Progress has often been driven by utopian dreams of a better world. This better world is always one that allows people’s lives to be, in some important (albeit varying) respect, better than they normally are at the time when, and the place where, the dream is dreamt. That imagined world, which compares favourably with the here and now, can be in the past (the Golden Age, Paradise Lost), in the future (Heaven and a New Earth, Paradise Regained, and secularised versions thereof), and even in the present (mythical places like the Isles of the Blessed or Avalon, but also real places such as America - the “land of the blessed” – for European emigrants in the early 1900s or Communist Russia in the 1930s). Utopian dreams fulfil an important function. They serve as a reminder that the world doesn’t have to be as it is: that there are other possible worlds that we could live in - worlds in which nobody is poor and where everyone has enough to eat, worlds in which people are not being oppressed and each can say what they please, where everyone counts for one and no one for more than one; worlds perhaps where we don’t have to work so hard and where there is more enjoyment, where being alive is an unimpaired pleasure, where there is no suffering, disease, or death, where we are powerful and no longer have to fear anything or anyone. Utopian dreams like these have no doubt stimulated social, scientific and technological progress. However, they have also led to terror and humanitarian disaster when concerted attempts to make the dream come true failed miserably. Unfortunately, some worlds turn out to be less desirable than they appeared to be in our dreams, and some dreams get compromised by the means thought necessary to realize them. Others are repugnant in their own right, like the utopian dream of a world in which, say, the Aryan Race reigns supreme. Clearly not all dreams are worth dreaming, and not all survive their implementation into the real world undamaged. The challenge is to know in advance what will happen if we endeavour to turn utopia into reality.

Utopian thinking can be found both in transhumanism and in posthumanism (or, as Miah 2008 calls them, *philosophical* posthumanism and *cultural* posthumanism, largely because transhumanism is mostly advocated by philosophers, whereas posthumanism is more the domain of cultural theorists). Transhumanism is
without doubt a philosophy with strong utopian tendencies, both in motivation and in outlook (see for a more detailed discussion Hauskeller 2011). It is a practice-oriented, increasingly influential philosophical-political movement whose proponents and allies frequently and quite openly declare themselves to be motivated by a desire to create a better world or make this world “a better place” (see e.g. Harris 2007, 3; Bostrom 2011; UK Transhumanist Association 2011). Transhumanists believe that the best chance we have to make this world a better place is through the use of already existing or soon to be developed human enhancement technologies. By gradually improving human capability we will eventually change into beings far superior to any human that has ever lived and hence can be seen, in this respect, as “posthuman”. It is commonly assumed that posthumans will lead lives and have experiences that are on the one hand unimaginable, but are on the other far superior to, i.e. much better than, anything we can experience now. When transhumanists describe the posthuman future that allegedly awaits us, they often indulge in fantasies that borrow their imagery from religious hymns and ancient myths. Nick Bostrom, transhumanism’s most prolific academic proponent, is particularly apt at painting our posthuman future in the most glorious colours. We are being promised nothing less than “lives wonderful beyond imagination” (Bostrom 2011). In his Letter from Utopia (2010, 3), in which one of those fortunate posthumans of the future addresses us merely humans, we are reminded of those few and all-too-short precious moments in which we experience life at its best, only to be told that those moments are nothing compared to the bliss permanently experienced by the posthuman: “And yet, what you had in your best moment is not close to what I have now – a beckoning scintilla at most. If the distance between base and apex for you is eight kilometres, then to reach my dwelling requires a million light-year ascent. The altitude is outside moon and planets and all the stars your eyes can see. Beyond dreams. Beyond imagination.” Posthumans will no longer be cursed with ageing bodies, and will no longer have to die; they will know and understand things that are entirely beyond our reach now; and above all, they will have lots and lots of pleasurable experiences: “Pleasure! A few grains of this magic ingredient are dearer than a king’s treasure, and we have it aplenty here in Utopia. It pervades into everything we do and everything we experience. We sprinkle it in our tea.” (Bostrom 2010, 5) The letter ends with an urgent call to bring the posthuman into existence and is signed by “your possible future self”.

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There is nothing very unusual about the utopian outlook that Bostrom endorses so unabashedly. On the contrary, it is rather common and apparently shared by many who see humanity’s salvation in emerging and converging technologies and technological growth in general. The authors of the 2002 landmark report *Converging Technologies for Improving Human Performance*, commissioned by the US National Science Foundation and Department of Commerce, seriously expect that through the convergence of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science we will soon be able to solve all the world’s problems. Technological progress will result in “world peace” and “evolution to a higher level of compassion and accomplishment” (Roco/ Bainbridge 2003, 6). More importantly, it will also lead to “a golden age of prosperity” (ibid., 291) and “economic wealth on a scale hitherto unimaginable” (ibid., 293). Economic wealth is here clearly seen as both necessary and sufficient for permanent human happiness, where the latter, in well-tried utilitarian fashion, is equated with unlimited access to, and enjoyment of, pleasurable experiences. This essentially materialistic and hedonistic understanding of human progress is reminiscent of the medieval legend of the Land of Cockaigne, where supposedly “no one suffers shortages/ the walls are made of sausages” and “lovely women and girls may be taken to bed/ without the encumbrance of having to wed” (Pleij 2001, 33, 39). Transhumanists occasionally betray similar sentiments and ideals. David Pearce for instance, who in 1998, with Nick Bostrom and a few others, drafted the *Transhumanist Declaration* (the founding document of the World Transhumanist Association), advocates a form of negative Utilitarianism that sees as the ultimate goal of all human action the abolition of all suffering. In his internet manifesto *The Hedonistic Imperative* he predicts that over “the next thousand years or so, the biological substrates of suffering will be eradicated completely” and that consequently the “states of mind of our descendants (…) will share at least one common feature: a sublime and all-pervasive happiness” (1995, 0.1.). What awaits us (or rather our posthuman descendents) is nothing short of a “naturalisation of heaven”, where we “will have the chance to enjoy modes of experience we primitives cruelly lack. For on offer are sights more majestically beautiful, music more deeply soul-stirring, sex more exquisitely erotic, mystical epiphanies more awe-inspiring, and love more profoundly intense than anything we can now properly comprehend” (1995, 0.4.).
By and large, all transhumanists are optimists regarding the future of humanity (Berthoud 2007, 295). They look forward to what lies ahead of us, and embrace without much hesitation the technologies that are supposed to lead us there. They tend to believe that everything will be for the best, and that the best is what we will get if we are only courageous enough to wholeheartedly commit ourselves to scientific and technological progress. Transhumanists do not doubt that humans are special, that reason sets us apart from the rest of nature, and that we all carry the potential in us to ascend the heavens and to be (or live) like Gods – very much in accordance with the very modern human self-understanding that Pico della Mirandola laid down in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), which can be seen as the foundation charter of Renaissance humanism. For Pico (1985, 4) humans were by nature free to invent themselves, and not confined by any natural boundaries: “Thou art the molder and maker of thyself, thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer.” As humans we are naturally disposed to change and to progress to higher spheres. It is in our very essence to transgress boundaries, to go ever further on our way to perfection and godliness. This belief is also at the core of transhumanism. Scratch a transhumanist and you will find a humanist underneath.

In contrast, despite being rather a diverse lot, (cultural) posthumanists are normally decidedly anti-humanist - or “posthumanist” (Wolfe 2010, xv) - and hence also deeply suspicious of transhumanist aspirations to create better, even more glorious humans by means of technology. Posthumanists generally refuse to see humans as a “superior species in the natural order” (Miah 2008, 72), ontologically distinct from animals on the one hand, and machines on the other. They insist that the boundaries between the human and the non-human are rather fluent and in fact have always been so: it is just that this fact has become more pronounced and thus more obvious through recent technological advances. This makes the posthuman that posthumanists talk about an altogether different entity from the posthuman of the transhumanists. In contrast to the latter, the posthumanist posthuman is not an entity of an imagined future, but an entity that already exists. For the posthumanist we are already posthuman (Hayles 1999) and in a certain sense have always been so. The human (as something essentially different from other entities) has never existed. As Halberstam and Livingston in their seminal collection of articles on “posthuman bodies”, echoing Donna Haraway’s “we are cyborgs” (1985, 191) programmatically declare: “You’re not human until you’re posthuman. You were never human.”
Thus “the human” is merely an ideological construct, a myth, and ultimately a lie, because the phrase suggests that there is an essential distinction between the human and the non-human, while in fact there isn’t. Any appearance of an ontological difference between humans and machines on the one side, and humans and animals on the other, is merely a discursive practice that “functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman” (Halberstam/ Livingston 1995, 10) It is the ideology of the human that posthumanists seek to uncover and to attack. The political goal is to rupture and exceed traditional cultural “narratives” of the human and to “destabilize the ontological hygiene of Western modernity” (Graham 2002, 16) in order to overcome historic divisions between class, race and gender. For this reason, posthumanists are equally opposed to so-called ‘bioconservative’ critics of radical human enhancement such as Francis Fukuyama, Michael Sandel, or Leon Kass, and to transhumanist enhancement enthusiasts. From a posthumanist perspective both parties commit the same basic mistake: that, although they may have different ideas about what it means to be human, they both believe in the existence of the human, and in the value of being one. Transhumanists welcome and endorse the new technologies because they seem to provide new, far-ranging possibilities for human progress. Posthumanists often do the same, but for other reasons. The increasing incorporation of modern technology into our lives and bodies is a fact that we have to deal with, and whether we like it or not, it is to be welcomed to the extent that it confuses boundaries (e.g. between human and non-human, male and female, physical and non-physical) and forces (or at least allows) us to review and revise the way we are used to look at the world. “The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically.” (Haraway 1985, 205).

There is, of course, a utopian dimension to the posthumanist critique of humanist and transhumanist progressivism and utopianism, which was initially acknowledged by Donna Haraway in her early Manifesto (1985, 193): “This chapter (…) is an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, nonnaturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender”. 20 years later, however, she expressed discomfort with her own utopian interpretation of posthumanism. In an interview with Nicholas Gane (Gane/
Haraway 2006, 137) she revokes her earlier remark: “It’s not a utopian dream but an on-the-ground working project. I have trouble with the way people go for a utopian post-gender world”. Clearly part of Haraway’s discomfort with being seen as trying to launch some kind of utopian project stems from her distaste for the goals of transhumanism: “I can’t believe the blissed-out techno-idiocy of people who talk about downloading human consciousness onto a chip” (ibid., 146). Yet she still acknowledges the importance of utopian thinking for the purpose of critiquing (and possibly changing) established practices (ibid., 152): “I suppose there is a kind of fantastic hope that runs through a manifesto. There’s some kind of without warrant insistence that the fantasy of an elsewhere is not escapism but it’s a powerful tool.”

It is obvious that Haraway does not share the enthusiasm that most transhumanists seem to feel for the ongoing technification of the life world – she even admits that it is something of a “nightmare” (Gane/ Haraway 2006, 150). Likewise, Katherine Hayles, in her influential book How We Became Posthuman (1999, 1), speaks of the “nightmare” of a downloaded consciousness, and contrasts it with a “dream” of her own: “If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being” (ibid., 5). Other posthumanists express a similarly ambivalent attitude. Thus David Wills (2008), while embracing what he calls the “technological turn” and claiming that the “human thing” has never been “simply human”, but is and has always been in its very essence a “technological thing” (ibid., 3), argues that, precisely because we always already have technology in our backs, we can and should resist a “technology that defines itself as straight-forward, as straight and forward, straight-ahead linear advance, the totally concentrated confidence and pure technological fiat of an unwavering lift-off” and “reserve the right to hold back, not to presume that every technology is an advance” (ibid., 6). According to Wills, control and mastery are an illusion, never to be fully accomplished because technology has us rather than the other way around. In the same vein, though not always for the same reasons, other posthumanists such as Elaine Graham also scorn what they see as transhumanists’ “technocratic futurism” (Graham 2002, 155) and “libertarian philosophy” (ibid., 159).
However, despite the widespread posthumanist opposition to transhumanist techno-utopianism, the desired and recommended dissolution of all confining boundaries is clearly itself a utopian idea, whether those boundaries are conceived as physical boundaries (as in transhumanism) or rather conceptual, i.e., social and political boundaries (as in posthumanism). At the heart of posthumanism is clearly a liberationist ideal: the hoped-for redistribution of difference and identity is ultimately a redistribution of power. Haraway and those who have been following in her footsteps urge us to see the confusion of boundaries that our use of modern technologies forces upon us not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to develop resistance to domination: “certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals – in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self.” (Haraway 1985, 219) Instead of bemoaning the increasing technification of our life world and resigning ourselves to the role of victims, we are asked to use it in order to undermine existing structures of domination. Again, we are told to be brave in the face of new developments and to see them as an opportunity rather than a threat. However, while transhumanists tell us not to be afraid of letting go of the familiar but defective human and paving the way for the unfamiliar, but vastly improved posthuman, posthumanists ask us not to be afraid of “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” and to suppress and firmly reject the perhaps all-too-human desire for clear demarcations (Haraway 1985, 194). This requires an appreciation of disorder and illogic, and a repudiation of (normative conceptualisations of) health, purity and stability (Halberstam/Livingston 1995, 13). Katherine Hayles makes it clear that “the posthuman” is just as much a construct as “the human”. It is not a real entity that is meant to replace the human at some point in the future, but rather a certain point of view, a new way of looking at things and at ourselves: “Whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity emerging from such fields as cognitive science and artificial life imply that even a biologically unaltered *Homo sapiens* counts as posthuman” (Hayles 1999, 4). Whether we are human or posthuman thus entirely depends on our own self-understanding: “People become posthuman because they think they are posthuman” (ibid., 6). Along the same lines, Elaine Graham (2002) analyses the different “representational practices” that create the differing worlds of the human and the posthuman. Technology changes things, but the really important
changes, according to posthumanists, are ultimately in the head. Haraway’s ‘Cyborg’ was a metaphor for a changed, or changing, perspective. And so is ‘the posthuman’ for many cultural theorists. For transhumanists on the other hand, the posthuman is the radically enhanced, virtually omnipotent human of the future.

Haraway famously concluded her *Manifesto* with the statement that she’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess. These two words stand for alternative utopias. What distinguishes posthumanists from transhumanists is this: while posthumanists would rather be cyborgs than goddesses or gods, transhumanists wish to be both, but if they had to choose, they would much rather be gods.

**Literature:**


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