A middling introduction to Better Humans

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Review of Paul Miller, James Wilsdon eds. *Better Humans: The Politics of Human Enhancement and Life Extension* **(Demos, 2006) Free for download**

This is a book about a hugely important topic. It contains thirteen different essays, by writers with a variety of viewpoints. The essays are all short and easy to read. The editors are to be commended for commissioning these essays, to promote public discussion about the issues arising from the increasing potential for technology to drastically uplift the capabilities of humans – making us healthier, stronger, smarter, wiser, kinder, safer, more connected, more contented, more fulfilled, more highly sensed, and more alive. Yet the book disappoints. Although most of the essays contain some good points (especially the ones by Nick Bostrom and Arthur Caplan), they often seem to miss the big picture, and they become sidelined in rather sour complaints. In short, there's a much better book waiting to be written, on this same topic of "Better Humans".

The big picture is what is sometimes called the transhumanist vision. The "humanist" part of the word "transhumanist" indicates a belief that our collective well-being is in our own hands – that is, in the hands of humans – rather than being under the control of mysterious supernatural or mystical entities. Although we humans have flaws, we also have the potential to address our own flaws. The "trans" part of "transhumanist" indicates that we humans can go far beyond our present-day capabilities. We can radically transcend the powers that we have inherited from countless generations of evolution. The key to this improvement is in the wise application of rapidly advancing breakthrough technologies, such as computer miniaturization, artificial intelligence, smartphones, neuroscience, pharmacology, stem cell therapy, gene therapy, and nanotechnology. In reply to the objection that such enhancements are "unnatural", transhumanists say that the distinction between "natural" and "unnatural" is an unnecessary distraction. There are all kinds of things that people used to find unnatural, but which we now, happily, take for granted. And in reply to the objection that such enhancements "risk playing God", transhumanists say that the failure to seek to control our own destiny, via self-enhancement, leaves human life in an impoverished and dangerous state.

When you dare to think about it, the drawbacks of the unenhanced human state are severe. First, all too often, human life is snuffed out in its prime – our vital spirits are sabotaged by our failing bodies. Second, we are vulnerable to disasters such as tsunamis, plagues, earthquakes, and meteorite strikes – not to mention human-originated disasters including wars, terrorism, and famines. Third, we are facing what the writer Thomas Homer Dixon calls "The Ingenuity Gap", in which the problems confronting modern society seem to demand a higher calibre of reasoning, to solve them, than we are collectively able to muster. Fourth, most of us suffer (to varying extents) from one or more disabilities – whether congenital, injury-inflicted, or aging related (such as senility). The transhumanist vision is that, well within the lifetime of many people now alive, human enhancement will take place to the extent of very significantly addressing each of these problems, thereby allowing us to experience life much more fully.

If you're interested to explore the transhumanist vision further, you might expect to find more details in the "Better Humans" book. But whereas it will provide you with some useful pointers, you'll also have to put up with a fair amount of uninspired material, which overly focuses on potential downsides of new technologies. For example, you can read about the increased potential for government surveillance and control of citizens, or the risk that some people will (shock horror) gain preferential access to the benefits of these technologies. Indeed, there are potential downsides of the transhumanist undertaking, which require careful forethought and public debate. But these downsides must not be allowed to obscure the very significant potential upsides. It's my judgment that this collection of essays has put the balance too far over to the "precautionary stance", instead of the "proactionary stance". The precautionary stance would have strangled most of technology development at its birth. It must not be allowed to unduly cramp creative research into human enhancement.

For a more full-blooded introduction to the transhumanist vision, I recommend *Citizen Cyborg: Why democratic societies must respond to the redesigned human of the future* by James Hughes, *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future* by Gregory Stock, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* by Ray Kurzweil, and *Our Molecular Future: How Nanotechnology, Robotics, Genetics and Artificial Intelligence will Transform our World* by Douglas Mulhall. Alternatively, take advantage of one of the early fruits of enhanced human collaborative intelligence, namely the Internet, to view the very considerable online material about transhumanism.

I'll make two more points in conclusion. First, some of the authors confess to an imagination failure, thinking they'll get bored if they start living longer lives. This misses the point that transhumanism is about life expansion just as much as it is about life extension. Second, it may be true that aging is "natural", but so are lots of other diseases. That shouldn't prevent us from realizing that we should be tackling aging just as vigorously and intelligently as we have tackled all kinds of other causes of decay and death.