ceiling of our own.) It would, he says, be selfish of us to let them stay

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there and to keep the benefits of enhancement technologies to ourselves. “Imagine dolphin philosophers, bonobo therapists, raven playwrights and poets,” he says, “How lonely, if we turn away without trying.” That we might be *lonely* without uplifted animals is a curious and telling worry. It assumes that we cannot communicate with nonhuman animals, that they live in one world and we in quite another. That we cannot communicate with them in our language (i.e. a language that *we* can understand) is clearly perceived as frustrating. It is yet another limitation imposed on us. There are worlds of experience out there that we cannot grasp, that are closed to us. We have no idea at all what it is like to be a bat. Or for that matter a dog. Uplifting will change that: it will finally allow us to know what it *is* like. Except that the uplifted bat is no longer a bat, the dolphin turned philosopher no longer a dolphin, and the raven turned poet no longer a raven. Once they have been enabled to communicate with us in our language they are no longer the kind of otherworldly being that we wanted to communicate with in the first place. “If a lion could speak,” Wittgenstein remarked, “we could not understand him” (1953, 223). We will, however, understand the post-lion, precisely because he will no longer be a lion, which is just as well. With only post-animals around (since we will not *allow* any unenhanced animals to exist), we will no longer be constantly reminded of our limitations because there is nobody left that we cannot communicate with, nobody who defies our understanding and is beyond our reach, beyond our control. The animal is that which cannot be controlled (and the animal *in* us, the animal that we are, is everything in us that we cannot control). Giving nonhuman animals human-like mental abilities is a way to make them less alien and more compliant. The autonomy that is bestowed on them is a form of appropriation. Uplifting is less about giving nonhuman animals a mental form that finally makes them deserv-

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ing of equal moral recognition (as Hughes seems to think), but about giving them what they need to recognise us: as their creators, saviours and, ultimately, superiors. In *Sundiver*, the first installment of Brin's *Uplift* trilogy (Brin 2012), first published in 1980, an argument ensues between a human and an uplifted chimp technician called Jeffrey. When Jeffrey gets mad and physically attacks the human in an ape-like fashion, another human, the novel's main protagonist, a man called Jacob, intervenes: "Jacob took the chimp's face in his hands. Jeffrey snarled at him. 'Chimpanzee-Jeffrey, listen to me! I am Jacob Demwa. I am a human being. I am a supervisor with Project Uplift. I tell you now that you are behaving in an unseemly manner... you are acting like an animal!' Jeffrey's head jerked back as if slapped." When a chastened Jeffrey apologizes to his human opponent, Jacob praises him: "That's fine," Jacob said. "It takes a real man to apologize." (Brin 2012, 67)

The ex-animal apologises for behaving like an animal. The uplifting process was meant to civilize and discipline it, and when it falls back to its animal ways it needs to be disciplined again by being reminded of its status, its precarious and paradoxical position as the animal-it-was-but-no-longer-is. It is thus not surprising that uplifting can, as Dvorsky (2012) acknowledges, "be construed as being imperialistic and overdomineering — an unfair and unwarranted imposition of 'humanness' onto the animal kingdom." Yet Dvorsky's concession that "there's something to be said for living in an innocent state of mind — even if it is in the jungle" rings false. The phrasing betrays the same condescending attitude towards real pre-enhancement animals that informs the whole uplift project. The animal's "innocence" is just a euphemism for an absence of (human-like) knowledge and understanding, which a transhumanist cannot but find deplorable. For the transhumanist, in-

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nocence means ignorance, and ignorance is bad. That kind of innocence is quite compatible with Pearce's assessment of carnivorous animals as psychopaths. And the "jungle" indicates a nature that is red in tooth and claw, untamed, uncivilized, unpredictable. This jungle is clearly not a paradise. It is a place that we cannot imagine anyone would like to stay in if they had the choice to leave it. I'm an animal... get me out of here.

So that is what transhumanists urge us to do: get the beast out of the jungle, make it presentable. I find myself reminded of a story by Franz Kafka, "Report to an Academy," published almost exactly a century ago. In that story, a former ape reflects on his transformation from ape to human-like post-ape and explains why this transformation has occurred. Red Peter – as human society has dubbed him – lived his life as a free ape until he was shot and captured by hunters, who teach him how to drink alcohol and how to spit. He finds himself crammed into a small cage, made fun of, and occasionally tortured. He knows that even if he manages to escape it would do him no good because he would only be captured again. So he reasons that if this is the place that an ape has to live in, then there is only a way out for him if he stops being one, and becomes human. So he observes and imitates, learns to speak like a human, and to act like one, until he is finally human enough to be allowed to live a human-like life in a human world. By adopting human ways he has managed to survive and to get out of the cage. He has not, however, acquired freedom. Freedom, he says, is something that he perhaps had (he cannot quite remember) when he used to be an ape and that some humans may yearn for. That freedom he has not regained by submitting himself to "the yoke" of human civilization.

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This suggests that there are two different kinds of freedom. One is the self-regulating autonomy that characterises modern human life and that transhumanists seek to expand and extend to non-human animals, ultimately aiming at liberation from all biological constraints. The other is the freedom of the jungle that any wild animal still has and that we humans have mostly lost. This is the freedom to live one's life as the kind of creature that one is, without the pressure or need to change and become something else. Like Kafka's Red Peter, animals may only want to choose the former if they have no other way out: if ceasing to be what they are is the only chance they have to be left in peace and not to be subjected to our human needs and wants.

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