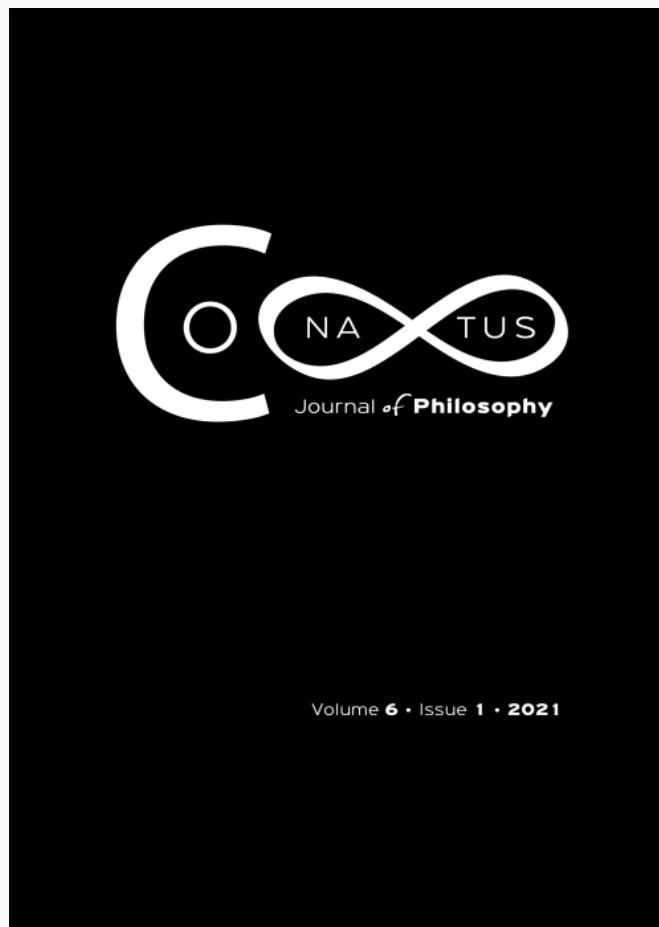


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Religious Dimensions in Transhumanist and Posthumanist Philosophies of Science

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Abstract

The article discusses transhumanism and posthumanism as marginal trajectories of the modern philosophy of science, which, however, distinctly influence the mainstream narrative of science and societal relations. Among the decisive determinants of this impact is trans/posthumanism's para-religious content that replenishes a conceptualised process of cutting-edge scientific practices and ideals. In particular, transhumanism and posthumanism evolve as ideological exploiters of seemingly obsolete forms of religiosity, for they simultaneously exploit and reinvent the entire apparatus of the scientific, political, and moral activity in Western societies. Avant-garde secular worldviews tend to be religious in the sense that their ultimate quest is the transformation of humans into certain historical entities, which are capable of rearranging their own systems of order.

Keywords: transhumanism; posthumanism; science; society; religiosity; Steve Fuller

I. Introduction

In this article I view *transhumanism* and *posthumanism* as a certain *modus operandi* in contemporary philosophy of science, while I am trying to demonstrate that their quite often overt religious content plays a decisive role in their conceptualisations of cutting-edge scientific practices and ideals.

Initially, I will present definitions of religiosity. Setting aside the trivial notion of religion as a belief in supernatural powers (monotheism, polytheism, spiritualism, etc.) that constitute moral principles and rituals, I rely on the definitions given by Irving Hexham and Clifford Geertz. By adding few elements from the concepts of civil religion by Enn Kasak and invisible religion by Thomas Luckmann, I aim to gain a solid ground in order to interpolate

scientific beliefs in a corporate modern worldview, where religious as well as scientific techniques of uniquely realistic meaning-formation overlap, for they are both sanctioned universally objective by culture and both transcend immediate human experience. Here, transhumanism and posthumanism (and their various subforms) unfold as ideological exploiters of an apparently exhausted phenomenon of 'religion/religiosity' and simultaneously (are prompted to) redefine the nature of science, human being, and prosperity.

Then, by briefly introducing transhumanist and posthumanist attitudes toward the prospects of human development, I will assume that the insufficient consideration of the ideological basis of scientific understanding undermines efforts of legitimating the scientific worldview, increases the risk of the negligent apprehension of human needs, and eventually compromises integrative models of science, technology, and society. These models take quietly their own ideas and ideals (responsibility, well-being, scientific progress, morality, etc.) for granted and unreflectively operate them as aims by providing unreliable arguments.

Therefore, aiming to highlight religious dimensions of these marginal scientific worldviews, I will unfold their scientifically engaged and ideologically contested self awareness as 'secularly religious' by arguing that what basically emerges, is constituted and evolved within the interactive 'post humanist/transhumanist' medium of cultural praxis. Religious dimensions of post/transhumanist praxis translate biological, social, and cultural distinctions into conventional categories. Consequently, habitual efforts to separate scientific knowledge from a broadly ideological environment, to interpret it as socially self justifying and organised acts based on rational decisions or individual capacities, are implicitly considered questionable and problematic.

II. The necessary extensions of religiosity

According to Irving Hexham, religion contains:

intellectual, RITUAL, SOCIAL, and ETHICAL elements, bound together by an explicit or implicit BELIEF in the REALITY of an unseen world, whether this belief be expressed in SUPERNATURALISTIC or IDEALISTIC terms.¹

Equally important is Hexham's note that precisely any definition of religion reflects 'a scholarly or a DOGMATIC bias' of the person forming the definition. One must keep that in mind.

¹ Irving Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion* (Canada: Vogelstein Press, 1993), 186.

In his definition of religion, Clifford Geertz dispenses with the postulate of supernatural (seemingly obeying his own scholarly bias):

a religion is: (1) a system of symbols, which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²

Initially, I refuse to judge the sufficiency of these definitions presented herein; consequently, I will not propose any definition of science and will not address the relationship between science and religion. My aim could be better articulated in showing how the transhumanist and posthumanist philosophers construct certain a) ‘conceptions of a general order of existence,’ that are followed by b) ‘auras of factuality,’ which convert their ideas into c) ‘uniquely realistic’ worldviews.

Additionally, a few more elements should be introduced for that purpose:

- Religion functions as a projected medium in order to transform human beings into participants of a specific historical-social course. If a component of human reality fulfils this function, it can be rightfully called ‘religious.’³
- Certain beliefs in science resemble religious ones, but in a non-doctrinal sense: a belief is considered religious if it corresponds to Geertz’s definition; a belief is considered scientific if it corresponds to intersubjective experience within the rules and context of the actual discipline.⁴
- The stronger the social regulation and pressure from society on science (to standardise thoughts and actions, to integrate individuals) is, the more it resembles religion and ideology.⁵

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

³ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1967), 61.

⁴ Enn Kasak, “Unperceived Civil Religion in Science,” *Problemos* 80 (2011): 99-100.

⁵ Serge Moscovici, “The New Magical Thinking,” *Public Understanding of Science* 23, no. 7 (2014): 762.

III. Transhumanist and posthumanist revelations

Among the innumerable definitions of transhumanism, I personally prefer the following:

Transhumanism is a class of philosophies that seeks the continued evolution of human life beyond its current human form as a result of science and technology guided by life-promoting principles and values. Transhumanism promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology.⁶

Nevertheless, to understand better the transhumanist agenda, we have to look carefully at the *Transhumanist Declaration* (2009), particularly at the three (out of eight) following statements:

1. Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.
6. Policy making ought to be guided by responsible and inclusive moral vision, taking seriously both opportunities and risks, respecting autonomy and individual rights, and showing solidarity with and concern for the interests and dignity of all people around the globe. We must also consider our moral responsibilities towards generations that will exist in the future.
7. We advocate the well-being of all sentient beings, 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.⁷

The aforementioned ‘responsible and inclusive moral vision’ and ‘the well-being of all sentient beings’ presently beg for a certain factual, sincerely transhumanist context. I take the opportunity here to speak of Steve Fuller,

⁶ “Roots and Core Themes,” in *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, eds. Max More, and Natasha Vita-More (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 1.

⁷ “Transhumanist Declaration,” *Humanity +*, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-declaration/>.

the famous transhumanist philosopher, who is unique in providing such context.

In his book *Knowledge: The Philosophical Quest in History* (2015) Fuller cultivates the idea that science, if correctly understood, unequivocally demonstrates the divinity of human beings; or, to be more accurate, that humans, somehow, are not part and parcel of nature. Allegedly, this is the true mission of the unified institution of science and its religious core. In this context, taking science seriously means to endorse the purest 'Good News' of the transhumanist kingdom: 'Humans are gods in the making.'⁸

How so? Because humans invented science, and, inversely, they are themselves defined by science: scientifically speaking, if everything in its own existence could be resumed under Darwinian terms, we would not comprehend the Darwinian evolutionary theory. Therefore, it follows that human beings cannot be only Darwinian evolutionary subproducts. We are not natural human beings, so the argument goes, because science is not natural, and science explicitly is 'the dominant feature of the human being.'⁹ That is how Fuller's transhumanism religiously generates 'the existential general order' with all the necessary decorum of the 'uniquely realistic aura of factuality.' A kind of magic, or the power of supernaturally excluding the human from the natural realm must certainly persist here.

Unfortunately, a few, minor though, issues also inevitably persist. First, a 'theological' theft of scientific autonomy: 'The best explanation for the shape and persistence of science's fundamental questions is theological.'¹⁰ Fuller's transhumanism hurls him so far that in *Humanity 2.0. What It Means to be Human Past, Present and Future* he shamelessly seizes the 'unifying' scientific worldview in order to denounce the scientific attitude from within:

I believe that Darwinism poses a much greater threat than Christianity or Islam to the future of humanity as a normatively salient category.¹¹

Salient or not, this is just the way it is in the contemporary 'scientific worldview.'

The second minor religious issue is the Fuller's embezzlement of morality. 'Errors are unavoidable in the quest to extend human knowledge.'¹² One may

⁸ Steve Fuller, *Knowledge. The Philosophical Quest in History* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

⁹ Ibid., 264.

¹⁰ Ibid., 62.

¹¹ Steve Fuller, *Humanity 2.0. What It Means to be Human Past, Present and Future* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

¹² Ibid., 264.

wonder which are these unacceptable errors. Surprisingly, the transhumanist aura of the ‘unique factuality’ finds no such errors, because the scientific path, at least in the long run, is self-purifying and self-forgiving: ‘In short, the march of progress is itself morally cleansing as we learn from our mistakes.’¹³ I find the task of wreathing this sort of transhumanism with the ‘responsible and inclusive moral vision’ extremely difficult. Unless, as Barry Allen aptly remarks, ‘human moral horizons can be sanctioned by human immortality.’¹⁴

The third (but inconclusive) magic trick of the Fuller’s transhumanism lies in his academic arrogance:

We must somehow believe that all the human and non-human lives lost through science-induced aggression, negligence, and obliviousness have contributed to a world that has maximised the welfare of more humans, understood as the highest form of life.¹⁵

Farewell to ‘the well-being of all sentience.’ At this point posthumanism as an ideological alternative comes into play. Posthumanism unambiguously associates human nature with the natural environment and is neither able nor willing to exterminate the divinely human ‘essence’. That is, posthumanism finds nothing particularly special about human beings, and clearly declares the ‘failure’ in scientific terms. In this respect, posthumanism is:

a break with humanism; it is a post-humanism. In recent years “posthumanism” served as an umbrella term for a variety of positions that reject basic humanist concepts and values. Above all, the construction of “human beings” is deemed to be ideologically laden, insufficient, dangerous, or paternalistic.¹⁶

The transhumanist visionaries help us, at least provisionally, to understand how a human being in his/her self-righteousness, arrogance and magnificence may incidentally transform from a dangerous idea into a dangerous entity. The aforementioned reasons are also sufficient to infer certain political agendas

¹³ Ibid., 97.

¹⁴ Barry Allen, “Review of *Knowledge: The Philosophical Quest in History*, by Steve Fuller,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 34, no. 3 (2015), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/knowledge-the-philosophical-quest-in-history/>.

¹⁵ Fuller, *Knowledge*, 93.

¹⁶ Robert Ranisch, and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, “Introducing Post- and Transhumanism,” in *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*, eds. Robert Ranisch, and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 8.

from the sectarian transhumanist beliefs ('Left Creationism' in Fuller's case) and, more generally, from wider inclinations of the transhumanist movement to politically motivated institutions (e.g. *Humanity+*, *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies*).

Posthumanism, on the other hand, 'serves as an umbrella term for ideas that explain, promote or deal with the crisis of humanism. So far, however, no common name for these critical discourses has been established.'¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the common denominator of the 'crisis of humanism' analysis lies upon the unorthodox yet paradoxical belief in the ephemerality of the real; hence, posthumanism distributes parareligious ideas of 'post-exclusivism' (or ontological depolarisation), 'post-exceptionalism' (or epistemological discontinuance), and 'post-centralisation' (or a sort of Nietzschean perspectivism).¹⁸

IV. In sum: Inconclusive return of the ideal

Posthumanist as well as transhumanist arsenals of the world imaginarium unequivocally target 'the dissolution of the idea of knowledge as a public good.'¹⁹ However, the posthumanist vision of 'public good' is entirely different. 'Relational and multi-layered ways' of thinking, 'expanding the focus to the non-human realm in post-dualistic, post-hierarchical modes, thus allowing one to envision post-human futures, which will radically stretch the boundaries of human imagination'²⁰ from the transhumanist standpoint, end up only in an open revolt against 'scientific progress,' meaning that the 'normative regulation of both science and society has been effectively turned over to unconstrained markets.'²¹ How it allegedly challenges the ideals of 'open society,' thus insinuating the deviously tyrannical character of the posthumanist agenda, remains a mystery.

Nevertheless, both narratives, quite obviously, exploit human religiosity, i.e. they construct alternative beliefs in the reality of an unseen world,²² by simultaneously and inevitably exposing their ideological biases.

Inversely, societal regulations, pressure and expectations upon science, such as 'theological,' political, moral, etc. demands of 'public good,'

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Francesca Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations," *Existenz: An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics and the Arts* 8, no. 2 (2013): 30.

¹⁹ Fuller, *Knowledge*, 93.

²⁰ Ferrando, 30.

²¹ Fuller, *Knowledge*, 208.

²² Hexham, 186.

proportionally transform it into a religiously, perhaps even magically, arranged social system.²³

Precisely, these external impediments disclose an opportunity to unveil the tacit aspects of scientific understanding that we may call a ‘secular religiosity,’ and an understanding of sorts as a post/transhuman condition. The aforementioned condition dictates that our ‘avant-garde’ worldviews are irrevocably oriented towards the religious urge to transform humans into certain historical entities, capable of rearranging their own present and future and constituting their own systems of order.

However, transhumanism and posthumanism as marginal philosophies of the sciences are too multifarious as intellectual/cultural movements; in fact, they lack the ideological backbone required to become ‘systems of symbols.’ Transhumanism is plainly incapable of offering any transparent criteria as to what ultimately *is* human, what being *human* actually means. Therefore, why should we expect any definite plan of human enhancement from transhumanism?

From the posthumanist perspective, the very idea of the ‘improvement’ of this obscure creature deserves sacramental denouncement via rituals of dehierarchisation, decentralisation, dehumanisation, if necessary – even descentification.

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²³ Moscovici, 760-761.

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