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 it 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, can be used to try 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."

"Transhumanism 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 to 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 transcension: a very few people endowed with strong willpower and great refinement would throw off the shackles of traditional morality and..."
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 (58%) 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?

Food for thought
The week in ideas

Today
The search for life on other planets
Glenn White of the Open University explains to the media researchers at the Solar System on planned missions to study planets outside our own solar system. Church Lecture Theatre, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, 12.00pm; 01908 653 243

Suicide of the west
Lord (Chris) Smith, the former secretary of state for culture, media and sport, and Richard Koch, his co-author, discuss their new book, which contends that westerners have lost faith in the values that made them successful. DEMOS, Magdalene House, 136 Tooley Street, London, 6pm, suicideofthewestademos.co.uk

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

prime minister analyses the challenges faced by his country following the assassination of its former PM and Sir Henry’s withdrawal of its troops. CHATHAM HOUSE, 10 St James’s Square, London, 3.30pm, prime.minister@chathamhouse.org.uk

The Lebanese
He Fouda Siniora

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Thursday

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

Multicultural 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

Wednesday

He Fouda Siniora
The Lebanese

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The Guardian 09.05.06 25