

Billionaires want to use tech to enhance our abilities – the outcomes could change what it means to be human

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Many prominent people in the tech industry have talked about the increasing convergence between humans and machines in coming decades. [...]While people with disabilities would be near-term recipients of these innovations, some believe technologies like this could be used to enhance abilities in everyone.

5 These aims are inspired by an idea called transhumanism, the belief that we should use science and technology to radically enhance human capabilities and seek to direct our own evolutionary path. Disease, aging and death are all realities transhumanists wish to end, alongside dramatically increasing our cognitive, emotional and physical capacities.

10 Transhumanists often advocate for the three “supers” of superintelligence, superlongevity and superhappiness, the last referring to ways of achieving lasting happiness. [...]

Tech billionaires are among the biggest promoters of transhumanist thinking. It is not hard to understand why: they could be the central protagonists in the most important moment in history.

15 Creating so-called artificial general intelligence (AGI) – that is, an AI system that can do all the cognitive tasks a human can do and more – is a current focus within Silicon Valley. AGI is seen as vital to enabling us to take on the God-like role of designing our own evolutionary futures. That is why companies like OpenAI, DeepMind and Anthropic are racing towards the development of AGI, despite some experts warning that it could lead to human extinction.

[...]If there really is a threat that AGI could pose an existential risk, everyone would shoulder that cost, but the profits would be very much private.

20 This issue within AI development can be seen as a microcosm of why the wider transhumanist imagination may appeal to billionaire elites in an age of multiple crises. It speaks to the refusal to engage in grounded ethics, injustices and challenges and offers a grandiose narrative of a resplendent future to distract from the current moment.

25 [...]There’s also the pressing question of whose future will be transhuman. We currently live in a very unequal world. Transhumanism, if developed in anything like our existing context, is likely to greatly increase inequality, and may have catastrophic consequences for the majority of humans.

Perhaps transhumanism itself is a symptom of the kind of thinking that has created our parlous social reality. It is a narrative that encourages us to hit the gas, expropriate nature even more, keep growing and not look back at the devastation in the rear-view mirror.

30 If we’re really on the verge of creating an enhanced version of humanity, we should start to ask some big questions about what being human should mean, and therefore what an enhancement of humanity should entail.

35 If the human is an aspiring God, then it lays claim to dominion over nature and the body, making all amenable to its desires. But if the human is an animal embedded in complex relations with other species and nature at large, then “enhancement” is contingent on the health and sustainability of its relations.

If the human is conceived of as an environmental threat, then enhancement is surely that which redirects its exploitative lifeways. Perhaps becoming more-than-human should constitute a much more responsible humanity.

40 One that shows compassion to and awareness of other forms of life in this rich and wondrous planet. That would be preferable to colonising and extending ourselves, with great hubris, at the expense of everything, and everyone, else.