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# TRANSHUMANISM

## Towards a Futurist Philosophy

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### Religion, Eupraxophy, and Transhumanism

Humanity is in the early stages of a period of explosive expansion in knowledge, freedom, intelligence, lifespan, and wisdom. Yet our species persists in old conceptual structures and processes which act as a drag on progress. One of the worst is religious thinking. In this essay I will show how religion acts as an entropic force, standing against our advancement into transhumanity and our future as posthumans. At the same time I will acknowledge the necessary and positive role that religions have played in giving meaning and structure to our lives. The alternative to religion is not a despairing nihilism, nor a sterile scientism, but transhumanism. Humanism, while a major step in the right direction, contains too many outdated values and ideas. Extropianism the principal form of transhumanism moves beyond humanism, focusing on our evolutionary future.

Before launching the discussion it will be helpful to distinguish between the notions of religion, humanism, transhumanism, posthuman, eupraxophy, and Extropianism.

The core of any *religion* consists of faith and worship. Other elements typical to religions are beliefs in supernatural forces, ceremony, a comprehensive view of life, and a moral theory or rule book. Generally religions hold that there is a god or gods which give our lives meaning by assigning us a role in a grand plan created and controlled by external supernatural forces. Our assigned function is to obey and praise these forces or entities. However, the *essence* of religion and religious styles of thinking is faith and worship rather than any belief in a god. A *eupraxophy*, a non-religious philosophy of life, plays a similar memetic role in that it is concerned to create or increase meaningfulness through a philosophical framework. In contrast to religion, eupraxophies are opposed to faith, dogmatism, ideological authoritarianism, and stagnation.

The concept of eupraxophy encompasses within it humanism, transhumanism (including Extropianism), and possible a future posthumanism. *Humanism* is a eupraxophy or philosophy of life that rejects deities, faith, and worship, instead basing a view of values and meaningfulness on the nature and potentials of humans within a rational and scientific framework. *Transhumanism* is a class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a *posthuman* condition. Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural "afterlife". Transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, life extension,

nanotechnology, artificial ultraintelligence, and space habitation, combined with a rational philosophy and value system.

Finally, **Extropianism** is the foremost version of transhumanism. While all transhumanists as such will agree on many overall goals, they may differ over the principles that will get us to a posthuman stage. The philosophy of Extropianism affirms the values of Boundless Expansion, Self-Transformation, Dynamic Optimism, and Intelligent Technology, and Spontaneous Order.

## Why Does Religion Persist?

Many people find it puzzling and frustrating that religion has persisted despite enormous advances in scientific understanding. In order to see why this has been the case and what the future holds for religion, we need to determine the causes of religion. I suggest that there are four basic causes: Religion is (a) a pre-scientific system of explanation and technology; (b) a source of meaning, direction and emotional expression in life; (c) a means of social control; (d) a means of coping with uncertainty and death. I will comment on (c) and (d) briefly, since I want to focus on (a) and (b).

**SOCIAL CONTROL:** Understanding religion as a form of social control and domination probably has little value as an explanation of its *origin* since religious belief had to exist before it could be used to this end. But it is plausible to think that religion has been fostered and developed by priests and state authorities in order to consolidate power over their subjects. If you can convince people that your authority derives from God or gods you will be in a stronger position than a merely secular authority. This is illustrated by the historical record which shows that state authority and religious authority have been held in the same persons; this is still true in many less developed cultures, such as that of Iran. The entropic forces of religion and 'state' have synergistically boosted one another. For instance, 'the divine right of kings' means that King could do no wrong in law (or morals). Derived from this principle is the current policy of immunity of government agents in performing their functions.

Marx and Engels took essentially this view. They saw religion as part of an ideology that rationalized the position of the ruling class, teaching subjects the virtues of meekness, humility, obedience, non-resistance, and non-retaliation. They saw this as inevitable until social conditions resulting in alienation and unhappiness were changed, making religion unnecessary as an "opium of the people". While there is some truth in this view, it ignores the radical and disrupting nature of some religious movements and undervalues the role that religions have sometimes played in undermining statist powers. Religion has occasionally provided a rival authority rather than a collaborative one.

**DEALING WITH DEATH AND UNCERTAINTY:** One of the great tasks before us, as transhumanists, is the reengineering of our consciousness to do away with the powerful desire for certainty of a dogmatic kind. Most humans feel that they cannot bear to be wrong. They fear an unknown future. They readily give up intellectual and emotion independence in favor of faith in another person, whether human or supernatural myth. Humans are also driven to the comforts of religious dogma by the terrible fact of death. Some transhumanists expect religion to automatically decline as technological progress accelerates. Unfortunately, the faster technology and society changes, the greater the uncertainty in people's lives, so the greater the appeal of religion in all its forms. (Hence the takeover by National Socialism and communism at times of great upheaval.) Scientific and technological progress alone will not abolish religious thinking. Transhumanist philosophies, especially immortalist philosophies such as Extropianism, will be vital to intellectual and emotional progress.

**EXPLANATION AND TECHNOLOGY:** Humans (and transhumans) are marked by a persistent desire to understand and control their environment and experience. Before the development of the scientific method, deductive and inductive logic, game theory, sophisticated epistemic principles and so on, humans resorted to superficial causal explanations based on observation for common phenomena, and theistic explanation for unusual events. Deities were invoked to explain unusual or destructive phenomena, and to try to provide a comforting model of the uncertainties and uncontrollable events in life. Storms, floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, epidemics and madness could not be tolerated without some belief about their

cause. In the absence of scientific explanation a religious or theistic explanation was almost inevitable.

Along with pre-scientific attempts at understanding came a crude attempt at a technology. A tension is evident here: On the one hand religions have frequently declared events to be determined by a divine plan and so have held attempts at changing things to be futile (this is common in Eastern religions, as well as other religions involving predestination). On the other hand, religions have offered certain limited and carefully circumscribed means of changing and controlling events, such as through prayer, ritual, and magic. The overall result has been entropic and anti-progressive since religious technology is ineffective (with the occasional exception of psychosomatic effects).

The role of religion in providing explanations, however poor, of human life and its environment has given way over time to the superior resources of empirical science. Science has been able to explain an enormous variety of phenomena, both commonplace and unusual. Protestations by theists that science has not and cannot explain the origin of life, the origin of the universe, or the nature of consciousness are increasingly ridiculous as we continue to learn and discover.

An objection to this view of the origin and strength of religion is that it is unclear why religion is persisting and even growing as scientific triumphs abound. This objection makes two mistakes however. First, as I am showing, there are other sustaining causes of religion that do not entirely or closely depend on the development of science. Second, the apparent strength and resurgence of religion is, I believe, an illusion generated from a limited perspective. Certainly religion is not declining *rapidly*, and is continually taking new forms (such as New Age mysticism), but seen over a span of decades and centuries the trend is clear enough. Late twentieth century religion is very much less powerful than religion in the Middle Ages. In the past religion dominated all aspects of life and the idea of a separation of Church and state would have been considered incomprehensible and wicked.

The illusion is strong in North America, where TV evangelists have benefited from modern media exposure. A higher and louder profile does not necessarily mean that religion is actually more powerful. Europeans see the decline of religion more clearly. The numbers of people attending churches, and the strength of religious conviction have declined drastically. It is a notorious fact that a high percentage of priests and ministers themselves have weak or non-existent beliefs. As science continues to squeeze out religion from its role in explanation, this factor in the persistence of religion will weaken. Just as important as the development of science in weakening religion is the scientific *education* of the population something which is extremely poor in our monopolized and primitive state schools. Yes, as I noted earlier, religion could persist indefinitely unless we can spread transhumanist perspectives widely.

**MEANING AND EMOTION:** For psychological health and strength humans need to have metaphysical and existential beliefs capable of endowing their lives with a sense of meaningfulness. Religion does a fairly effective job at this, especially considering the falsity of its tenets. Religion is most effective in bolstering the psychologically weak those who find life a burden: "You have a friend in Jesus". So long as you obey the rules and believe you will be rewarded, you needn't be too concerned at being a loser. Religion operates as a philosophical Band-Aid, sheltering weak selves, but is poor at positively promoting individual and social evolution. In being part of another's grand plan one gains the illusion of meaningfulness, even if it is the kind of meaningfulness the peasant felt under feudalism.

By providing a complexly structured myth religions add drama to life, provide usable moral categories, and allow the expression of emotions unique to humans, such as metaphysical joy, love of abstract principle, and identification with deep values outside the self. One of the most gripping of any religion's appeals is its ability to allow the feeling and expression of these powerful and transcendent emotions. An isolated self can neither express itself nor actualize and relate to broad values. By "letting in the holy spirit" or some other link to a divine being or force, one steps beyond the confines of one's self as it is and connects into a meaningful condition. This feature of religious belief is related to its explanatory role since the being or forces which provide the meaningful structure also have important effects such as creating, sustaining, structuring, and destroying humanity, the planet or the universe.

Ludwig Feuerbach explained how religion conceives "God" and gods in anthropocentric terms. "Man this is the mystery of religion projects his being onto objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself." (p.29). Feuerbach characterizes God as the self-consciousness of man freed from all discordant elements. Looking beyond ourselves *as we are* is a good thing, but *externalizing* our values is both alienating and an abdication of responsibility. As I will explain below, transhumanism focuses not on an external state of current perfection (as imagined by us with our near-primitive minds) but on an internalized process of growth and expansion taking us into the future.

As a strategy (generally unconscious) to create meaningfulness, religion is a failure. This is only partly because it is based on ignorance and rejection of evidence and rationality. Even if reality contained the entities and forces claimed to exist, any remotely objective meaning would be absent. What kind of role in a divine plan could endow us with meaning? Being a trivial element of a plan would not satisfy us. We want to be near the center of the plan and to play an important and positive role. "If the cosmic role of human beings was to provide a negative lesson to some others ("don't act like them") or to provide needed food to intergalactic travelers who *were* important, this would not suit our aspirations. The role should focus on aspects of ourselves that we prize or are proud of, and it should use these in ways connected with the reasons why we prize them." (Nozick, p.586-7). Even this would not be sufficient. Fulfilling our role in the plan might require our voluntary compliance, or it might be imposed on us. If it is our choice, we may have no good reason to cooperate. In either case it's unclear how fitting into the plan could give us meaning. Even if it did give us *meaning* it may not be *good* for us. A further problem arises when we ask what it is that gives God's purposes meaningfulness; I refer the reader to Nozick for a tale concerning God's crisis of meaningfulness.

## Religion as Entropic

The urgency of the need to replace religions with other types of meaning-fostering system is all the more evident when we think of the inherent irrationalism of religion and its entropic retardation of progress. As I have noted, essential to religion is faith. This does not mean a rational, pragmatic decision to adopt a hypothesis; faith, in the pertinent sense, means a fixed belief which persists in the face of contrary evidence. As I stressed in my "In Praise of the Devil" (*Extropy* #4, 1989), hostility to reason may be explicit (as in Luther) or it may be revealed only after some probing of beliefs. This is true not only of traditional religions such as Christianity and Islam, and their offshoots such as Mormonism, but also of the diverse variants on New Age mysticism. Those who believe in astrology, crystals, angelic forces, and guiding aliens are not interested in evidence or plausibility.

Irrationality, the rejection of our best means of cognition, is necessarily dangerous and entropic. Entropy, the loss of order, information, and usable energy, is promoted by faith. *Extropic* values of increasing intelligence, freedom, enjoyment, longevity, and expansion can only be achieved by the most scrupulous employment of reason, science, logic, and critical thinking.

Apart from subverting extropic progress, the irrational faith of religion encourages an attitude of resignation. Why bother to try to improve one's lot if it is "God's Will" or "The Cosmic Plan"? On the one hand believers cannot take badness and evil seriously: Given the existence of perfect goodness and power, the bad aspects of life must be illusory, or unimportant compared to the afterlife. On the other hand, religious beliefs are usually accepted because of the person's pessimistic, hopeless view of the human situation (or their personal condition). The surface contradiction is eliminated when we see that the overall view is of a tragic human condition made bearable by a separate realm of divinity, salvation, and paradise.

Where religion offers faith in the invisible and unknowable, Extropian transhumanism embodies the extropic principle of *dynamic optimism*. Unlike faith's unquestioning belief in a superior realm to be bestowed on us through divine agency, dynamic optimism is an internally generated motivation for progress. It is an attitude that looks at evidence, trends, and capacities, but goes beyond them (not *against* them) in setting inspiring goals in order to empower us to move forward, upward, and outward. It says (literally!): "Never say die". Our goals and direction for the future are not rigidly determined by what we

think we know now, since what we understand and what we can accomplish increases daily. Dynamic optimism makes full use of our current understanding and abilities and directs us to move beyond them. The Extropian rejects the common culture of negativity, the focus on negatives, the defense of stagnation and tradition, and advocates a surging forward into a bright future.

The extropic striving for something better than what we have exists in religion in an irrationalist-fantasy form, in which a superior existence is *given to us* by a divine force, an existence only truly accessible after our physical death and decay. Locating "Paradise" in another realm removes from us the necessity and point of taking responsibility for our condition by using reason and technology to transform it. Sometimes Paradise is located (perhaps temporarily) in this world, but it will be brought about by divine power and not by our own efforts. Religion says we need not and should seek physical immortality through life extension, biostasis and so on, since we are already guaranteed these in the afterlife. The Christian notion of salvation by the act of Jesus, rather than through our own restitution for wrongs and our self-transformation, can similarly result in moral hazard. Religion justifies complacency and stagnation. The religionist has no answer to the extropic challenge put by Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "I teach you the overman. Man is something that is to be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?"

## Nihilism

These defects are easy to overlook when it seems that the alternative is nihilism a belief in the absence of meaning and purpose. The nihilist view, as put by Peter Atkins holds that "At root there is only corruption and the unstemmable tide of chaos." Nihilism says that there is no truth about the way things are; the world is valueless and purposeless. As Hans Kung puts it, nihilism represents itself "as insight into the nothingness, contradictoriness, meaninglessness, worthlessness, of reality."

I will not explain what's wrong with nihilism in detail here. I agree with Nietzsche (in *The Will to Power*) that nihilism is only a transitional stage resulting from the breakdown of an erroneous interpretation of the world. We now have plenty of resources to leave nihilism behind, affirming a positive (but continually evolving) value-perspective.

Briefly, to justify the assumption that there is truth to be discovered requires only a critical rationalism that is, a pragmatic and fallibilistic, but optimistic empiricism. If there are regularities then our best strategy for discovering them is a fallibilist but optimistic empiricism.

A reply to nihilism about value is more involved, but essentially involves the observation that we are faced with choices, alternatives, and have conflicting desires that call for ethical principles. There is no intrinsic value built into the universe. Our situation as living, conscious beings faced with choices demands that we adopt and continually refine ethical principles. Rational values must be *practical*. Practical values are those conducive to each individual's survival and flourishing. Given the objective existence of reality, and the existing nature of human or transhuman beings at any point in time, there will be objective (not intrinsic) values: those values that are actually conducive to our flourishing.

## Transhumanism: Meaning as Perpetual Transcendence of Limits

Now that we understand the functions of religion, we can see that a narrow scientism will not succeed in replacing it. A deeply value-laden, yet open and critical system (or systems) will be necessary to dislodge virulent religious memes. The growth of humanism over the decades has begun this job, but now it is time to utilize the more inclusive and memetically attractive option of transhumanism.

The Extropian philosophy is the most developed form of transhumanism. It includes a broad metaphysical perspective on the development, direction, goal and value of life and consciousness. It goes beyond humanism by peering into the future in order to better understand our possibilities. As we move forward through time our understanding of our immense potentials will evolve; there can be no final, ultimate, unalterable philosophy of life. Dogma has no place within transhumanism. Extropianism and other transhumanisms, if they are to be true futurist philosophies, must be flexible and ready to reconfigure into

higher forms. Balancing this should be a resistance to change for the sake of novelty: transhumanism, if it is to guide us, cannot involve a pervasive skepticism. Truth, once found and expounded, should not be quickly jettisoned merely for newness.

Extropian transhumanism offers a optimistic, vital and dynamic philosophy of life. We behold a life of unlimited growth and possibility with excitement and joy. We seek to void all limits to life, intelligence, freedom, knowledge, and happiness. Science, technology and reason must be harnessed to our extropic values to abolish the greatest evil: death. Death does not stop the progress of intelligent beings considered collectively, but it obliterates the individual. No philosophy of life can be truly satisfying which glorifies the advance of intelligent beings and yet which condemns each and every individual to rot into nothingness. Each of us seeks growth and the transcendence of our current forms and limitations. The abolition of aging and, finally, all causes of death, is essential to any philosophy of optimism and transcendence relevant to the individual.

Humans have tried to imbue their lives with a fuller sense of meaning by a belief in the possibility of connecting with a higher realm, by transcending their limitations and merging with or at least communing with the Infinite and Eternal. Apart from the sheer falsity and irrationality of religion it has had the unfortunate consequence (identified by Ludwig Feuerbach) of debasing humanity. By inventing a God or gods and elevating them above us, by making external divinity the source of meaning and value, and by abasing ourselves before these higher powers, we have stifled our own emerging sense of personal value. We can look up while on our knees, but we cannot walk forward.

The Extropian philosophy does not look outside us to a superior alien force for inspiration. Instead it looks inside us and beyond us, projecting forward to a brilliant vision of our future. Our goal is not God, it is the continuation of the process of improvement and transformation of ourselves into ever higher forms. We will outgrow our current interests, bodies, minds, and forms of social organization. This process of expansion and transcendence is the fountainhead of meaningfulness.

What is meaningfulness and why is the extropian philosophy of transhumanism especially effective at nurturing and feeding it? A static life, one which is closed up within itself and never seeks new values, never grows, never explores, is a life lacking meaning. If the universe were controlled by a malevolent being who frustrated all of your plans even before they could move you forward, you would be unable to connect with anything beyond your current condition. Even if you were free to plan and act, your life would lack much meaning if your long term plans reached no further than current narrow concerns (such as the pursuit of immediate gratification and the conditions for its continuance).

It will be clear why death undercuts meaning. The involuntary termination of life limits the ways of and extent to which you can connect your life to other values. People seek meaning by connecting with many different things and causes: Political and social causes of all kinds, having children, seeking beauty or knowledge, relationships with others, and self-development. We worry about lack of meaning when we ask ourselves "Is this all it comes to?", "Is it merely *this*?". We find more meaning as we realize the connections of our concerns to broader values, and as we become more intensely involved in these transcendent concerns.

No matter how broad the field of value we connect our lives to, we can intellectually step outside that field and ask ourselves "what does that come to? What does that mean?". Even if the values we link to are themselves extremely broad and important it seems we can always stand outside that system of meaning and be concerned about its adequacy or its ultimate meaningfulness. The wider the field of the meaning-relations the more difficult and strained will be this questioning. If, no matter how wide the realm with which we connect ourselves and our purposes, there is always a wider context from which to question meaning, perhaps what we require is a field of meaning that is unlimited and outside of which we cannot stand. As Robert Nozick notes, "The intellectual life seems to offer one route across all limits: there is nothing that cannot be thought of, theorized about, pondered."(597) However, though thinking can link us to everything, it is only one particular type of link. A meaningful life will involve more than simply abstract consideration of values.

Meaning involves transcending limits, but transcending limits to connect with something trivial will not serve to provide meaning. For the transcendence of limits to bestow meaning, what we connect with must be valuable. The meaning of a life will be the structure of value with which it connects. If value is organic unity or a certain internal ordering, the transcendence of limits involved in meaningfulness requires the breaking up of old orders, the demolition of stagnant unities. On one view (which Nozick identifies as the classicist) the point of transcending limits is to reach ever higher levels of value. The goal is the unifications, the new levels of value and ordering. An alternative view (the romanticist) locates the goal of the process in the destruction of the unities.

We need not choose between these views. Neither the construction of new orderings and unities nor their transcendence alone is what matters. The importance lies in the process of ordering-and-transcendence. The value of the process is in its alternating unification and transcendence. This alternation alone will not suffice; if the alternation was akin to Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, or Sisyphus' endlessly repetitive task, it would quite meaningless. The process of alternately creating and breaking organic structures can be seen as meaningful if it has direction.

This is the core of the Extropian approach to meaningfulness: Life and intelligence must never stagnate; it must re-order, transform, and transcend its limits in an unlimited progressive process. Our goal is the exuberant and dynamic continuation of this unlimited process, not the attainment of some final supposedly unlimited condition. The goal of religion is communion with, or merely serving, Goda being superior to us. The Extropian goal is our own expansion and progress without end. Humanity must not stagnate to go backwards to a primitive life, or to halt our burgeoning move forward, upward, outward, would be a betrayal of the dynamic inherent in life and consciousness. We must progress on to transhumanity and beyond into a posthuman stage that we can barely glimpse.

God was a primitive notion invented by primitive people, people only just beginning to step out of ignorance and unconsciousness. God was an oppressive concept, a more powerful being than we, but made in the image of our crude self-conceptions. Our own process of endless expansion into higher forms should and will replace this religious idea. As extropians pursuing and promoting transcendent expansion we are the vanguard of evolution. Humanity is a temporary stage along the evolutionary pathway. We are not the zenith of nature's development. It is time for us to consciously take charge of ourselves and to accelerate our progress.

No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality. The future is ours.

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