

# Transhuman and Transhumanism

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## The Transhuman

The term transhuman has an unusual etymology and its usage is found within the fields of literature, philosophy, religion, and evolutionary biology. According to the attached “Report on The Meaning of Transhuman” (Vita-More 1989), the first use as transhuman is written as an Italian verb “transumanare” or “transumanar”, as written by Dante Alighieri in *Divina Commedia* (1321).<sup>i</sup> In this reference, trans-human means “go outside the human condition and perception”. The English translation is “to transhumanate” or “to transhumanize”.

Centuries later, poet T.S. Eliot used the term “transhumanized” to represent the risks of the human journey in becoming illuminated as a “process by which the human is Transhumanised” in “The Cocktail Party” (1949).<sup>ii iii</sup> What is unusual is that both authors, centuries apart, were poets. Further, a link is found between Eliot and Teilhard de Chardin, a philosopher and a Catholic priest, who proposed that man use any appropriate means for transhumanizing himself to the fullest potential in *The Future of Man*<sup>iv</sup> (1959).

The noun transhuman was formally identified and codified in *The Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedia Dictionary*, which defined “transhuman” as meaning “surpassing; transcending; beyond” (1966).<sup>v</sup> Almost a decade later, the field of science fiction borrowed the concept with Robert Ettinger’s use of the term transhumanity in *Man into Superman*.<sup>vi</sup> (1972). Futurist FM Esfandiary introduced the transhuman as a future of human evolution in his chapter “Transhumans 2000” in *Women the Year 2000* (Tripp, 1974).

The interpretation of the transhuman as an evolutionary process was noted in *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*<sup>vii</sup>, which defined “transhuman” as meaning “superhuman,” and “transhumanize,” as meaning “to elevate or transform to something beyond what is human” (1983). At that same time, I authored the “Transhuman Manifesto” and “Transhumanist Arts Statement” (1983), emphasizing an aim to transcend the limits of our bodies and our minds.<sup>viii</sup>

“There are numerous forbearers of theories on human evolution and traces can be found in a plethora of sources, all suggesting that the biological human is not the final stage of evolution for the human. The philosophy and social/cultural movement of transhumanism has developed not only from the words “trans” and “human”, but also through an understanding that the human condition is one in which we might go outside to gain perspective, a process in becoming an evolutionary transformation” (2011).

## Transhumanism

The origin of transhumanism is bestowed on two British scholars who never met, but both graduated from Oxford University almost a century apart and in two entirely different fields of study.

- Julian Huxley, an evolutionary biologist and Catholic priest wrote about how humans must establish a better environment for themselves in the essay “Transhumanism” in *New Bottles For New Wine* (1957).<sup>ix</sup> His theory did not evolve but others around the same time were writing about the future of humanity.
- Max More, strategic philosopher and CEO of Alcor Life Extension Foundation, created the philosophy of transhumanism in his essay “Transhumanism: Toward a Futurist Philosophy” (1990), which codified the principle that life can expand indefinitely by means of human intelligence and technology.

What turned the philosophical view of our existence into an emerging cultural movement was largely due to the Internet. However, *before* the Internet, transhumanism was seeded by people who were curious about new technology and how AI and nanotechnology can change the world. This curiosity was the intellectual fuel accelerated alongside the tech industry. We simply wanted to think about and talk about where technology was heading.

Science played a major role in applying technology to transhumanist interests. Transhumanist thinking may have been a catalyst that prompted curiosity and the desire to find solutions in areas of knowledge gathering critical thinking, ethics, and visionary foresight in developing new social narratives. For example, venues such as TED talks and makerspaces, projects such as Quantified Self, and DIY all strongly exemplify transhumanist behavior. This behavior evidences how life experiences can be uncovered, expressed, and shared and then transmitted across varied channels of communication and collaboration. TED talks are all about what a person did differently, a type of hero or heroine’s journey, and how that journey contributed to the personal’s life experience and through this, add to the well-being of society. Makerspaces provide a collaborative venue for people to come together and identify a problem, strive to figure out how to unravel it, roll up their sleeves, and then create an innovative solution.

These examples are grassroot and located within their own domain of experience, but they evidence how self-responsibility is a shared cultural behavior. We start someplace—perhaps at the bottom with our own identity to place in life, and then experience, learn, evolve, and become someone or something better than when we started. You could call this spiritual, or simply intelligent. All in all, it is natural—an innate element of human psychology of survival—that is shared among individuals and society.

And this is how transhumanism as a philosophy became a growing worldview. It is a process and behavior that started in 1989 through a high-gloss print journal called *Extropy: The Journal of Transhumanist Thought*. In 1991 the original transhumanist email list called “extropy”, a metaphor for negentropy as refers to a systems intelligence, order, vitality and capacity and drive for

improvement. The Internet was the most fertile breeding ground for people interested in learning about and exploring transhumanist thinking, including innovators, entrepreneurs, and academics that furthered a transdisciplinary scope. In 1991, the first email list covering technology and humanity's future was developed by transhumanists at Extropy Institute, the first transhumanist non-profit organization. The organization hosted a series of conferences from 1994 to 2004 with keynotes and thought leaders who set the bar high. In fact, the original ideas about artificial intelligence and human computer integration, encryption, crypto currency, AI, Super AI, nanotechnology, the technological singularity, radical life extension, and uploads (posthumans), were incubated at these conferences.

Today, the merging of early transhumanism and its pioneers with other organizations and disciplines, increased use of social media, and the mainstream's awareness of and interest in nanotechnology, AI/AGI, and life extension has reached a paradigmatic shift and, along with the project Humanity+. The symbol for transhumanism has gained branding currency as "H+" and while a trademark of Humanity+, a 501(c)3 non-profit, a version of h+ is also copyright protected by Humanity+ for its magazine. Humanity+ is the largest transhumanist organization worldwide and is associated with many other organizations that aim to inform the public about the advances in technology, ethics, and political issues that are ahead.

## **Conclusion**

Transhumanism's time has arrived. "It has struck a chord with many who want to fight the onslaught of disease and live longer healthy lives. It is no longer a complex concept that encounters vast and often confusing questions" (Vita-More, 2019). The earliest ideas, terms, and

themes transhumanists have been writing and talking about for three decades have become mainstream. Nevertheless, there are still some unanswered questions and misconceptions about the history of transhumanism that linger in the cultural ethos—that of an unclear and irregular accounting of the past. The aim of this chapter has been to present an historical account covering the past three or more decades.

There is a need to question the existing state of affairs and to be informed about opportunities for the future. The very core of transhumanist thinking prepares us to be leaders of our own lives and to work with others to help increase the well-being of others. Together we are trailblazers propagating and encouraging seminal, ground-breaking solutions. The more we engage in the unknowns, the more we adapt to change, the more we challenge your own thinking, the more impactful our shared knowledge will address the challenges we face. We are part of this Transhumanist Era.

## Report on the Meaning of Transhuman

*The research on the history of the term “transhuman” and “transhumanism” was completed by Natasha Vita-More and Winifred Clark (1988-1995).*

“As an historical note, the Italian verb “transumanare” or “transumanar” was used for the first time by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) in *Divine Comedy*. It means “go outside the human condition and perception” and in English could be “to Transhumanate” or “to Transhumanize.” T.S. Eliot wrote about the risks of the human journey in becoming illuminated as a “process by which the human is Transhumanised” (1950:147) in his play “The Cocktail Party” (1949, Pub. 1950). Ideas about humanity and evolution were explored by Julian Huxley in his writings on evolutionary humanism in the book *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* (1942) and suggested the term transhuman for a “superior being aware of his potential and able to work toward it because of his knowledge” (Halacy 1965:11). Pierre Teilhard de Chardin referenced the transhuman in *The Future of Man* (1964) and in FM Esfandiary (FM-2030) outlined an evolutionary transhuman future while teaching “New Concepts of the Human” (1966) at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Abraham Maslow referred to transhumans in *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1968), Robert Ettinger also referred to transhumans in *Man into Superman* (1972). FM Esfandiary (FM-2030) wrote the trilogy, *Optimism One* (1970), *Up-Wingers* (1973) and *Telespheres* (1977), which comprise his unique ideas about the transhuman, some of which were mentioned in the final chapter of *Woman In The Year 2000* (1974). Damien Broderick discusses the transhuman in the science fiction novel *The Judas Mandala* (1982), and by Natasha Vita-More in the “Transhuman Statement (Manifesto)” (1983).

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