

Beyond Otaku: Transhumanism and Judaism

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Transhumanism seeks to bring about a radically transformed future, one in which every aspect of our human existence is changed for the better. The ideology, though not explicitly dependent on any one culture, is in practice tightly bound with Silicon Valley way of life: intellectual, elitist, Americentric, secular, and technophilic.

Ethnic groups world-wide have developed distinctive elements such as oral traditions, literature, song, visual art, crafts, languages, family structures, ritual, moral systems, and much more. If Transhumanism completely remakes mankind in its own image, we will lose the best of thousands of world cultures, from New Guinea to Lapland. Transhumanists counter that in their preferred future, people will be permitted to retain their atavisms Amish-style, or else to adopt for themselves features of any culture, just as people today can choose punk, Goth, Otaku, or polyamory.

These alternatives leave a thin broth in place of yesterday's rich stew. Western civilization has already swamped thousands of now-dead cultures, eliminating both their good and their bad aspects. Transhumanism threatens to wipe out all the rest.

Many transhumanists strive to base their principles and beliefs on culture-neutral rational principles, such as utilitarianism. Yet cultural neutrality does not require neutralizing culture. Transhumanism also believes in "Humanity Plus," in enhancing the [best of what makes us human](#). This includes not only universal values, but also those found in the tremendous variety of cultures. There is a more out there than furies and anime. We must open a path into the future for these myriad cultures.

The path-breaking Transhumanism belief-system does draw on richer historical roots than are readily visible in its future-looking ideas. Though these are less important influences, they serve as a reminder that not all is rationalist-libertarian-atheist. Transhumanism has drawn on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's Jesuit learning, as well as the Taoist and Buddhist insights of East Asia, the [Paleolithic lifestyle](#) represented by today's hunter-gatherers, and the Russian Orthodox traditionalism of [Nikolay Fedorovich Fedorov](#). This essay will trace the connection to Transhumanism of another source: The Jewish culture, religion and ethnic group.

The Roots of Apocalyptic

The Singularity is a modern apocalyptic, the End of Days: the looming threat of world-destroying nanobots, or an superintelligent machine as world-devouring demon-god. Along with that, the Singularity offers the promise of a Messianic [Transition Guide](#) to lead us to utopia, with a Singleton AI as benevolent god-figure—or, as Eliezer Yudkowsky has put it, an entity greater than any god ever imagined.

The idea of the apocalypse (originally meaning "revelation") emerged in Judaism during the late Biblical period, under the influence of Persian Zoroastrianism. The idea reached the form we know today around the turn of the era, emerging in both Judaism and Christianity.

As [Steven Kaas points out](#), the concept of Singularity differs sharply from the religious version of the Abrahamic religions. Still, there is no doubt that the Rapture of the Nerds evokes many of the same feelings as the Jewish and Christian Apocalypse. And of these two religious visions, the Singularity more closely resembles the Jewish version, in which the Messianic era is purely earthly, [a much-improved political situation](#), with people living their lives in a material Utopia, not transfigured into a spiritual existence.

There is precedent for strivings towards an earthly Messianic era, with overtones of Transhumanism. Socialists, and particularly the idealists of the late nineteenth century, looked forward to the [hell-and-heaven of a secular End of Days](#), with science and technology as guides. Theodor Herzl likewise offered a technophilic and universalistic [solution to the](#) age-old problem of anti-Semitic persecution. Libertarians, who

are disproportionately represented among Transhumanists, envisage a Utopia brought about by the elimination of government interference in society.

A disproportionate number of Jews are leaders in Transhumanism, as also in these other Utopian ideologies. This may be due to the influence on Jews of their tradition's materialist apocalyptic; or this may simply be another case of Jews' outsized representation in many areas of endeavor in modern society. But either way, a glance at any list of well-known Transhumanists shows that the Jewish people has contributed disproportionately towards this effort to improve humanity's future. Ironically, the number of Jews involved also means that Judaism also gets a [disproportionate amount](#) of the anti-religious reactions common in the movement.

Israel and the Future

The Jewish people has re-built its national home in Israel. This state leads the world in many areas of interest to Transhumanists: computer science, software and hardware development, bio-tech, and others. I'll refer you to an article by Hank "Hyena" Pellissier in [an earlier issue of H+Magazine](#) for the details, and I'll let Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fill in the picture, with [his speech at the United Nations in September 2009](#):

.... The allure of freedom, the power of technology, the reach of communications should surely win the day. Ultimately, the past cannot triumph over the future. And the future offers all nations magnificent bounties of hope. The pace of progress is growing exponentially

What seemed impossible a few years ago is already outdated, and we can scarcely fathom the changes that are yet to come. We will crack the genetic code. We will cure the incurable. We will lengthen our lives. We will find a cheap alternative to fossil fuels and clean up the planet.

I am proud that my country Israel is at the forefront of these advances – by leading innovations in science and technology, medicine and biology, agriculture and water, energy and the environment. These innovations the world over offer humanity a sunlit future of unimagined promise



Figure 1: Theodor Herzl's rejected [proposal for a Zionist flag](#): Stars of David for the Jewish heritage; seven stars for the seven hours of the working day; white background to symbolize purity.

Moral Complexity

I have traced several lines of connection between Judaism and Transhumanism: The rise of apocalyptic, with a focus on a material rather than an other-worldly Utopia; the outsized contribution of Jews to Transhumanism; and the role of the state of Israel in benefiting humanity through technological progress.

But I have not traced a connection between Transhumanism and Judaism as a religion. In Transhumanism, attitudes towards religion range from evangelical atheism to a diffuse personal spirituality. Support for organized religion is few and far between, with Lincoln Cannon's Transhumanist Mormonism and Tohamer

Toth-Fejel's Catholicism as notable exceptions. There is no explicit connection between the Jewish religion and transhumanism. But Judaism, though it includes religion in the post-Enlightenment sense of personal spirituality, is more than that. It is also an ethnic group, an ancient civilization, a state, and a system of rules for daily life, including ethical principles

There is another area where Judaism's contribution is crucial. Judaism was the origin of ethical monotheism. Other civilizations have established their own moral systems, all related through their origin in our evolutionary past, but the moral backdrop established by Judaism has spread world-wide through the civilization in which Transhumanism thrives, to a large extent through the medium of Christianity. We define morality here not simply in the narrow sense of "altruism," but, in accordance with the Jewish legal system, as "the best way to order society and human life."

Jewish religious law frames its commandments as divinely inspired imperatives, not merely as calculations of personal benefit, nor as arbitrary customs. The laws are not necessarily moral injunctions. Seen from the ethical perspective commonly adopted by Transhumanists, which tries to be culturally neutral while taking its guidance from Enlightenment principles such as individual choice, the ethical weight of the precepts vary from the immoral to the moral.

Some of Jewish religious law, like divorce regulations, are from the modern perspective immoral. (We should note, however, that such Biblical commandments as the extermination of enemy tribes are proto-Jewish, not Jewish; the religion has evolved radically since the writing of the Bible.)

Other rules, like dietary taboos, are morally neutral. Yet others, like rules for sexual behavior, are immorally restrictive of liberty from a modern Western perspective, yet considered key to morality by billions of people worldwide, including those who are followers of an Abrahamic religion.

But many of the religious precepts of Judaism are explicit demands for just behavior towards others, without hope of immediate reward. It is this ancient background, more than any utilitarian calculations or abstract deontological universal imperatives, which has shaped our altruistic feelings into what we call "morality" today.

Transhumanism as a whole has a "techno-volatile" world-view, foreseeing either tremendous benefit or tremendous harm from technology. This makes the definition of morality critical; when we set technology on a course, we may find that it takes us to a destination far beyond what we can imagine today.

There is thus a tension between simplicity and complexity in moral definitions. On the one hand, as technological power tends to an extreme, it is much easier to extrapolate its effect under simpler moral calculations.

David Pearce's negative hedonism, the elimination of suffering, can be extrapolated to a world where no living being, neither human nor any other animal, experiences the subjective pain which today serves as a low-level driver for higher-level behavioral choices. Eliminating suffering is important, and it would be unfair to deprecate Pearce's philosophy for "compromising" by seeking nothing more than the total elimination of pain. Yet morality as we intuit it, whatever it is, is much more than that.

Another Transhumanist philosophy, one which Hugo de Garis calls "Cosmism" and reluctantly advocates, ascribes primary moral value to increased intelligence. It is simple to extrapolate this morality under radical technological improvement, and relatively simple to guide the future towards perfection under this moral system. All that is needed is to fill the world with intelligent thought, and the ideal is achieved. Yet morality, again, is far more than that. An "artilect," a superintelligence which is able to maximize intelligent thought by converting the world to ultraefficient computer processors, computronium, and then setting these processors to intelligent thought, would not have achieved moral perfection, as most of us see it.

The Singularity Institute is working on the formal definition of a decision-theory based on utilitarianism, which in the limiting case fulfills each human's true desires with the help of a friendly superintelligence. Again, a simple definition and a relatively simple extrapolation.

The definition does try to subsume, within its compact specification, the complexity of individual human volition. And no doubt the ultimate solution, if any, will be based on something like this approach. Yet each

individual's desires sometimes contradict each other, as the science of heuristics and biases has shown. For example, the [Trolley Problem](#), which poses certain moral quandaries to test subjects, produces results which apparently contradict not only each other but also utilitarian ethics. The "[Framing Effect](#)" bias produces mutually contradictory answers to moral questions by a single respondent depending on how the situation is described. Though the utilitarian formula "the greatest good for the greatest number" can cover pretty much any moral system with an appropriate choice of definition for "good" (technically, a utility function), human morality simply doesn't work that way, and human morality is the only kind we can work with.

Moreover, in a world where different people want different things, reconciling their desires may be impossible. Ben Goertzel, Chairman of Humanity+, describes a [Coherent Aggregated Volition](#) which tries to average out human desires. But game theory has known, at least the 1940s, of difficulties and paradoxes in rules-based preference aggregation, as for example [Arrow's Impossibility Theorem](#). The notion that one could average out human desire is a simplification.

Worse, even if one could average out human desires, what would emerge would not necessarily look like what most Transhumanists consider morality. It seems likely, for example, that an average of all humans' attitudes towards homosexuality would work out to condemnation, or at least disapproval.

Eliezer Yudkowsky of the SIAI attempts to solve this with his proposal for Coherent Extrapolated Volition, in which the desires of humanity are not only averaged, but also extrapolated into the future towards what "[we would wish if we knew more, thought faster, were more the people we wished we were.](#)" The results of this extrapolation are not known precisely, but the dominant assumption seems to be that this future wisdom would be based on the liberal-secular-Western principles of the culture which surrounds the SIAI—augmented with other as-yet-unknown moral sentiments. The presumptuous notion that humans' desires would converge under extrapolation at all, and that the SIAI's host culture would serve as the core of this outcome, are simplifications with little evidence to support them.

Ray Kurzweil's approach at least resolves the problem of oversimplification. He believes that humans will merge with machines. Rising intelligence and power will be controlled directly by humans, and thus will reflect human values in all their complexity. Unfortunately, humans are unreliable, and we cannot rely on individuals to use their power responsibly, particularly since their minds' architecture could change in new and unpredictable ways as they merge with their computers; nor is there any guarantee that we will merge with our computers before a standalone AI self-improves itself to super-human intelligence levels.

[Socialists](#) also tried to discard our complex and contradictory morality, which was brewed by human societies out of the original psychological ingredients created by evolution; they wanted to eliminate the complex "bourgeois morality" and replace it with simple formulas like "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need," "for the good of society," and "for the good of the state." Then, as the power of the state trended towards totality, the results were 100 million deaths and much more suffering.

In contrast to these simplifications, real human morality is a complex and internally inconsistent mess, as Joshua Greene has [described](#). Morality is built of ad hoc and sometimes contradictory modules designed by evolution, and then further developed in human societies. If we really want a moral future, we must set our technology on a course towards true morality, which is deeply human, and not simple at all.

What is usually called morality, in the larger civilization in which Transhumanism is embedded, has been shaped by its Jewish origins. No one will develop brain-altering drugs to implement a morality based on the Jewish religion, or any other; nor will anyone assign a super-human AI to make this happen. The results would differ too often from personal definitions of morality in a world with thousands of cultures and billions of individuals. But the principles which emerge from this ancient, inconsistent source serve as a reminder that the world is not simple, nor is the definition of what it means to make the world a better place.

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