

A Defense of Cis-Humanism: Humanism for the Anthropocene

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This paper considers connections between discussions of transgender and transhumanism. Using concepts developed in discussions of transgender studies, the paper defines cis-humanism as affirming the human condition albeit with awareness of the complexity of the concept of humanity and humanism. Cis-humanism affirms mortality, finitude, and the natural givenness of life and world—in contrast with the transhuman aspiration to transform and overcome these limitations. The paper connects some of the problems of the Anthropocene to technological hubris and the quest for transcending the human and human nature in a way that is not grounded in the fact of human mortality.

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Recent discussions of sex and gender have popularized the term “transgender.” A related term has emerged, “cisgender,” which is meant to indicate a gender identity that is in conformity with traditional gender norms and sexual identity. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term “cisgender” as an adjective with the following definition: “Designating a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth; of or relating to such persons. Contrasted with transgender.” The emergence of the term cisgender corresponds with emerging awareness of the possibility of changing gender and indeed a reevaluation of the very idea of gender. The term “transgender” indicates the possibility that one’s personal gender identity does not correspond to one’s “sex at birth.”

As the transgender designation has developed, a related concept has emerged almost in parallel: “transhumanism”. Transhumanism is a philosophical and political movement that embraces the development of a transhuman or posthuman condition in which human abilities will be enhanced, including better health, improved cognition,

longer life, and an improved gene pool. This paper explores parallels between transgender and transhuman ideas, while arguing in defense of what I call “cis-humanism.” Cis-humanism develops as a self-conscious re-affirmation of many of the ideas associated with traditional humanism. But this re-affirmation returns to humanism with a more nuanced understanding of humanism as one term on a dialectical continuum. Cis-humanism affirms human mortality, finitude, and natural limitations while acknowledging the urge to transcend finitude is an aspect of our humanity that is both natural and dangerous.

1. Humanism, Transhumanism, and Cis-humanism

Humanism is defined in relation to the non-human. Traditionally, the human was defined in opposition both to the merely natural (the animal or biological) and to the supernatural divine. Human beings are mortal animals. But we also relate to the immortal, eternal, and non-natural (in the realm of the gods, culture, mathematics, logic, history, beauty, truth, and the ideal). Transhumanism has developed recently as an attempt to transcend human limits that is not supernatural. It seeks to extend human capacities and even to overcome mortality but without making a metaphysical leap into the supernatural.

Humanism develops out of the history of supernatural religion. It has given birth to the new idea of transhumanism. While transhumanism remains enamored of many of the values, concepts, and ideas associated with traditional humanism, it seeks to transcend the humanistic focus on finitude and mortality. Nonetheless, transhumanism remains committed to values such as autonomy and self-control, rationality and intellect, and secular/libertarian politics.

A primary proponent of the idea of transhumanism is Nick Bostrom. Bostrom explains that transhumanism has roots in what he calls “secular humanism.” But he argues in favor of surpassing humanity as traditionally understood by secular humanists:

Transhumanism has roots in secular humanist thinking, yet is more radical in that it promotes not only traditional means of improving human nature, such as education and cultural refinement, but also direct application of medicine and technology to overcome some of our basic biological limits. (Bostrom 2003)

He explains the vision of transhumanism in a way that opens the door to understanding how humanism gives birth to transhumanism. Transhumanists do acknowledge a developmental model that is open to change and evolution—from mere humanity (what we might now call “cis-humanity”) toward something that he describes as “posthuman”.

Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution. Transhumanists hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means we shall eventually manage to become posthuman, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have. (Bostrom 2003)

The idea of what has traditionally been called “humanism” has a long lineage that is being called into question by the development of transhumanism. Transhumanism asks us to re-evaluate what we mean by “humanity” and “human nature.” With this in mind, it is clear that we need a concept of the “cis-human,” which is the norm or identity from which the transhuman develops. A more explicit norm or affirmation of the cis-human condition would thus be called (in parallel with the norm of transhumanism) “cis-humanism.” Cis-humanism affirms the definition of humanity that rests firmly on “this-side” of the human/trans-human divide. Cis-humanism would embrace the ideas, norms, and identity claims of traditional humanism—even if it affirms these in a non-dogmatic fashion that is aware that the concept of “the human” is fraught with difficulties.

The term “humanism” is an umbrella or family resemblance term that includes a variety of concepts, norms, and commitments. Although there are religious humanists (Erasmus, for example, was a “Christian humanist”), humanism is generally thought to be connected with a commitment to life lived here and now. Thus humanism is often connected with the word “secular” as in the movement/idea known as “secular humanism,” associated with Paul Kurtz and others (See Kurtz 1983 and 2000). The concept of the secular itself has a lineage and is understood dialectically in relation to religious and other concepts. Secular humanism is understood as developing out of religious belief—as an affirmation of the human world (in opposition to the religious turn toward an other world).

There is a long and complex history of humanism in the Western tradition (see Copson and Grayling 2015; Herrick 2005; Law 2011). We might summarize this by stating that traditional humanism began with the ancient Greeks; it developed through the Renaissance and came to fruition through the Enlightenment and into the twentieth century. Traditional humanism developed dialectically in opposition to more theistically oriented worldviews. Traditional humanism generally favors reason over myth, secularism over theocracy, science over religion, and philosophical ethics over divine command. Implicit in the humanist worldview is the idea that human beings are good enough to solve their own problems using empirical science, naturalistic explanations, and rational thought. Non-humanistic, theistic worldviews ask us to defer to faith, myth, the supernatural, the miraculous, and the non-human or divine. Non-humanistic, religious worldviews have been criticized for being anti-human when they devalue the merely human. Critics such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and the so-called “new atheists” have articulated a view summarized by Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who said, “Religion has ever been anti-woman, anti-life, anti-peace, anti-reason, and anti-science” (O’Hair quoted in LeBeau, p. 291; also see Fiala 2013). Feuerbach himself warned the perverting and crippling power of what he called superhuman speculation that is “anti-human” (*widermenschliche*) and “anti-natural” (Feuerbach 1841/2004, p. xix). Some religious worldviews focus on immortality, eternal life, and the non-human to an extent that does turn against the human, the natural, and the scientific—looking instead toward supernatural solutions for suffering, disease, disability, and death. A humanistic worldview is different insofar as it embraces human finitude, while employing science and reason as a way of improving the human lot and reconciling us to our mortality.

Transhumanism offers a new dialectical development, which pushes beyond humanistic naturalism towards a kind of trans-naturalism in which human beings use human ingenuity to transform nature, thus creating a new, and unimagined form of transhuman (or even posthuman) existence (Bostrom 2008). Rather than accepting mortality, fragility, and finitude—and seeking consolation in traditional art, religion, philosophy, and the like—the transhumanist seeks to transcend mortal finitude, thereby overcoming certain facts that once imposed natural limits on human development and gave meaning and form to life. As an example of this mode of thinking, Bostrom has argued against what he calls “deathist” thinking. He writes, “Deathist stories and ideologies, which counsel passive acceptance, are no longer harmless sources of consolation. They are fatal barriers to urgently needed action” (Bostrom 2005). Another recent account of transhumanism describes the general transhumanist “crusade against death” (Tirosch-Samuels and Hurlbut 2016, p. 19). While death is not the only thing that transhumanists want to transcend through technology (we might also focus on genetic imperfection, unhappiness, stupidity, immorality, etc.), it is symbolic of the dialectic I am describing. In somewhat hyperbolic and simplistic terms, we can postulate the following tripartite schema:

Theistic worldviews seek to overcome death through mythic immortality.

Traditional humanism seeks to respond to death through science and consoling philosophies.

Transhumanism seeks to abolish death through technological intervention.

A fourth possibility thus suggests itself as a response to transhumanism, i.e., cis-humanism. Cis-humanism develops as an affirmation of traditional humanism—but one that returns to traditional humanism with the understanding that traditional humanism is one term on this dialectical continuum. In other words, cis-humanists return to humanism as a dialectical development from out of transhumanism.

With the effort to abolish death (and unhappiness, etc.) using technology, the transhumanist ushers in a new conception of human being, which emphasizes the human capacity for self-creation and redefinition. For centuries the ideal of what it meant to be human was taken for granted by humanists. The Greeks defined human beings as rational, mortal animals. Christian humanism added an *imago dei* account of the human spirit—but also taking mortality as a given. The “rational, mortal animal” definition of the human became a point of emphasis for humanists during the past few centuries, in which Darwinian biology, anthropology, archaeology, and other sciences helped us better understand the place of the human within the natural world. But the development of transhumanism calls for a reevaluation of the idea of the human, offering the possibility that something new could emerge as technology pushes the limits of our rational, mortal, and animal natures. When we factor in the ways that human beings have already altered the natural world in what many are now calling “the Anthropocene,” it seems that we are on the cusp of a new era (see Davis 2016).

The new possibility of a transhuman future calls for reflection on the importance of what we must now call “cis-human” identity. Cis-human identity affirms much of what traditional humanism affirms. But cis-humanism returns to this-worldly humanism with the understanding that cis-humanism is a possibility that lies on a dialectical continuum. Said differently, cis-humanism is humanism for the Anthropocene: it embraces humanism in an era in which human nature and nature itself are rapidly being transformed.

I argue that we are justified in reaffirming the value of the cis-human, despite the fact that death and other limitations of human capacity are being called into question by transhumanism. Indeed, cis-humanism provides an ethical and political framework for the Anthropocene that emphasizes the need to remain committed to modesty, rationality, and democratic politics in the face of dehumanizing technologies and ecological threats to human well-being.

To be cis-human is to be comfortably human—in the sense described by traditional humanism. Cis-humanism affirms that to be human means to be a rational, mortal animal. Cis-humanism affirms biological human life including especially the limited nature of knowledge, basic constraints on human power and ingenuity, the fact of disability and dependence, and the omnipresence of death. Cis-humanism affirms the traditional consolations for death that are provided by philosophy, art, and other cis-human cultural products. But unlike traditional humanism, cis-humanism is self-consciously aware that to affirm the cis-human is to make a choice that includes rejecting the project of transhumanism. It also involves an acute awareness of one of the fatal flaws of traditional humanism: the kind of hubris that took it for granted that human reason and ingenuity are morally and politically unproblematic.

The challenge of the Anthropocene is to find ways to restrain human consumption and greed such that the earth remains a livable world. Traditional humanism failed in this regard, as did traditional theologies. Transhumanism offers a kind of technological escape from the problems of the Anthropocene: at the limit, it imagines a new form of life for a transformed planet. Cis-humanism wants to return to traditional notions of human limitations—but with a recognition that these traditional notions are no longer fixed and permanent. When traditional wisdom is reconfigured for the Anthropocene, we have cis-humanism.

2. Cisgender and Cis-humanism

The prefix “cis-” is used to emphasize the “this-sidedness” of things. It is the opposite of the prefix “trans-”. The need for the terms “cis-human” and “cis-humanism” is created by the transhumanist movement. This terminology may seem cumbersome. But the term “humanism” has already undergone a significant revision in light of the ways that transhumanists are challenging our assumptions about humanity, in light of the way that emerging technologies challenge those assumptions, and in light of the dawning of the Anthropocene. This parallels the development of transgender issues, which has prompted the development of the term “cisgender” (see Cava 2016).

This terminology reflects a politicized debate about gender and sexuality, including a critical discussion of privilege, status, and what we take for granted about sex

and gender. Some transgender activists use the term cisgender as a pejorative, implying that those who are cisgender are privileged, clueless, and oppressive. The term “cisgenderism” (and related terms “cisgender normativity,” “cissexism,” “cissexual gender entitlement,” “ciscentricity”—and the related concept of “transphobia”) can be used to call out and criticize the ideological privilege found in traditional gender roles and identities (see Serano 2001 and 2013). But the term may merely be an antonym indicating a difference that is reflected in terms such as “homosexual and heterosexual” or “male and female,” assuming that there is a simple binary relation expressed in the antonym “cisgender or transgender.” Of course, the difficulty here is that behind the transgender idea is a claim about the fluidity of such binary terms. Thus it may be that those who assert a firm distinction between “trans-” and “cis-” identities reassert a status hierarchy that disadvantages the “trans-” side of things.

This conceptual and normative problem is firmly on display in discussion of transgender issues (see for example, the debate between Jenkins 2016 and Salett Andler 2017). But it also occurs in discussions of transhumanism. If we assert cis-humanism and the importance of cis-human identity we may unjustifiably privilege a certain definition of the human, human flourishing, and proper human concerns and behaviors—and thereby disenfranchise or oppress those who aspire for a transhuman or even posthuman future. And indeed, transhumanists emphasize and affirm the fluidity of the human experience, while cis-humanists would attempt to restrict that fluidity and remain within some well-worn channels of thought and value.

I argue here that despite the concerns expressed above, it is not unjustifiable to privilege the cis-human and to advocate for cis-humanism. But I also acknowledge that it is a good thing that there is growing awareness of the fact that our understanding of the “human” is fraught with normative difficulties. When we affirm cis-humanism, we ought to do so with an awareness of the norms, hierarchies, and privileges that are often taken for granted by less self-conscious forms of traditional humanism. The norms of traditional humanism have often included identity claims that feminists, queer theorists, and other radical philosophers have criticized—including assumptions about gender and sex. For example, the norms of traditional humanism do include masculinist assumptions and values that are often connected to male dominance—such as the focus on autonomy, independence, rationality, control, and so on. Those norms also include implicit assumptions about race, class, and ability. We should not deny that traditional humanism has occasionally harbored sexist, racist, and able-ist ideas. But rather than throw out the humanist baby with the oppressive bathwater and rush headlong into the transhuman future, what is needed is a better and more inclusive form of cis-humanism, one that embraces all of what it means to be a rational, mortal animal.

This discussion can be used to shed some light onto emerging concerns about transgender issues. Transgender possibility can be understood as a manifestation of transhumanism. The idea that we can or should change genders is connected, at a fundamental level, to the idea that we can or should change humanity itself. And the notion that humanity is a fluid concept that could push itself into something posthuman is connected to the idea that gender is fluid and the idea that we could evolve toward something that is postgender. We might note here that one important source often cited in

transhumanist discussions, Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" connects the posthuman to the idea of a post-gender future. She writes, "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway 1991). Her ironic postulation of a postgender, posthuman cyborg future connects the dots between transgender and transhuman concerns.

One important consideration, however, has to do with the role of sexual reproduction. By sexual reproduction, I mean reproduction that occurs by combining sperm and egg—the sexually differentiated gametes (see Roughgarden 2013). Cloning is another possibility that is not sexual. And it is often imagined among the techniques proposed by transhumanism, along with transgenesis (moving genes from one species to another), genetic engineering, and so on. The dangers of these technologies involve negative outcomes that should be subject to a strong precautionary principle. But a further danger has to do with our understanding of human identity as requiring a biological father and a biological mother, even if this is merely a sperm or egg donor. Despite advances in terms of how biological reproduction occurs (and is now possible for trans-persons and homosexuals), the cis-human focus is on sexual reproduction.

Gender and biological sex are, of course, more complicated than traditional humanism often admitted, as is human being in general. There is an obvious and important stumbling block for any dogmatic or essentializing account of the human experience created by the experience of intersex persons (including what was previously called hermaphrodite), bisexuals, homosexuals, and other queer sex and gender possibilities. The human experience also includes a variety of other intersectional possibilities and expressions. There are differently abled people along a variety of axes including cognitive ability, emotional ability, physical ability, etc. There are different racial, ethnic, class, religious, and ideological expressions of humanity. And so on.

Intersectionality is an important conceptual tool for understanding the multiplicity of the human experience (see Collins and Bilge, 2016). Nonetheless it is possible to identify a sense of normativity in the midst of this intersectional multitude. And the normative middle ground is defined by the traditional humanist's claim that human beings are rational, mortal animals. Redefinitions of the human or transformations of the human that deny our rationality, our mortality, and our animality head off into absurdity. We return to a conception of the human under the rubric of cis-humanism with a healthy dose of self-consciousness, admitting that the normative middle ground can be exclusionary and essentialist. Nonetheless, attempts to transcend the cis-human condition ought to be viewed with skepticism and seen in light of a very strong precautionary principle.

Rather than seeking to transcend the cis-human condition, we ought to reconcile ourselves to human limitations and mortality—including the limitations imposed upon us by biology, evolution, and sexual reproduction. Rather than giving up on cis-humanity, we ought to forge a more inclusive vision of cis-humanity—but one that remains firmly on this side of the transhuman crusade against death, disease, and disability.

3. From Transhumanism to Cis-Humanism

The need for the concept of cis-humanism arises from the development of transhumanism. The fact that transhumanism now exists as a growing and important philosophical idea—

and that it is embodied in emerging technologies—requires us to reevaluate traditional humanism and develop a defense of cis-humanism. Cis-humanism is traditional humanism become self-conscious. To borrow language from discussions of gender and sexuality, we might say that with cis-humanism, the human becomes a “marked norm.” Traditional humanism takes the concept of the human as an unmarked norm. Unlike traditional humanism, which could take “the human condition” for granted, cis-humanism self-consciously asserts the value of what we might call “the human condition as traditionally conceived” in opposition to what transhumanists imagine in the posthuman future.

Cis-humanism self-consciously affirms and embraces much of the old, traditional form of biological, genetic, psychological, and social humanity. The cis-human condition is a source of value and meaning that ought not be discarded, overlooked, or devalued in the rush toward a posthuman future. In this regard we might agree with so-called “bioconservatives” such as Leon Kass, Francis Fukuyama and others, although the idea of cis-humanism indicates a somewhat less conservative idea than is permitted by some bioconservatives (Kass 2003; Fukuyama 2002; for response see Bostrom 2005a and 2005b). I argue that the transhumanist dream seems to overlook the important roles of sexuality, love, reproduction, suffering and loss, dependency, care, friendship, social dislocation, political struggle, and death. Of course it is true, as mentioned above, that traditional humanism often represented a male-dominant and patriarchal worldview which downplayed the importance of care and dependence, while ignoring the oppressive tendencies of traditional norms of sex and gender. But an improved cis-humanism would embrace care, dependence, and the experience of those who are othered, oppressed, excluded, and marginalized. Indeed, the return from transhumanism to cis-humanism can be inspired by critiques of transhumanism articulated from the standpoint of disability theory (Hall 2016). In the transhumanist worldview we lose track of the value of differential ability (a.k.a, “disability), dependence, and care. These are important aspects of our mortal animality and embodiment. They should not be minimized or eliminated. Cis-humanism self-consciously embraces our embodied animality, warts and all.

The cis-human condition embraces much of what traditional humanism embraces in terms of the actuality of the human condition, while also recognizing the oppressive tendencies of previous versions of humanism. Cis-humanism also embraces a dialectical vision of human identity that recognizes the importance of social roles, oppressive histories, and complex genealogies and identities. Transhumanism, in opposition to this, seems to want to create a new posthuman future that somehow begins from a tabula rasa, rising out of the ashes of prior humanity. But cis-humanism recognizes our historical facticity, including the fact that heroic efforts to transcend the human experience always have feet of clay. Moreover, it is our effort to reconcile ourselves to our finitude, failures, and fragility that gives meaning to life and culture. While Bostrom and other transhumanists want to move beyond the need for such consolations—condemning them as “deathism,” as noted above—the consolations of the human condition are the source of much of what is valuable for cis-human beings. Important cis-human phenomena—sexual reproduction, love, friendship, care, dependence, and death—form the focal point of art, philosophy, religion, and politics. These phenomena and cultural responses to them give form and meaning to cis-human life. We will lose much if we transform the human in a

radical posthuman direction. In a posthuman future, art, philosophy, and politics would have to be radically reimagined as cognitive enhancement, super-longevity, eugenic experimentation, and non-sexual reproduction change our understanding of values such as dignity, love, beauty, grief, mourning, death, and so on.

For cis-humanism, human beings are good enough without radical technological transformation. Indeed, we ought to recognize that faith in radical technological progress is partly responsible for creating the ecological challenges we face in the Anthropocene. Transhumanism's faith in technology uncritically relies upon the infrastructure of the Anthropocene. Radical surgeries, computer chips, and the rest of the high-tech arsenal comes with significant environmental impacts. In our desire to transform ourselves, we also transform the world, creating ecological harm. The return to cis-humanism offers a modest embrace of our place within nature and a critical stance with regard to world-altering (and person altering) technologies.

We ought to embrace our failures, our limitations, our vulnerabilities, and our mortality. Human satisfactions and possibilities have developed through millennia-long evolutionary processes. We have digestive organs, reproductive organs, sensory organs, muscles and nerves, all of which have evolved in equilibrium with the earth's ecosystem. The satisfactions of life are primarily found in digestion, sexuality, reproduction, sensory stimulation, movement, and thought. The same biological apparatus also causes dissatisfaction and suffering. We experience hunger, sexual longing, pain, disability, angst, and death. Transhumanists imagine overcoming the negativities associated with biological life. But in seeking to overcome these limitations and negativities, they forget that humanity only exists within a given biological and geological niche. They also forget that human happiness and well-being consists in finding balance and harmony within this niche. And they forget that the ecological dilemmas of the Anthropocene were often created by the technological revolution that sought to produce human satisfaction.

Transhumanists will often complain that "Mother Nature" is a cruel mother, who gave us death, disease, and disability. They seek to remedy this through human ingenuity and technology. But we ought not seek to overcome the cis-human condition, eliminating our fragile, embodied animality in order to transcend it. Mother Nature also nurtures us. Embodied animality provides sources of immense satisfaction and meaning. And death is a normal part of life.

To overcome human nature, we may also destroy much of the natural world. In seeking radical life-extension, for example—as transhumanists do—we risk causing further disequilibrium in the Anthropocene. This is not to say that we should not continue to find ways to extend the benefits of medical science, cure disease, and so on. But there is a natural course of life. We are born. We reproduce. We grow old. And we die. Transhumanism wants to overcome this, viewing aging and death as maladies that need to be cured rather than as part of the human life-cycle contained within the broader systematic processes of the human species and the eco-system as a whole. Medical science has been successful at extending our lifespans. It is not possible to stipulate an exact number of years that determines the ethically maximal lifespan. But Mother Nature has a natural logic, often ignored by the transhumanists, that require generational turn-over, as one generation gives way to the next (Rider 2010, in reply to Harris 2006 and Harris 2010).

We should note that gendered imagery often shows up in such discussions (i.e., speaking of “Mother” nature) conceals hidden assumptions that ought to be interrogated further. Unlike traditional humanism, which takes such metaphors for granted, cis-humanism ought to recognize that there are value judgments and socially constructed meanings woven into the very language and imagery that we use to discuss “the human,” “the natural,” and “the human condition.” Indeed, as mentioned above, an intersectional lens reminds us that the use of the definite article (“the”) here tends to essentialize in ways that limit understanding and foreclose critical thought. And yet... nurture, care, sexual reproduction, disease, and death are common for cis-human being—and this provides something close to what we might call *the cis-human condition*.

Let’s consider a few of the important facts of cis-human experience.

(1) Sexual intimacy and reproduction are great goods that brings two human bodies together in shared pleasure and biological life-power. To replace that with robotic sex, masturbation machines, and the like would be a great loss. Biological reproduction is a great source of delight, which embodies something deeply animal in human being, despite the pain and risk of childbirth and the anxieties of parenting. To replace that with “ectogenesis” (childbirth through artificial wombs) would be a great loss. Of course, important questions remain about the importance of reproductive control (including IVF, birth control, abortion, etc.), heteronormativity assumptions about sexual reproduction, and so on. Cis-humanism should remain skeptical of transhumanist efforts to overcome sex, gender, and reproduction. But cis-humanism should also remain critical of the norms, values, and assumptions of traditional (male-dominant and homophobic) humanism.

(2) Care-giving for those who are dependent—pets, children, the disabled, and the aged—is a source of moral development and satisfaction. To replace that with a world of robotic care-givers or to eliminate dependence entirely would leave us without important sources of moral value and even joy. Of course, care-giving has often been associated with a gendered division of labor. So a cis-human embrace of care and dependence would need to be influenced by feminist critique. When transhumanists imagine possibilities such as surrogate wombs or computerized nursing, there are important implications for women and marginalized persons. Care and dependency are important and should not be lost. But we ought not return to traditional gender division of labor and other hierarchical assumptions of traditional humanism.

(3) Death—of others and our own future demise—provides an opportunity for existential reflection and community relations that develop through processes of grieving and mourning. To overcome death through downloading one’s consciousness or to postpone it through developing technologies aiming at superlongevity would change our existential condition and undermine important sources of love, caring, and solidarity. Of course, death and grief are also subject to a gendered division of labor. For example, grieving is often seen as women’s work. In some patriarchal cultures, women were expected to dutifully commit suicide after the death of the husband. And

so on. Again, robust and self-conscious cis-humanism would embrace mortality, while recognizing the limitation of traditional humanism.

(4) The experience of wonder and joy in connection with the natural world is a deep source of human meaning. We have amazing technologies that can offer virtual reality versions of the natural world and its sublimities. But virtual reality cannot replace the embodied joy of moving, breathing, and living in places of natural beauty. Moreover, the pace of walking, hiking, swimming, floating, surfing, skiing, and so on provide a kind of attunement and mindfulness that virtual reality seems to neglect. This includes patience, waiting, watching, and simply being. The cis-human condition embraces the human-world nexus. It is skeptical of virtual reality. And it criticizes the environmental cost (and environmental injustice) of high tech alternatives to lived natural experience.

Cis-humanism embraces our biological humanity. The biological, psychological, social, and existential processes—and associated problems—of cis-humanity have evolved in response to long and important evolutionary and cultural history. Cis-humanism develops out of an affirmation of that history that is informed by radical critique, including the critique offered by transhumanists themselves. But cis-humanists insist that if we were to overcome or eliminate those problems and difficulties we would lose much that is important for a meaningful life. It also claims that the ecological problems of the Anthropocene are generated as a result of our relentless pursuit of progress and technology.

Of course, we are able to ameliorate our condition through the use of science, technology, and reason. We ought to use our ingenuity to increase wellbeing and to share the good things of life fairly and equitably. Sexual dysfunction is a problem, as is rape. Women still die in childbirth. People are born with horrible diseases or suffer from terrible accidents. Some people die far too early. Care-giving is difficult work, as is grieving. Nature is not entirely benevolent. It is good that we have developed technological responses and control over natural disasters, diseases, and the like. We ought to continue to work to prevent unnecessary suffering. We ought to work to create a fair and just society in which satisfaction and suffering are equitably distributed across our intersectional lines. But we ought not seek to create a future in which all suffering is eliminated, in which nature is lost within the anthropocentrism of the Anthropocene, and in which we give up on the simple joys and sources of meaning typical of biological humanity.

4. The Wisdom of Humanism

The basic wisdom of what was once called humanism emphasized the fact that human beings had the capacity to live well despite our mortality—or indeed, because of our mortality. Traditional humanists deny that the human condition is irredeemably bad. For that reason they also reject religious myths that speak of sin and redemption. They focus on the satisfactions available in this life, while turning away from the false promise of

religious immortality. And they emphasize the need for social justice as a way of ameliorating the human condition at large. Humanism has a deep history that extends, in the West, back to philosophers such as Socrates and Epicurus. Similar ideas are found throughout the Western tradition, culminating in the work of philosophers such as Felix Adler, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Paul Kurtz, and others. Humanism is usually non-theistic and non-religious, although there are varieties of “religious humanism” or “humanistic Christianity,” etc. As Andrew Copson explains in the introduction to his massive *Handbook of Humanism*, humanism includes a number of commitments, such as a basic naturalism, the embrace of human finitude and mortality, a focus on universal morality and empathy, and a critical stance toward religion (Copson and Grayling 2015).

It is important to recognize, as we have noted above, that it is traditional humanism itself that has given birth to the idea of transhumanism. It is easy to see that transhumanism develops out of traditional humanism insofar as transhumanists also (1) turn away from religion, (2) emphasize the importance of amelioration, and (3) seek to spread the goods of technology and science. But transhumanism goes beyond traditional humanism in “both means and ends” as Max More explains in the introduction to *The Transhumanist Reader* (More and Vita-More 2013). Transhumanists imagine the possibility of a future in which the cis-human is transcended. It also goes beyond traditional humanism in imagining technological innovations that will provide the means to this transformation. While traditional humanism emphasized education, philosophy, and science, transhumanism emphasizes the use of technological innovations that make it possible to overcome previous biological and genetic limitations. The transhumanists imagine a posthuman future in which genetic technologies, robotic technologies, information processing technologies, nanotechnology, and other technological innovations will produce something new (and better) than the current state of humanity.

But there is something pernicious about the idea that we can or should radically transcend human nature. It is also pernicious to imagine embracing the Anthropocene without also criticizing the technological faith that is often a source of ecological damage. It is exciting and fun to imagine a posthuman or transhuman future. But the utopian project of dreaming of a new tomorrow can distract us from the more important and mundane need to accept reality today. On a planet that is rapidly being changed by rampant technology and on which billions of human beings still suffer from easily curable diseases and profound social injustice, the transhumanists appear to be looking in the wrong direction. We ought to ameliorate the human world and spread the goods of traditional humanism equitably around the globe before we even begin to imagine a posthuman future. Moreover, the dream of transhumanism is somewhat anti-human and even oddly theological (Bauman 2010; Zimmerman 2008). While the transhumanists seem to view themselves as scientific realists of sorts, who are focused on technology and evolutionary biology, they dream of a humanity that has acquired a kind of god-like power. And they risk becoming misanthropic and anti-human when they imagine eugenic opportunities that could pose risks to actually existing cis-human people, especially the disabled.

Human facticity requires that we embrace the world as it is, with a bit of Stoic equanimity, while recognizing the natural bases of human experience and naturally

imposed limitations on human experience. We have bodies and minds that wax and wane in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. We are diverse in terms of our abilities and disabilities. The life-course involves both dependence and independence. We are interconnected social beings who need others like ourselves for companionship, mental stimulation, and reproduction. We exist within complex economic, social, historical, and political structures that operate according to a logic that can appear oppressive and alien to the individual but which also provide opportunities for success and satisfaction. We are subject to the vicissitudes of the physical world, including the facticity of climate, geography, and basic biology. We are the product of evolutionary and astronomical forces that have no concern for our existence. Human individuals die, as do cultures, languages, and civilizations. The human species itself will eventually go extinct. Even the Anthropocene will not last forever. We create art, religion, and philosophy as ways of consoling ourselves for our mortality and ways of seeking to understand who and what we are.

Cis-humanism embraces all of this, resisting the idea that we ought to seek to transform humanity in radical ways that turn away from much of what makes life worth living. Cis-humanism also recognizes that humanism itself has feet of clay. Oppression and dominance are woven into the humanist worldview. Rather than rejecting traditional humanism in its entirety, however, cis-humanism wants to bring the limitations of humanism to consciousness and work to ameliorate them.

Transhumanists embrace exploration, innovation, and entrepreneurial action along with freedom. The transhumanists extol morphological and reproductive freedom, pointing out that we ought to be left alone to alter our bodies and even our DNA. The libertarian strain of transhumanism resonates with traditional humanism, which also emphasizes human liberty in opposition to totalitarian political regimes and in opposition to the constraints of traditional religion. But transhumanists combine liberty with a more radical “proactionary principle,” which emphasizes the willingness (and even the need) to embrace the risks associated with attempts to evolve beyond the cis-human. In the work of Steven Fuller and Veronica Lipinska, “the proactionary imperative” is oriented especially toward eugenic projects (Fuller and Lipinska 2014). But we actually still need a “precautionary principle,” as defended by ecologists and others critical of unbridled technological innovation. Fuller points out that there is a great divide between advocates of proaction and advocates of precaution. This divide is reflected in the difference between transhumanism and cis-humanism. Cis-humanism emphasizes precaution with regard to technological innovation for three reasons.

First, prior technological innovations have not been unequivocally beneficial. Technology often makes our lives better. But technology also creates ecological disaster, social dislocation, economic disruption, war, and so on. Precaution is required—especially with regard to innovations with eugenic implications—because we know from experience that technological risks can be significant.

Second, the greatest goods of life are often very primitive in terms of technology. We value and enjoy walking, eating, and sex. It is true that walking has been improved by the invention of shoes, eating is improved by the invention of cooking, and sex is improved by the invention of birth control. But those innovations are minor in comparison to the innovations imagined by transhumanists. At some point technological innovation

produces a qualitative change. The precautionary principle wants to avoid making such qualitative changes. It also warns that qualitative changes caused by technology can undermine our ability to enjoy traditional cis-human goods. We see this for example in the way that innovations in cooking and agriculture have led to obesity, diabetes, and the like. Innovations create risk. And major innovations as imagined by transhumanists can create major—and as yet unimagined—risks. Transhumanists imagine that further technological innovation can respond to those new risks. But cis-humanists warn that this might not be true; and they ask whether the risks are really worth taking in light of the satisfactions that cis-humanity provides.

Finally, cis-humanism worries that transhumanism is too focused on liberty, autonomy, and control. Those are primary values for traditional humanism. Transhumanism amplifies those values. But those values have also often been associated with male dominance and the denigration of care, dependence, disability, etc. Cis-humanism warns that we ought to be very cautious in projecting these humanistic values into the future. It also advises that we still have a lot of work to do here and now in terms of valuing care, disability, and dependence. We also have a lot of work to do in battling death on this side of the transhuman singularity: too many people die of easily prevented diseases. We continue to have much work to do in the cis-human world in terms of distributing harms and benefits along the intersectional matrix.

5. Transgender, Transhumanism, and Cis-Identity

As indicated above, I have coined the term “cis-human” here as a way of “marking the norms” or specifically indicating the version of human being that has long been taken for granted by traditional humanism. In this concluding section, I would like to consider in more detail how the term is related to and derived from the terminology that has developed in discussion of transgender issues. As mentioned above, the prefix “cis-” focuses on the “this-sidedness” of things. It is the opposite of the prefix “trans-”. Cis-human is a term coined to describe human beings whose self-identity conforms with the norms and possibilities of biological/genetic humanity as it exists here and now; cishuman is the opposite of transhuman—it is not transhuman. “Cis-humanism,” then, is a movement, worldview, or theoretical framework that affirms the “this-worldly” nature of human being, asserting that we ought to avoid the project of radically transcending human nature.

Some who argue against transhumanism can be described as “bioconservative.” This term tends to indicate a connection with traditional conservative politics and ultimate a connection with the natural law tradition. Those approaches are inadequate from my perspective. For example, in some conservative, natural law discussions it is simply presumed that the gender binary is good and that heterosexuality embodies the essence of sexual expression. John Finnis and others who argue in the natural law tradition against homosexuality provide examples of a very conservative approach—and one which I do not agree with (Finnis 1997). By embracing the term cis-human it is possible to embrace a wide range of human possibility.

To be blunt, we ought to admit that cis-human experience includes the possibility of homosexuality and gender nonconformity. The natural law tradition argues that human sexuality ought to be reduced to its reproductive purpose (with some accommodation for a further unitive purpose). But sexual experience is not merely about reproduction. Homosexuality occurs within a continuum of cis-human experience, as does gender nonconformity, including the possibility of transgender and intersex personhood. As proof of this one need only point out that same-sex relations have occurred for millennia—and they are in a sense “natural” (See Corvino 2013 for a discussion of homosexuality and the problem of using the term “natural”). The challenge remains, however, to contrast cis-human identity with something other that would be called “transhuman” to the extent that it would transcend human sexuality altogether (such as would occur with regard to sex robots, artificial wombs, and other qualitatively different sorts of technological innovation).

And so to conclude, one can emphasize cis-humanism without embracing a kind of conservatism that rejects homosexuality or narrowly defines the human experience in other conservative ways. Transgender theory does pose a unique challenge, as we’ll discuss in a moment. But transgender possibility still remains, for the most part, cis-human—a possibility found within human life. This can be seen, for example, by the fact that non-dual sex and gender identities can be found in diverse cultures across the globe including in Native American “two-spirit” identity, Polynesian *mahu*, or South Asian *hijra* (Stryker 2008).

It was once taken for granted that we knew what we were talking about when we spoke of humanity and human being. Those days of presumed consensus are over. A similar phenomenon has occurred with regard to sex, gender, and reproduction, which are important components of the larger concept of humanity. Newly emerging recognition of transgender possibility parallels newly emerging interest in the transhuman; and the concept of “post-genderism” runs parallel to the concept of “post-humanism” (Ferrando 2014). It is often surprising then that feminists and others who are often supportive of transgender issues tend to be skeptical of transhumanism (Hall 2013; DeBaets 2011).

One should be careful in generalizing here, since transhumanism and feminism are both family resemblance terms which include diverse perspectives. But one concern of feminist critics is that transhumanism remains sexist and ableist (and these two are often thought to go together): ableism privileges independence, rationality, autonomy and other values that are traditionally associated with masculine paradigms and male-dominance. Feminists and disability rights theorists want to re-emphasize dependence, differential abilities, the social construction of disability, and the goal of embracing alternative sexualities and gender identities; and some have been critical of rapid advances in biotechnology, which point toward normalization processes that disadvantage women and the disabled (Tremain 2006; Shakespeare 1998). One might think that feminist proponents of transgender inclusion would also affirm the idea of transhumanism, since gender experimentation can be affirmed from within a point of view that embraces the freedom to choose one’s gender identity or sexual orientation.

One might also think that feminist defenders of reproductive freedom—including abortion-rights defenders, defenders of artificial insemination, surrogacy, and other non-

cishuman modes of reproduction—would affirm much of the trans-human vision, since a significant concern for transhumanists is the ability of human beings to take affirmative control of reproduction. Admittedly, one concern of feminist and disability-rights critics is that transhumanist reproductive alternatives often include an explicitly eugenic and ableist focus—even including the possibility of sex-selection (in cultures that devalue certain genders) (Savulescu 2008; Savulescu and Kahane 2009).

One basic feature of human beings is that we reproduce sexually through a process that involves sexual difference. Males and females copulate, bringing genetic material together. This process is typical of animals in general, and it remains an important feature of our embodied animality. Human beings are also mammals, which means that females of the species gestate the embryo in a uterus, give birth to an infant, and nurture the infant by feeding breast milk. This sexual difference allows for specialization of reproductive tasks in a way that is linked to the gender differences that developed as cultural ideas that rest upon this biological difference. Transhumanists often appear to want to overcome all of this complex and messy animal apparatus. In a sense, transgender persons and homosexuals also call traditional biological sex and reproduction into question. But transgender persons remain cis-human insofar as they embrace and embody (although differently) the gender norms of cis-humanity. This is obviously the case when transgender processes are viewed as dimorphic conversion on a strictly binary gender continuum. Some transgender persons may move beyond cis-humanity when they embrace something beyond gender, as in the idea of postgender possibility that includes artificial wombs (Dvorsky and Hughes 2008).

My point here can be made simply in conclusion to this section in two related propositions. First, there is a connection between transgender processes and transhumanism. But second, there is no necessary connection between cis-humanism and cis-gender identity; nor is there a necessary connection between transgender identity and transhumanism. More details could be fleshed out in a paper that focuses exclusively on the conceptual relationship between types of trans- and cis- identities. But suffice it to say that intersectional analysis makes any simplistic reduction difficult to maintain.

6. Conclusion

This paper has shown that it is impossible to simply assert a commitment to “humanism” in the era of transhumanism and the Anthropocene. It has articulated the idea of cis-humanism, which is humanism that self-consciously embraces the embodied animality of cis-human beings. To be cis-human is to affirm mortality, dependence, and the natural given-ness of our rational and animal nature, in a world that is beyond our control. To affirm cis-humanism is to remain committed to an ideal of humility and acceptance that remains critical of the kind of hubris that has created some of the ecological problems of the Anthropocene. To be critical of transhumanism from the vantage point of the cis-human is to remain skeptical of the transhumanist faith in technological solutions to the problems that form the core of human identity—for example: sex, reproduction, disability, and death.

This paper has also explored conceptual relations arising out of comparisons between transhumanism and transgender ideas. It has argued that it is possible to embrace self-conscious cis-humanism without remaining wedded to all of the heteronormative, sexist, racist, and other assumptions of traditional humanism. We are in the middle of a complex dialectical process in which considerations of human nature are being challenged. An intersectional lens helps us imagine the complexity and fluidity (and remaining oppressiveness) of this dialectical process. Human beings are multiplicitous. Learning to embrace our diversity—rather than overcoming it through utopian project of technological transhumanism—is one of the challenges of cis-humanity that gives meaning and value to life.

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