

# Human, More Human

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By: Joshua Fox

Transhumanists strive to humanize—the opposite of “dehumanize.” We want everyone to be as human as possible.

What does “being human” mean? Whatever you want it to. But since you’re human, I’ll bet that it includes some or all of life, love, family, beauty, dignity, sexuality, creativity, freedom, learning, and the like. There are also other, less important values: To scarf a boxful of PopTarts, to see our enemies suffer, or to watch soap-opera reruns all day.

All these desires, the elevated and the base, were sculpted by evolution, hundreds of thousands of years ago on the African savanna. And in the millennia since we developed intelligence, we have also been shaping new values on top of this ancestral set. The elevated ones, the “true” values, are those which we want to keep when we reflect on our evolution-driven and societally-built urges and select the best.

Transhumanism is usually associated with technophilia. This is because technology consists of new ways to help people achieve their goals. But achieving some values for some people can infringe on other values. Technology can dehumanize, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other nostalgists have pointed out. A factory worker who runs an automated loom machine 12 hours a day makes clothes that keep people warm and decorated. At the same time, he is deprived of most opportunities to do what our ancestors enjoyed doing, what hunter-gatherers do today, and what we enjoy doing and wish we could do more of: Flirting, playing, exploring, hunting, socializing, and resting, with no pressures other than the needs of the moment.

Even the freely-chosen technological luxuries of today’s wealthy societies can be dehumanizing. They may satisfy our baser needs, but interfere with the more elevated values. Television entertains at will, but also provides passive entertainment in place of interaction and storytelling. Modern medicine, even as it saves lives, gives us anonymous carers and white-walled institutions, replacing empathic nursing by loved ones. Grains keep more people per square kilometer alive than do hunting and gathering, and people enjoy eating sugars, but carbohydrate-based nutrition brings obesity and diabetes—like some dystopian factory-farm human feedlot.

Even imperfect technology can humanize. When the Roman empire brought eight thousand Sarmatian soldiers from today’s Ukraine to Britain in the second century CE, they never saw their families again, nor did they speak to them or write to them. This had always been the fate of those who left home. When Jewish immigrants moved to their ancestral homeland a century ago, most never again spoke with or saw the loved ones they left behind, but they at least had the benefit of postal service. Today, globetrotters, even poor job-seekers, can talk to their family members at will, for free, with video; many can afford to fly home for a visit. True, ink on paper is not as good as a conversation, and video-calls aren’t as warm as a face-to-face chat with a hug, but those weren’t the alternatives that the technologies replaced. The technologies preserved family ties that could not otherwise be preserved, and what is more human than that?

The complaint goes: “Make real friends, not Facebook friends.” But for me at least, online social networks are not pushing aside face-to-face friendships; they are connecting me to old and new friends to whom I would never otherwise maintain my ties. Sometimes a real-world meeting results. This browser-based interaction is helping me be more human.

Cell phones can annoy, but they have also eliminated a specific kind of social misery; the unpleasantness of missing rendezvous with a friend, checking your watch and walking around the block, wondering if you set the right time and place. We’ve lost some good storylines—Dr. Zhivago would have caught up to Lara right away—but cellphones ensure that meetings with friends happens as they should, and that’s wonderfully human.

Other technologies have nearly eliminated other forms of suffering, at least in the richer parts of the world. Start with the big ones: we rarely have to see our children die of disease; with heating and air conditioning, we rarely have to feel too cold or too hot if we don't want to. Now some small ones: we never have to search in frustration to hear favorite songs; we never have to continue wondering who acted that bit part in the movie we saw. These forms of unpleasantness have mostly disappeared.

These are the technologies of the past. We've gotten used to them. But transhumanists always look forward. The past is behind us, but we can change the future.

Of future technologies, those which modify the human body get the most attention. In transhumanist contexts: brain implants, blood-stream nanobots, genetic enhancements. Anti-transhumanists like Leon Kass and Frances Fukuyama condemn transhumanism mostly for the yuck factor of these technologies—a deep-seated disgust with modifying the human body. Indeed, to the extent that the perfection of the human body at its unblemished best is one of those human values which matter to us, an extension of our ancestral desire to preserve health, Kass and Fukuyama are right.

Today's medical technologies are easy to accept because almost all modify the body to counter pathologies: vaccines, surgery, or cochlear implants. Even Botox counters a pathology, if like transhumanists, you consider aging a pathology—though Botox does no more than remove aging's shallower signs. But the future may go one step better, bringing us technologies which actually improve the body's optimum above today's baseline.

Depending on how we define our values, we might feel that improving our abilities beyond the baseline can still preserve the best of what we consider human, particularly if the visible form is left untouched. Or we might decide that physical features are not the essence of humanity. Considering that people have been dying their hair, tattooing their skin, and piercing their bodies for thousands of years, we might accept even visible enhancements as human and not monstrous.

Still, there is no need to get under our skin to make us more human. Eyeglasses can improve vision almost as well as laser surgery, and our eyes feed Wikipedia's knowledge into our brains pretty well, if not as well as through direct brain interfaces.

Regardless of whether we assimilate future technologies or just use them externally, they can make us more human, more able to achieve our values than we are today. If poverty were eliminated through well-distributed innovation-driven wealth, then a major cause of dehumanizing indignity would disappear. Today, most people live in awareness and joy for a tiny fraction of their lives. If we could stimulate our brains to clear-minded alertness with smart-drugs or electrical implants, what could be more human? If we could, at will, connect ourselves to loved ones with a telepathic link, we could strengthen our empathy. What greater spiritual fulfillment could we hope for? If leisure time and greatly improved transportation let us visit other planets or the bottom of the sea inexpensively and safely, each one of us could satisfy our desire to explore the universe in a way that we cannot today.

Dangers remain. Future technologies, like those of the past, could dehumanize by satisfying base needs, while preventing achievement of more elevated values. Direct currents to the pleasure centers of the brain could meet the human desire for happiness while removing the incentive to work towards other values. Immersive virtual reality could entertain but distract from other important personal goals. And in the end, the ultimate dehumanizer would be a weapon which satisfies one not-so-nice human value—the desire for revenge—while extinguishing humanity and all human values with it.

Our technologies today have changed so much, yet sometimes it seems that nothing has changed. Achilles' mourning for his battle-slain friend Patroclus 2200 years ago and Daisy Miller's flirtations as she tours Europe 150 years ago seem the same, in essence, as our experiences of the twenty-first century. This is because we remain human as we always have. Little has changed in our basic motivations, like love and conquest.

Staying human is good. We should let technologies increase our abilities, but not change our fundamental preferences. More accurately, we can allow changes in some of our less desirable desires, as for ingesting sugars to the point of diabetes, or for fleeing shame through suicide. But we must avoid changing those preferences which, on reflection, we want to keep.

I don't want a technology to change any of my most important goals. I don't want anything to take away my love for newness and learning so that I'm satisfied watching TV all day; or to take away my compassion so that I turn into a psychopathic killer; or to take away my sense of beauty so that a mountain-top panorama means nothing to me. I want technologies to help me, and everyone else, better achieve our goals.

Transhumanism is all about being human. Becoming transhuman might mean changing our humanity by removing preferences which on reflection we don't want, or by adding abilities beyond what we have today. But becoming transhuman means becoming *more human*—treasuring the human values which matter most to us.

*Joshua Fox works at IBM, where he co-founded the Guardium Data Redaction product and now manages its development. He has served as a software architect in various Israeli start-ups and growth companies. On the transhumanism side, he is a long-time supporter of the [Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence](#). Links to his talks and articles are available at his [website](#) and [blog](#).*