

Book Review

James A. Herrick

Visions of Technological Transcendence: Human Enhancement and Rhetoric of the Future

—Reviewed by

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Technologists, research scientists, communication professionals, and others involved in computer and internet technologies, including graduate students, will find *Visions of Technological Transcendence: Human Enhancement and Rhetoric of the Future*, by James A. Herrick, both relevant and prescient. Readers interested in philosophy, futurism, or the fate of humanity will like it too. The book achieves its purpose of outlining, with salient references and a sense of history, the prominent strains of thought in the Transhumanist and human enhancement communities—and their philosophical forebears—along with critical responses.

In the first chapter, Herrick introduces the major tenets of Transhumanism, variously referred to as the human enhancement movement, technofuturism, techno-progressivism, and posthumanism. He enumerates the movement's main interests: directed evolution, enhanced humans, artificial intelligence, and space colonization. Finally, he outlines the goal of the study—to identify, explicate, and assess the visionary narratives or myths of technological transcendence currently emerging around the ideas of the human-enhancement movement and techno-progressivism generally (p. 9)—and its structure. The goal is well met.

The book's second chapter clarifies myth as a rhetorical strategy. Herrick argues that myths have

rhetorical power, shaping the way in which we view the world and ourselves. In support, he quotes the work of philosophers and critics, particularly Mary Midgley, who explains that myth and symbolism form “our imaginative visions” (p. 18), which are crucial to our understanding of the world. This association has real-world consequences; *mythos* creates *logos*, or the reasoning behind laws or policy. In her work on the strategic role that myths play in scientific disputes, Midgley observes one particular rhetorical maneuver: the alignment of speculative claims with a widely adopted scientific narrative. The connections between myth and logic serve as a guiding philosophy for the book. The author also uses Northrup Frye's terms “mythological apocalypse” (the utopian endpoint conceptualized by myth) and “epiphany” (the moment at which the transcendent world of myth and the world of nature align) (pp. 17–18).

The second chapter traces the origins of Transhumanism's myths from three authors. Russian philosopher Nikolai Federov, the central figure in the Russian intellectual movement Cosmism, speculated about immortality, space exploration, colonizing the oceans, and mental eugenics. The French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin posited the concept of the “noosphere,” a connected consciousness spanning the globe. British author Arthur Clarke envisioned in his fiction many ideas that would make up scientific inquiry for technofuturists. Through the work of these thinkers, Herrick traces elements of the *mythos* of Transhumanism: immortality, progressive evolution leading to moral and physical perfection, and space colonization.

Herrick follows these elements through the rest of the book. In chapters four and five, he discusses

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the twin myths of progress and evolution, and shows how, using mythical rhetoric, Transhumanism and its forebears established a future defined by inevitable progress. He also demonstrates how writers and thinkers have pushed that idea further, suggesting that technology has agency that drives it forward. For example, the “Singularity,” Ray Kurzweil’s keystone idea, anticipates a near-future moment when man and machine converge into one consciousness. Herrick shows that evolution has been made to support the concept of inevitable progress and demonstrates how evolution became a symbol of progress toward an end and how narratives of progress formed—including racist ideas of Aryan supremacy and eugenics. Evolution transformed into an atheistic religion. Finally, he discusses directed evolution, a Transhumanistic idea that humans can and should take control of their evolution, which flowed from the previous narratives.

In chapters six and seven, Herrick explains how the idea of humans as information arose from the discovery of DNA and the invention of computers. He reviews *Mind Children* by Hans Moravec and the Macy Conferences of the 1950s, where scientific language—in particular, machine metaphors for humans—began to be applied to social science. He then links the myth of the informational person to the project to download human consciousness onto computers, as exemplified by the Mind Clones project advocated by inventor and Transhumanist Marine Rothblatt. Herrick offers criticism that this narrative wrongly privileges information over bodies and minds. Chapter seven exposes perspectives of the brain inspired by J. D. Bernal, whose isolated notion of human essence privileged the brain and excluded the body. Herrick argues that this view has led to ideas of enhanced brains and merging the human brain with machines and other brains. In addition to linked minds, Herrick discusses technologies aimed at increasing intelligence, memory, and other capacities. Finally, he states that these technologies miss the true nature of human beings, could increase inequality, and could even compromise personal privacy.

Herrick breaks down posthuman myths in chapters eight and nine. Without a myth of the posthuman, the ideology of human enhancement is fragmented, rather than unified. In positioning posthumans as something close to God-like, Transhumanists create the perception of positive, inevitable progress. To support this idea, Herrick outlines immortality in chapter nine. He starts with

its history, and its modern-day variants of cryogenic freezing, anti-aging technologies, and cloning. He ends the chapters with responses from critics, including questions about the veracity of the posthuman perspectives.

Chapter ten deals with artificial intelligence (AI) and explores narratives that have developed around efforts to create computer-based intelligence at or above human levels. A consistent theme of these narratives, he says, is to create a God-like intelligence so powerful that machines would threaten human existence. The chapter traces AI from its potential inception to its outcome in human-created deities. He ends the chapter with a critique of human exceptionalism over machines and ethics regarding AI.

Chapter eleven deals with the last main tenet of Transhumanism: space-travel and colonization. Herrick shows that the *mythos* of space travel supports the *logos* of necessary technological advancement. The chapter follows the mythology of space colonization from its origins in the work of Federov to its narratives around the need for space travel to ensure the survival of the human species. He critiques concerns that space exploration will cause neglect of Earth and economic limitations on space travel.

Herrick concludes the book with a set of critical responses to each of Transhumanism’s core beliefs. He broaches the issue of control: the techno-futurists desire too much too soon. He cites literary critic Kenneth Burke’s concern about the totalitarian potential in an ideology of the perfect. He notes critics who say that Transhumanism misses what is most important to human nature. Issues of justice and equality are raised, as well as myriad ethical concerns that will arise with these new technologies. Finally—and what seems, for Herrick, most important—he turns to the issue of religion and wonders whether Transhumanists are overplaying their hand. In the mythologies of Transhumanism, Herrick finds many similarities to the religious mythologies that Transhumanism ostensibly leaves behind. While the Transhumanists rush to their idealized future, perhaps they are too arrogant to look to the mistakes of the past.

Visions of Technological Transcendence stands out as a comprehensive, measured look at technology, its future, and its narratives. Herrick’s well-researched, historical look at the stories we tell ourselves about the future—and, crucially, how

those stories drive technological advances and policies—details the beliefs of Transhumanism: where those beliefs came from and how they are driving the shape of our future. Herrick also balances the book with critical responses to each of these narratives.

The book is focused more on the mythology of the future and technology, rather than on practical

applications of any of the technologies discussed. Therefore, it would be most suited to a graduate-level course, or for consideration by policy makers and designers who are potentially influenced by these myths. The book's value—and its contribution to its field—is in its scope and context, as well as its critical balance.