

In Defiance of Natural Order: The origins of “transhuman” techno-utopia

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The notion that human beings are themselves getting better is quite obviously wrong. The quality of human beings is declining, even while the web of man’s infrastructure grows around him. Modern man is a Wizard of Oz, a shrunken soul in a mighty machine. Thus modern man has multiplied his means of communication with mobile phones, satellites, email, SMS—a whole array of devices—but then finds he has nothing to say or no one to whom to say it. He has a diminishing capacity to make any real contacts. He has prolific external means but no inner reality to share. Ours is the age of the space tourist: truly awesome technology devoted to truly trivial human beings.¹

Introduction

Traditional metaphysics asserts a divine order of reality that, at its unified origin (i.e. the qualified Absolute), is the supreme principle of cosmological order. In this context, terms such as transcendence and transformation refer to an ontological unveiling of the divine reality, a human “awakening” within the vertical metaphysic (*axis mundi*). This pre-eminent axis, permeating the entire seen and unseen cosmos, is marked by divine presence (*al-hadhrat al-ilāhiya*). The higher or principial orders of reality (and thus consciousness) are accordingly and appropriately described as “trans-personal,” or “supra-physical,” etc. These should not be confused with the phenomena of twenty-first century Trans-humanism.² This movement promotes bio-genetic and neurological transfiguration (e.g. life-extension, “mind-uploading,” artificial intelligence [A.I.], nanotechnology, cryonics, etc.) marketed under anchorless terms such as “enhancement” or

¹ R. Blackhirst, ‘The Transcendent Connection and the Problem of Loneliness’, *Vincit Omnia Veritas* 3.1, 2007, p.122.

² The term “transhumanism” originated with Fereidoun M. Esfandiary (1930 – 2000 CE). Transhumanism has given rise to organizations such as the World Transhumanist Association.

“modification.” In a sense one might say that traditional “transformation” alludes to becoming fully “human,” whereas transhumanism aims at leaving the human state behind, an idea expressed in the origins of this term, which is shorthand for “transitory human.”

Traditional metaphysics views the transcendent divinity as pre-existent and primary; however it does not deny the integrity of the immanent level of being, including the natural order. To emphasize the essential reality of the divine order it becomes necessary to use terms such as “supra-sensory,” “meta-historical,” “supra-rational” or “trans-personal.” This is not an attempt to repudiate the senses, historical record, the rational mind, or the personal self; neither do these imply that the divine order is a distant or disconnected state. On the contrary, prophetic tradition speaks of divine Presence (*al-Hadrah*) and has indicated that the “Ground of Being” is ‘nearer to [us] than [our] jugular vein’ (*Qur’an* 50:16). The perceived distancing factor between the conditioned consciousness of the self (the temporal-relative *nafs*) and the unconditioned pure consciousness (the eternal-absolute *Rūh*) is considered proportionate to the degree of egotism of the self.³ If an image in a mirror appears vague or impossible to discern, this may be due to the extent of the layers of dust obscuring the mirror. To polish the mirror or to clarify the lens of perception is to bring into view, and into proximity, that which was thought to be far. Human proximity or remoteness to the divine reality must be considered from a qualitative perspective and not reduced to a quantitative “distance.”

Divine immanence implies that the sacred can be known in this world as theophany. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes ‘the reflection of the Divinity in the mirror of created forms’ as a symbolic “showing” of God (viz. the divine attributes).⁴ Nasr continues,

To behold the cosmos as theophany is not to deny either the laws or the chain of cause and effect which pervade the cosmos but to view the cosmos and the forms it displays, with such diversity and regularity, as

³ By “egotism” I am not referring to the ego of formal psychological definition (i.e. the development of self); I am specifically referring to the narcissistic and divine-denying “commanding” self (i.e. *nafs al-ammara*).

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, p.215, n.6.

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reflections of Divine Qualities and ontological categories rather than a veil which would hide the splendour of the face of the Beloved.⁵

The *Qur'an* relates the following:

On the earth are Signs for those of assured faith, as also in yourself. Will you not then see? (51:20-21)

We will show them Our Signs upon the horizons and in themselves until it is quite clear to them that it is the truth. (41:53)

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily, in that are Signs for those who know. (30:22)

As Frithjof Schuon says,

On the one hand, one must see God in Himself, beyond the world, in the Emptiness of Transcendence; on the other hand and *ipso facto*, one must see God everywhere: first of all in the miraculous existence of things and then in their positive and theomorphic qualities; once Transcendence is understood, Immanence reveals itself of itself.⁶

Similarly Rama Coomaraswamy remarks,

Both [Transcendence and Immanence] are realities. Transcendence without immanence cuts us off from the Divine; Immanence without transcendence cuts the Divine off from us. Both the Transcendent and the Immanent must go together because of the duality "Principle and Manifestation." While the Supreme Principle in itself is neither transcendent nor immanent, but "That which It is," from the perspective of the plane of manifestation, there must needs be a transcendent Creator, and the resulting creation must needs be embraced by immanence for its very existence.⁷

⁵ Ibid., p.197.

⁶ F. Schuon, 'Norms and Paradoxes in Spiritual Alchemy', *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 1.1, 1995, p.18.

⁷ R. P. Coomaraswamy, 'The Problems that Result from Locating Spirituality in the Psyche', *Sacred Web* 9, 2002, pp.109-110.

The natural or cosmological orders represent an “earthly” reflection of divine order. As Kenneth Oldmeadow notes,

The traditional mind perceives the natural world as a hierophany, a theophany, a revelation—in short, as a teaching about the Divine Order. It is so by way of its analogical participation in the Divine qualities, which is to say that natural phenomena are themselves symbols of higher realities. A symbol, properly defined, is a reality of a lower order which participates analogically in a reality of a higher order of being.⁸

Quoting Coleridge, Oldmeadow goes on to say,

Nature, then, is a teaching, a primordial Scripture. To “read” this Scripture, to take it to heart, is ‘to see God everywhere,’ to be aware of the transcendent dimension which is present in every cosmic situation, to see ‘the translucence of the Eternal through and in the temporal.’⁹

Through contemplation and understanding of the cosmological order we can come to an understanding of the divine order. In a process analogous to sympathetic resonance, this living primordial “language” gives valuable expression to supra-rational structures or influences inherent within human consciousness, which otherwise evade empirical method and are exceedingly difficult to comprehend or connect with due to the ontological limitations of the rational mind and its discursive logic. It is asserted that the ecosystemic or harmonic symbol is capable of conveying transformative meaning—for example, bringing understanding to the realities of balance/equilibrium (*al-mīzan*), cohesion (*al-jāmi’*) and unity (*tawhīd*)—because human consciousness is considered interconnected and interdependent with natural order and consequently responds to ecological integrity, itself a theophanic reflection of harmonic principle (*al-bāri*).

Theophanic contemplation and understanding of the natural order brings these underlying interrelationships of human and nature into harmonic resonance, which in turn brings transformative meaning. To receive and integrate this theophany is to experience the divine harmonic composition as a vision of beauty. In true Platonic sense, this beauty is not only

⁸ K. Oldmeadow, ‘The Translucence of The Eternal: Religious Understandings of the Natural Order’, *Sacred Web* 2, 1998, p.20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

expressed as immanent aesthesis but also participates in the transcendent reality of the divine, in that it cultivates a yearning for union with the divine Origin (viz. *rūh al-quddūs*): the pure consciousness gathered in a state of “oneness” (*wahdaniya*).

By extension we come to realise that the natural order—and the fact that humans exist in interconnected-interdependent relation with nature—demands recognition of manifest laws and an appropriate adherence to those laws. Regarding our response to this greater cosmology, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri remarks,

The key issue is what is appropriate and to what end. If it is to realise, both individually and socially, the importance of balancing inner and outer realities and needs, then we are heading towards a healthy and fruitful evolvment. Otherwise, we will collectively suffer from a diminished world of suffocating brutality: a materially-efficient global village without the open spaces, village green and celebration of life; an industrial park with plastic flowers and plants visited by unhappy and overstressed grey people, pretending to be smart.¹⁰

The one who seeks a state of health and equilibrium places himself in the middle of the spectrum of opposites. One’s experiences of the outer, sensory, terrestrial will be balanced by the inner, meaning, and celestial. If any one of these aspects is not met with its opposite in any given act or situation, one experiences imbalance.¹¹

In the words of Imam Malik (c. 715-796 CE),

Whoever has the outer law without the inner reality has left the right way; whoever has the inner reality without the outer law is a heretic; whoever unites the two of them has realisation.¹²

¹⁰ Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, *Witnessing Perfection: A Sufi Guide*, South Africa: Zahra Publications, 2006, p.197.

¹¹ Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, *The Journey of the Self: A Sufi Guide to Personality*, San Francisco: Harper, 1991, p.72.

¹² Quoted in Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, *The Elements of Sufism*, South Africa: Zahra Publications, 2003, p.49.

Sethian gnosticism, utopianism, and transhuman extropianism¹³

Sethian gnosticism was one of many diverse gnostic trends in the first to third centuries of our Common Era.¹⁴ As in most gnostic systems, the Sethians regarded creation as a “prison-house,” governed by an inferior god, the Demiurge, and his wicked angels or archons, cosmologically rendered as aeons. Popular Hellenistic Sethianism was an antinomian doctrine demonstrating a deep ambiguity towards physical existence, choosing to transcend the flesh, and the related religious “law,” by indulging in either the extravagances of the senses or else the personal psyche (cf. the Borborites, the Carpocrations, and the so-called Cainites as described by Philo of Alexandria).¹⁵ Third century Manichean gnostics went to the opposite extreme: practicing severe asceticism, mortification of the flesh, and viewing nature and women as “void of goodness,” subject to “darkness” and inherently “evil.”

Despite their differences the doctrines of the Sethians and the Manicheans suffered similar imbalance as a consequence of a loss of grounding in prophetic tradition, a severance of esoteric principle from

¹³ According to Max More, Chairman of the *Extropy Institute*: ‘Extropianism is a transhumanist philosophy. The Extropian Principles define a specific version or “brand” of transhumanist thinking. Like humanists, transhumanists favour reason, progress, and values centred on our well being rather than on an external religious authority. Transhumanists take humanism further by challenging human limits by means of science and technology combined with critical and creative thinking. We challenge the inevitability of aging and death, and we seek continuing enhancements to our intellectual abilities, our physical capacities, and our emotional development. We see humanity as a transitory stage in the evolutionary development of intelligence. We advocate using science to accelerate our move from human to a transhuman or posthuman condition’ (www.maxmore.com/extprn3.htm; see also <http://www.extropy.org>).

¹⁴ “Sethian gnosticism” appears to have originated, in part, in the Mandaean tradition, which was pre-Christian and pre-first century. Seth is named *Sitil* and is considered not only as the son of Adam but is also allegorically conceived as the “awakened soul” of Adam. In the *Alf Trisar Suialia* text of the Mandaeans, it is stated: ‘When [the cosmic pair] beheld children by divining [or testing] mysteries, Adam and Sitil [Seth] came into being, and yonder they called Seth “the mysteries of the soul” and they called Adam “the body,” because in that Place Adam was the blood and Seth was the soul. And in another sense, Adam was darkness of the eyes and Seth was vision, and Adam was Earth whilst in all the mysteries Seth is the Jordan, for all of them are connected with the Jordan’ (quoted in E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p.23).

¹⁵ Cf. Contemporary society’s “extreme sports” philosophy, as well as the “extreme entertainment” field in general. The innate drive towards the supra-physical—and the human desire to awaken into the timelessness of pure consciousness—have collapsed seemingly entirely into physical or sensory adrenalin-rush events.

authentic exoteric religious frameworks, and a progressive depreciation of principle and practice. These particular gnostic groups were arguably fringe offshoots of the more sober doctrines of the Alexandrian Therapeutae / Hermeticists, the Palestinian Essenes, the Nasurai-Sabi'un, the Buddhists and the Shiva-Shakti tradition (cf. Tantric philosophy). The Zadokite-Essenes (c. 4 BCE - 68 CE) actually expressed disdain for the Sethians, as encountered in Qumranic literature such as the *Damascus Document*.¹⁶ A similar disapproval of Sethian antinomianism was expressed by the Nazorai-Ebionite and Nasurai-Mandaeen communities of *Ya'qob* (James the Righteous) and *Yahya-Yohana* (John the Baptist) respectively. In the *Letter of James* we read, 'Do you not realise, you vain man, that faith without works is useless?' and, 'As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.'¹⁷

In this paper I assert that transhuman ideology resembles key aspects and attitudes of Sethian philosophy, though it must be understood that this is—psychologically speaking—an unconscious relationship (inversely manifested) and not the result of any direct doctrinal or traditional lineage. Sethian gnosticism, always at odds with the orthodox religious establishment, was attempting to restore (return to) the “paradisical” transcendent reality (*pleroma* or “fullness”) and thus escape cosmological conditioning, which it viewed as inherently defective and hostile to the liberty of Spirit.

By the time of the Renaissance and following New World trends in the wake of a declining religious authority, many emerging socio-political movements in pursuit of “liberty” ironically rejected the transcendent principle, while promoting the establishment and “fulfilment” of a utopian secular society. This approach to human development, social progress and geographic conquest was buffered by the philosophical implications of Cartesian dualism and the proto-positivist¹⁸ ideas of early secular humanism—effectively paving the way for the European colonisation of so-

¹⁶ Column VII, Manuscript A, 18-21, in R. Eisenman (tr.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the First Christians: Essays and Translations*, New Jersey: Castle Books, 2004, p.364.

¹⁷ *Letter of James* 2:20 & 2:26.

¹⁸ Positivism (proper) was a mid-nineteenth century philosophy developed by sociologist Auguste Comte (c. 1798-1857 CE). Comte asserted that scientific knowledge—“positively affirmed” through rigid scientific study of the data of sense experience (empiricism)—*was the sole source of authentic knowledge*. Proto-positivist ideas (though yet to be systematically theorised in a formal philosophical framework) appeared common to many thinkers of the Scientific and Enlightenment eras.

called “lesser” foreign societies, the industrialisation of the nineteenth century and the institutionalisation of environmental degradation.¹⁹

It was in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the neoclassical economic system—resulting in the radical displacement of human society from the natural world and from natural order—that a deeply anomic outlook emerged. From within this psycho-social despair arose the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900 CE). The philosophy of Nihilism and the “Will to Power” subsequently held great influence over many modern philosophers. Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch*, which we might well compare with the Sethian “unshakeable race,”²⁰ not only influenced elitist aspects of fascism and Nazism, but was also part-inspiration for the transhuman movements of our twenty-first century.

While (arguably) not indulging in the conventional gratification of the senses, transhumanist philosophy is clearly susceptible to *conceptual* or *ideological* obesity. If “God is dead” (as Nietzsche would have it) and the metaphysical orders denied (as positivist philosophy would have it) then ‘the Word, becoming flesh’ collapses into a state whereby intellectual abstraction rules supreme and is “freed”—seemingly “absolutely”—to manifest as “innovative concept,” “exploitable raw-materials” and “the manufacturing process.”²¹ This metaphysical collapse feeds back into the world at large (as the term “techno-utopia” suggests), resulting in the ongoing depreciation of natural order and a corresponding loss of the sacred. As Tom Cheetham remarks,

... Vattimo’s point, and Heidegger’s too, is, I think, that when everything has become “objective,” when all things are reduced to objects for manipulation, then anything goes. There are no more natural boundaries to be respected, nothing has an inside or an outside, no

¹⁹ See P. Sherrard, *The Eclipse of Man and Nature: An Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Science*, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1987; also S. H. Nasr, ‘Modern Philosophy Since the Renaissance’, in *Religion and the Order of Nature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp.100-113.

²⁰ For the term “unshakeable race,” see Dositheos’ introduction to the ‘Three Steles of Seth’ in *The Gnostic Bible: Gnostic Texts of Mystical Wisdom from the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, W. Barnstone and M. Meyer (eds.), Boston: New Seeds Books, 2006, p.202.

²¹ Hence corporate and commercial trends towards “authorship” of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), including related patenting issues; see also T. Cheetham, ‘The Word Made Flesh: I Am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds’ in *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*, New York: SUNY, 2005, pp.100-106.

individual can have more than an evanescent coherence, everything is understood as cobbled together from parts that are subject to recombination by nature or by technology. Permanence and stability have been replaced by perpetual metamorphoses... What this suggests is that all boundaries are in some sense arbitrary, capable of dissolution and restructuring...

Nihilism as the ungrounding of all facts and the dissolution of all boundaries is expressed through the corrosive dissolving power of technology and of modern economics as its inevitable extension.²²

Ibrahim Kalin contrasts this with the traditional view:

In sharp contrast to the modern view of nature which reduces the order of nature to everlasting change and impermanence, the traditional sciences look upon nature as the abode of both change and permanence. Although the common-sense experience tends to see nature as a perennially changing structure, the world of nature displays also a remarkable continuity, perseverance and harmony as we see it in the preservation of the species and the endurance of natural forms. For Nasr, this double-aspect of nature proves beyond any doubt the Divine quality in nature: the world of nature has not been left to the infinite succession of haphazard and senseless changes which admit no *telos* in the cosmos. On the contrary, nature contains in itself the principles of change and permanence simultaneously and points to a “big picture” in which all of its parts are recognised as forming a meaningful unity and harmony. As Titus Burckhardt reminds us, ‘the Greek word *cosmos* means “order,” implying the ideas of unity and totality. Cosmology is thus the science of the world inasmuch as this reflects its unique cause, Being.’ Defined as such, the order of nature or the cosmos cannot be other than the reflection of a higher principle on the level of relative existence.²³

The association of transhumanism with Sethianism might appear contrived; yet we would do well to consider the following parallelisms. Each has antinomian inclinations; both depreciate the natural order; and both project an ideology of a supreme “being” (though ill-conceived as a

²² Cheetham, ‘The Word Made Flesh: I Am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds’, p.94.

²³ Ibrahim Kalin, ‘The Sacred Versus the Secular: Nasr on Science’ in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, L. E. Hahn et al. (eds.), Chicago: Open Court Press, 2001, pp.448-49.

creaturely existence in transhumanism) which appears as a humanist inversion of the various traditional understandings of the Perfect Man (e.g. the Nasurai-Sabi'un doctrine of the "Perfect Man," the "Standing One," the "Man of Light" (*Enosh Uthra*). I contend that the ideologies of the humanist utopian movements and the twenty-first century extropians (i.e. "techno-utopian" transhumanists) stem from the same underlying psychological tendency to confuse what is secondary, relative, temporal, limited and conditioned (hence diverse, plural and subject to duality), with that which is primary, absolute, eternal, unlimited and unconditioned (unified, unique and primary Origin). There is a projection of what is essentially inner psychological issues (e.g. hyper-addictions, personal insecurities, obsessions with aging, physical limitation, death, boredom, etc.) onto material existence, which is inherently relative and temporal.

For the ideologies we are considering, the world or the natural order is a "prison-house" imposing limits on their "commanding self's" (*nafs al-ammara*) personal ambition. The result is a seemingly irrepressible and ultimately destructive urge to alter the very fabric of reality in order to suit one's personal tastes. This can be ascertained in Sethian antinomianism, twentieth century techno-industrialism and in the modification technologies of the transhumanists. One need only consider the current state of the world in terms of a fragmenting human consciousness and a declining ecological order to realise that these ideologies have resulted in very little authentic development of self, but have exceeded themselves in the areas of materialism, licentiousness and mythic inflation.²⁴ This is all too predictable given these paradigms are not grounded in Reality. As Ali Lakhani notes,

The authentic Self in tradition is spiritual, which is to say that it is one with the substance of all reality. All spiritual questing is at once a search for an Origin (to which one returns) and a Center (in which one reposes), which are in substance identical. These correspond to the Heart of oneself, the genuine Self which is in essence the One Spirit that subsists in all reality. It is this Self that must be understood as the *Übermensch* (the Nietzschean "Superman"), as Ananda K.

²⁴ See T. Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post-Industrial Society*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973; also J. Wilkerson, 'Energy and Psyche: Resource Addiction in the Technological Age' (term paper submitted for Environmental Management and Policy class, *Energy and Society*, University of North Carolina, April 2006—<http://www.ecopsychology.org/journal/ezone/archive3/addiction.pdf>).

Coomarswamy noted in his essay on Nietzsche, not the psychic or sensational self of common parlance or of the ill-termed “Nazi gnosis.” The Nietzschean “Will to Power” or its Blakean equivalent of “Energy” (symbolised by the “Tyger” whose “immortal symmetry” cannot be framed) are thus to be understood strictly as faculties of the authentic Self or the “Inner Man,” and not as the personal cravings or lower impulses of the “Outer Man.” Mistake the source and it is easy then to misunderstand the impulse emanating from it. It is this misreading that informs the view of those who mistake licentiousness for freedom and amorality for virtue.²⁵

This confusion is also at the heart of misunderstandings about the nature of “freedom.” As Timothy Scott observes,

To say Relative is to say Manifestation, which, in turn, is to say limitation. Thus, paradoxically, the limitation of the Relative satisfies the achievement of the All-Possibility, and with it Divine or Absolute Freedom, is maintained. From the exoteric perspective Divine Freedom comes at the cost of human freedom. However, this point of view rests on a confusion of the two levels of Relative and Absolute, or Being and Beyond-Being. Thus the exoterist mistakenly places the Divine Foreknowledge—itself beyond Time in virtue of being at the principal level—within the realm of Being. Divine Freedom relates to the Absolute. Human freedom, at least exoterically, relates to the Relative.²⁶

Divine “freedom,” the unbounded or the unlimited is absolute only at the supra-sensory or trans-personal level. Yet when transhumanism speaks of the freedom of “transcending” so-called limitations and defects, it is not

²⁵ A. Lakhani, ‘Umberto Eco, Fascism and Tradition’, *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 11, 2003, pp.10-11. It is important to clarify what the *Sophia Perennis* identifies as the “authentic Self” (i.e. *Rūh / Atman*), and what *Tasawwūf* identifies as the “essential self” (i.e. *nafs al-kamīla*). In the tradition of *Tasawwūf* the *nafs* (“conditioned self”) is considered temporal, relative and subject to duality, whereas the *Rūh* (“unconditioned Self”) is considered eternal, absolute and unified (i.e. beyond subject-object polarity). For a relevant contemporary presentation of the cosmology, nature and role of the *nafs* and *Rūh*, see Haeri, *The Journey of the Self: A Sufi Guide To Personality and Witnessing Perfection: A Sufi Guide*.

²⁶ T. Scott, ‘The Elect and the Predestination of Knowledge “Esoterism” and “Exclusivism”: A Schuonian Perspective’ in *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge*, E. Crangle (ed.), Sydney: Sydney University Studies in Religion 5, 2004, pp.140-41.

referring to a vertical unveiling of the unconditioned, unbounded and ever-perfect pure consciousness—an order of consciousness implicitly denied in transhumanism; instead it is referring solely to the transfiguration of the existential, or conditioned, horizontal plane of existence. Transhumanism should therefore be considered a neo-utopian and quasi-Darwinian philosophy filtered through techno-idealism.²⁷

The *World Transhumanist Association* has given the following two formal definitions for transhumanism [my comments are italicized in brackets]:²⁸

1. The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging [*and why not—the “Trojan Horse” strategically relied on the vanity of Troy*] and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities [*i.e. this is not a transpersonal or trans-egoist “transformation” but clearly a “self” centred affirmation*].
2. The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations [*does this include the ramifications of neo-positivism, scientific reductionism, the conceptual collapse of the metaphysic, and a loss of the sacred?*], and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies [*but not from those groups they classify as “bioconservatives” or “bioluddites”*].

Although enjoying a loose and somewhat convenient affiliation with post-structuralism (making absolute the concept of “loop-hole”),²⁹ the *telos* of transhumanism is to be able to re-engineer or re-configure the natural

²⁷ Transhumanism (like posthumanism) views itself as a “post-evolutionary” movement; it desires to control its own evolution whereby “natural selection” would give way to “deliberate change,” referred to as “participant evolution” (see N. Bostrom, *The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction*, version 2.1, Willington: World Transhumanist Association, 2003, <http://www.transhumanism.org/resources/FAQv21.pdf>).

²⁸ Bostrom, *The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction*, p.4.

²⁹ Cf. Post-structuralism’s aversion to any fixed ontological/epistemological framework; compare also Sethian antinomian rhetoric.

order (viz. human bio-genetics and neuro-programming) so as to create “the perfect transhuman entity” (cf. the Nietzschean *Übermensch*; the Sethian “unshakeable race”). This ultimate transhuman entity is hoped to be an immortal of technologically enhanced physiology (via software-hardware interfacing) who is effectively “god” of his/her own evolutionary development, susceptible neither to “sickness” nor “suffering,” which transhumanism views as a result of innate bio-neurological defect or inefficiency. Transhumanism goes on to fantasize of a “non-stupid” society of genetically and neurologically perfected beings that are finally able to co-exist on this planet (or perhaps, more enticingly, in outer-space)³⁰ where “happiness” and “satisfaction” (according to the transhuman paradigm) are to be attained “absolutely.” Running parallel to these philosophies are trends relating to “robotic entertainment” and “artificial intelligence,” which anticipate the development not only of “perfected” transhumans but also of entities that are simultaneously considered to be completely “entertained” or “entertaining” (i.e. never suffering boredom or being boring). As Cheetham observes, ‘all of this points to the dominance of “one, absolute, total, all-encompassing God—the God of technology”.’³¹

The transhumanist desire to annihilate the human being into a technocentric utopian society, where technology is paradigmatic, all-encompassing and all-powerful—a “technological singularity”—inverts (and thus inversely affirms) the perennial truth that the human being was created to ultimately attain trans-personal “union” (*wahidiya/ahadiya*) with the divine Absolute at the level of pure Consciousness, which is the only real, truly all-encompassing, primary power, origin and sustainer.³² *La ilaha illa ‘llah*: Nothing exists absolutely, save for the Divine Absolute. Accordingly, Cheetham responds,

³⁰ The transhumanist’s desire to live in outer-space reflects how a denial or repression (i.e. “collapse”) of the *meta-physic* invariably manifests as some obsession with the *extra-terrestrial*.

³¹ Cheetham, ‘The Word Made Flesh: I Am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds’, p.104.

³² The “divine Absolute” here refers to pure Being, which is to say, the “qualified Absolute.” “Trans-personal union” refers to union in the sense of identification with, and hence knowledge of, the qualified Absolute; there is also the non-qualified Absolute, the unattainable or unknowable Essence, Beyond-Being (*al-Dhāt, nirguṇa-Brahman, Ayn, supra-Esse, Deus absconditus*). Pure Consciousness is considered “absolute” in relation to creation, existence and the self, but is conceptually “relative” to the unmanifest non-qualified Absolute.

The “open sea” that Nietzsche celebrates is not the “ocean without a shore” that Ibn ‘Arabi finds at the end of the mystical quest. There is a world of difference between *hubris* and mystical poverty, between *übermensch* and the *darwish*.³³

Transhumanism conceptually collapses the supra-physical absolute into a physical or material “absolutism.” The aim is to be able to transmute physical matter in order to transform society for the better. However, with this transformation we find such problematic issues as mono-culture, mythic inflation of the (relative) personal self or commercial brand, corporate genetic manipulation, epistemological fascism, fundamentalist scientism, rampant techno-industrialism, ecological degradation, theophanic depreciation, a loss of the sacred, and (significantly) a loss of the true human depth that harmonizes with the supra-physical divine attributes. As I have written elsewhere,

One of the many disastrous consequences of an ongoing repression of [the] trans-personal Ground of Being—and the mistaken assumption of the Absolute by a relative entity or self—is epitomized in our techno-industrial pursuit to convert the earth into one large global factory—reinforced by multinational monopoly... This apparent narrowing of human perspective is the logical result of paradigmatic trends linking back to the so-called Age of Enlightenment. With the advent of Cartesian dualism, positivist philosophy and a corresponding scientific reductionism—hence an increased denial of all metaphysical realities—these paradigmatic trends were naturally followed by a human failure to correctly grasp the reality of the divine Absolute and a corresponding inability to perceive nature and cosmos as sacred theophany. These misperceptions and repressions consequently and inevitably created destructive *inversions* of essential timeless truths, and these distortions now find projection in society as inflated “absolutisms”—psychologically and ideologically perpetuated by the materialist self as it wanders in narcissistic ignorance.³⁴

The prophetically recognised divine attributes, such as the All-Pure, All-Powerful, the Exalted, All-Knowing, Most-Beautiful, the Unique-One, the

³³ Cheetham, ‘The Word Made Flesh: I Am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds’, p.99.

³⁴ D. Catherine, *Nature, Theophany and the Rehabilitation of Consciousness* (e-book), South Africa: Üfudü Medicinal Arts, 2007, p.6.

Unconditioned, Unbounded, Unlimited, Absolute, Ever-Living, Ever-Perfect, etc., are being collapsed and conveniently misappropriated by the conceptually-obese self (*nafs*),³⁵ which can never become absolute, eternal or unlimited because its very existence is relative, temporal and thus limited.³⁶ Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri notes,

The great [human] paradox will dissolve by the discovery that human nature comprises two divergent entities belonging to two different... domains. One entity is the self [*nafs*], which is worldly and has physical and outwardly definable aspects; the other is the soul [*Rūh*], which is the seat of consciousness and the source of life; it is “heavenly,” unseen and intangible.

The self can take on the negative attributes of meanness, arrogance and other egotistic traits when it faces the black hole of self assertion. The self will only stop mimicking and being a parody of the soul when it realises its total dependency upon it and gives up its pretences of deserving to be acknowledged and honoured.³⁷

Keeping in mind the characteristics of the self, as a relative, conditioned, limited and temporal entity, it is important to grasp the fact that the space-time cosmos the self inhabits does not simply express concepts of duality; rather, it is manifest *as* duality. The keys to cosmological duality are *balance*, *equilibrium* and *harmony* within a system of interconnected and interdependent relations, fostered through knowledge of, and real-time access to, the supreme principle, which is also our Ground of Being—

³⁵ E.g. Attempts to eliminate aging or desiring physical immortality.

³⁶ The evolved, transformed or “essential” self (*nafs al-kamila*) is capable of reflecting the divine attributes, but it does so by virtue of the fact that it has cognition of, or is aligned with, the trans-personal Spirit (*Rūh*). Spirit is not only the source of one particular human (or group’s) existence but is simultaneously this very moment (and moment after moment) the absolute source and sustainer of all humanity, as well as all creation. If the divine attributes are incorrectly or absolutely assumed (out of context) by the lower egocentric self (*nafs al-ammara*), they become negatively inverted and oppressively projected into the world through the agency of vice. Those who have little concept of, or aspiration towards, the inner delights and sanities of their religion but are driven by their own fear, hate and anger are often the ones who aspire towards terrorism and torture as a means by which to “purify” the world. This is simply the projection of lower tendencies, confusion and inner fragmentation onto the outside world. As the great saint-poet Jalal al-Dīn Rumi once remarked: “Ill-disciplined people set fire to the landscape.”

³⁷ Haeri, *Witnessing Perfection: A Sufi Guide*, p.79 & p.139.

“nearer to us than nearness itself.” It is this metaphysical balance or equilibrium, within the greater context of interconnectedness and interdependence, that is seemingly lost to Sethian gnosticism, utopianism and transhuman extropianism.

It is self-delusion to think that we can bio-genetically or neurologically alter human beings—thus subverting ontological order—and not have this adversely affect the greater ecological or natural order. What is essentially required is not a technological “enhancement” of the human being, but instead an actual *rehabilitation* of the human consciousness, which is currently radically dispersed and susceptible to fragmentation.³⁸ According to Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee,

The arrival of human consciousness was a big step in planetary evolution, and the development of human consciousness has been central to the development of the planet. With our narrow cultural focus on the outer material world, we are unaware of this; we tend to see progress in material terms. But the true measure of a civilization are not the monuments it leaves behind, its sciences or the sophistication of its weapons or the standard of living its citizens enjoy, but the quality of the consciousness it fosters. The real evolution is the evolution of consciousness. And the next step in planetary evolution requires that we wake up to the central role that consciousness plays in it, and that we recognise our consciousness as part of the consciousness of the whole and step into the awareness and responsibility that brings.

³⁸ It is important to note that by stating physicality—and, by extension, a physical world in time and space (subject to duality and plurality)—we are simultaneously acknowledging, to a certain degree, the reality of dispersion (*viz.* a dispersed consciousness). The manifest world is not an absolute solid/permanent order of reality and is thus continually subject to varying degrees and states of dissolution and re-creation, and hence movement and dynamism. Dispersal through a process of involution into time, space and physicality is thus an inevitable factor in the physical, manifest or created realms. However, integral to our understanding of these space-time domains, and the health thereof, is a dynamic state of *equilibrium*, which ensures and maintains order (*i.e.* *kosmos*) within the seen and unseen domains. To acknowledge, in the Platonic sense, that “Beauty is the Splendour of the True,” is to inevitably acknowledge *harmony* and *equilibrium* (both reflective of permanent divine attributes) as being desirable states in a multidimensional and multifaceted cosmos. Therefore, equilibrium and cosmological order are considered essential to the “rehabilitation” of human consciousness due to them being interconnected and interdependent.

Our collective myths are more than a story we tell ourselves about the world—they shape the way we live in it, and even more fundamentally affect how the energy of life itself can flow. The myth of the past era gave rise to the idea of science as a purely objective pursuit and allowed us to believe we could impose our will upon the natural world. This has become such a dominant view of our world that we have even forgotten that it is a myth, a product of our consciousness. As a result, though we may see the connection between our actions and the pollution and ecological imbalance that are sickening the world, we fail to see the underlying cause, the myth that has made those actions appear logical and acceptable, and so we cannot trace our situation to its real source: our consciousness. It is our consciousness that has created this ailing world.³⁹

Although transhumanism promotes and embraces the ethic of clean(er) technologies, which will be less harmful to the natural environment, it fails to see that its primary aspiration to bio-genetically or neurologically enhance or modify the human being (i.e. the microcosm) will inevitably impinge upon the outer macrocosm. Oldmeadow explains,

The peculiar position of the human being can also be illuminated by recourse to the traditional cosmological principle of the microcosm/macrocosm, expressed most succinctly perhaps in the Hermetic maxim, “as above, so below.” In brief, man is not only in the universe but the universe is in man: ‘there is nothing in heaven or earth that is not also in man.’⁴⁰

This is an immutable metaphysical law and it is critical that we grasp its implications. To reconfigure the neurological or bio-genetic structures of humans is to manipulate human consciousness according to the dictates of a reductionist technocratic mindset that explicitly denies the supra-physical divine Principle sustaining cosmological order. As a consequence, human life, purpose, cognition, the supra-rational intellect and, in effect, the entire interconnected and interdependent spectrum of consciousness (both inner and outer) are “absolutely” reduced to the sole concerns of only one

³⁹ L. Vaughan-Lee, *Alchemy of Light: Working with the Primal Energies of Life*, California: The Golden Sufi Center, 2007, p.38; 34-35.

⁴⁰ Oldmeadow, ‘The Translucence of The Eternal: Religious Understandings of the Natural Order’, p.19.

(contextually minor) zone of consciousness within the greater spectrum or whole. Transhumanism perceives this as a most healthy rationalisation; an exalted display of “reason.” Yet pure “rationalism,” according to the logic of the supra-rational Intellect, appears quite irrational.

Interconnectedness, interdependence, and the required balance

If natural order forms part of the theophany of the greater whole and if human consciousness is to be considered interconnected and interdependent with natural order, then it would be impossible for transhuman ideals not to disrupt, in one way or another, the ecological and theophanic orders. Accordingly Cheetham remarks,

The “real work” for us is simultaneously a spiritual, ethical and physical struggle. “Like” can only be known by “like”: this means that thought and being are inseparable, that ethics and perception are complementary. The form of the soul is the form of your world. This fundamental unity of the faculties of human cognition and the world to which they give access is that eternal pagan substrate of all religion... This sympathy is at once perceptual and cognitive and requires an attitude towards reality that the modern world has nearly completely forgotten. It is a stance towards reality that gives weight to the display of the image, denying the schism between the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective.⁴¹

As I have noted elsewhere, ‘When we think or speak of cosmos or nature, we tend to perceive or portray it as an environmental form and substance existing in the world “out-there” somewhere’.⁴² However, the human mind is inextricably intertwined with the natural world and therefore responds to ecological integrity, as well as affects it.

There are essentially two types of ecology: mainstream or “Shallow Ecology” and “Deep Ecology.” An ecosystem is commonly defined as a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and the so-termed “non-living” environment, all interacting as a functional unit. Despite this “shallow” ecological definition, humans do form an integral part of the planetary ecosystem and its various sub-systems. Deep Ecology

⁴¹ Cheetham, ‘The Word Made Flesh: I Am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds’, pp.109-110.

⁴² Catherine, *Nature, Theophany and the Rehabilitation of Consciousness*, p.50. The following paragraphs revisit some key ideas from this paper.

developed out of the recognition that humans are invariably connected to all living entities and ecosystemic processes (hence the terms *interconnectedness* and *interdependence*). Deep Ecology sees the ecological predicament as a crisis of anthropologic consciousness whereby ecological functioning and health is affected by the human self's perception of itself, the world and our value systems. Similarly, ecopsychology—the term is credited to Theodore Roszak from his book *The Voice of the Earth*—attempts to understand the often ignored or misunderstood reality of consciousness, and its interconnected-interdependent relationship with the physical/material world, within the context of the present ecological crisis.

The natural world is an integral part of the spectrum of consciousness and intimately linked to human consciousness and its health. Not only have millennia of shamanism and metaphysical studies made this shared reality abundantly clear but also the secular fields of ecopsychology and quantum physics have discovered interconnectivity and interdependence between consciousness and the so-termed material universe—to the point that we now need to collectively re-evaluate the perceived (Cartesian) schism between the two. If, according to the most progressive fields of study, human consciousness is shown to be interconnected and interdependent with the natural world and thus natural order, then a significant cause of the ecological crisis rests on the way that humanity views itself and its relation to the natural environment; how we perceive of, or ascribe value to self, nature and cosmos. Ecological stability is invariably related to the degree of ontological stability and integration within human consciousness.

It is precisely as a result of a human crisis of consciousness that destructive attitudes, desires and perceptions are formed and projected outwardly, thereby exacerbating the crisis of ecosystem, social-system and signalling a disruption in human consciousness that interacts with these systems. A mirror cannot help but reflect: fragmentation of consciousness will eventually manifest in some form of depression, neurosis, psychosis or identity disorder, which in turn will lead to instances of abuse, fragmentation of self, of family, of community, of society, and of the natural or ecological order. “As within, so without,” means that the outer world will inevitably reflect the human condition, and *vice versa*, resulting in a feedback-loop with serious consequences for all life on earth.⁴³

⁴³ Alternatively: “as above, so below.” Nasr remarks: “The Earth is bleeding from wounds inflicted upon it by a humanity no longer in harmony with Heaven and therefore in constant

Transhumanism, despite its intellectual claims and its apparent concern for ethics, profoundly misunderstands the greater cosmological unfolding, including the purpose of human existence within this larger metaphysical framework. As Rodney Blackhirst remarks,

...the great productive surge of the modern revolution inevitably involves the further deterioration of man's primal integrity—machines exteriorize human faculties, technological man is hell-bent on a strangely misconceived quest to make himself redundant, thinking that this somehow fulfils all human dreams. But “transhuman” is really *sub-human*. “Robo-buddies” are the proposed solution to the biosocial loneliness of an advanced, atomized ultra-selfish society, but there is no technological solution yet—other than sedatives—for metaphysical longing.⁴⁴

The utopian or extropian transhumanist goal is a metaphysical absurdity, and a dangerous one at that, since the very reality and nature of cosmological existence is that of (dynamic) interplay and equilibrium between complementary opposites, e.g. light/shadow; heat/cold; birth/death, joy/sadness; etc. In recognition of the nature and dynamics of cosmological order, both seen and unseen, the *Qur'an* relates,

The sun and moon both run with precision. The stars and the trees all bow down in adoring prostration. He erected heaven and established the *balance* [emphasis mine]. (55:1-5)

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily, in that are Signs for those who know. (30:22)

The attempt to raise one or the other relativity to absolute status will inevitably result in a severe backlash by the respective repressed complementary-opposite. The only way to move beyond the interplay of this duality is to transcend (metaphysically-speaking) these opposites. Real “transcendence” or “qualified non-dualism” or “non-qualified (pure) non-

strife with the terrestrial environment” (*Religion and the Order of Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.3).

⁴⁴ Blackhirst, “The Transcendent Connection and the Problem of Loneliness,” p.133.

dualism” belong to an entirely different order of consciousness and have precious little to do with techno-idealism, arrogant scientism or “reason.” Nothing of what we commonly perceive as “mind” or “existential affairs” can perceive of, or contain, this Reality. Only pure Being (pure Consciousness) is able to attain cognition/gnosis of this Reality, since they are ultimately consubstantial—“one without a second,” beyond subject-object polarity. This pure Consciousness is innate, primary and need not be outwardly “acquired”; it just needs to be recognised and realised within the very core, so-to-speak, of the human *Being*.

There is no need to subject the natural environment, including human biology, genetics, and neurology, to techno-industrial “enhancement,” quite simply because the existential remedy—and metaphysical technique—is innate to humanity and has been so since the dawn of human consciousness.⁴⁵ As we are told,

We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains. They refused it and were afraid, and man accepted it. (*Qur’an* 33:72)

And He taught Adam the Names of all things. (2:31)

And certainly We created man—and We know what his mind suggests to him—and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein. (59:16)

And according to Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib,

Your sickness is from you—but you do not perceive it; your remedy is within you—but you do not sense it; you presume that you are a small entity—whereas within you is enfolded the entire universe. You are indeed the evident book, by whose alphabet the hidden becomes manifest; therefore you have no need to look beyond yourself, what you seek is within you, if only you reflect.⁴⁶

The divine truth (*haqiqah*) and gnosis (*ma’rifah*) refer to insight and unveiling; they are not “products” that are going to be designed, engineered, programmed, manufactured, patented or uploaded by an “intellectually enhanced” transhumanist sometime in the idealized techno-aware future.

⁴⁵ The “adamic” consciousness and the meta-historical divine attributes (*asmā al-hūsna*).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Haeri, *Witnessing Perfection: A Sufi Guide*, p.19.

Unfortunately, far from a remembrance, realization and return to pure Being, it appears as though we suffer from a catastrophic amnesia and have inherited millennia-long fixations with materiality and sensory appeasement, often at the expense of the many other subtle or more essential faculties, states or stations of self. Sadly, the transformation of the lower, egocentric self (*nafs al-ammara*) into a more evolved or integrated self (*nafs al-kamila*)—in unison with pure consciousness—is becoming stagnant in an endless soap-opera adaptation of the “fall” of Adam.⁴⁷ “Adam” or the “adamic consciousness,” mythopoetically represents the human archetype and prototype; his “forgetfulness” and dispersal of consciousness are our daily inheritance.

The adamic myth is neither complete nor the archetypal journey fulfilled without the revelation that a realised awakening into pure consciousness (*rūh al-quddūs*) is divinely programmed within us, for:

I was a hidden treasure,
and out of love to become known
I created the worlds (*hadīth qudsī*)

The significance and irony of this prophetic life-transaction become clear when we refer to the phenomenon of artificial intelligence and the parallel quest for an obediently serving robot. Both can be said to be the sum of our own artificiality, animated by a pale projection of the “illumination” we deny within our own consciousness: a denial of the “Light of lights.”⁴⁸ This primary unified consciousness has also been referred to as the “redeemed adamic consciousness” and, mythopoetically speaking, the “light” or “flaming gold” of the Holy Grail.

⁴⁷ From a unified consciousness into a space-time dimension of duality, and the resulting “worldly” dispersal to be endured. Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri explains: “Although Adam was in the garden he did not realise its perpetual blissfulness. The descent to earth and the experiences of pain and pleasure, good and bad, light and darkness are necessary foundations to understanding the nature of harmony and unity. Thus, our experience of distance from the original divine “gatheredness” and restless worldly dispersion is in order to ascend back to the original oneness, which is encoded within every human soul” (Haeri, *Witnessing Perfection: A Sufi Guide*, p.9). Haeri continues: ‘We had to descend to the world of multiplicity so as to climb the ladders of consciousness to unity’ (ibid., p.26).

⁴⁸ In the tradition of *Tasawwūf* this supreme prophetic Light is referred to as *an-Nūr Mohammedi*.

If we cannot turn with awareness, love, knowledge and gratitude towards the Ground of Being, then predictably (but for the most part unconsciously) we will obsess about infusing a technological product with consciousness in order that *it* will come to know, love, praise and serve *us*! This is a distorted inversion of the need for divine awakening, reflected in our ongoing quest to replicate consciousness, accrue fame and find social acceptance—currently being projected onto commercial products and technological inventions. This may be considered a projection of a repressed archetype.

If the supra-physical and trans-personal Absolute is (conceptually) collapsed into an “absolute” transfiguration of *material* substance, including neural pathways and genetic mapping, this will only mark the beginning of a torturous future for those awake to what it truly means to be human, including those sensitive to theophany. The only remedy for “transhuman” reductionism is the *trans-personal* or *trans-egoic* approach, that is, a transformation of subjective *self* consciousness.

Are we, yet again—much like the Holy Grail extravaganzas in recent years—witnessing a profound misinterpretation of the (metaphysical) alchemical way?

Someone said, “There is something I have forgotten.” There is one thing in the world that should not be forgotten. You may forget everything except that one thing, without there being any cause for concern. If you remember everything else but forget that one thing, you will have accomplished nothing. It would be as if a king sent you to a village on a specific mission. If you went and performed a hundred other tasks, but neglected to accomplish the task for which you were sent, it would be as though you had done nothing. The human being therefore has come into the world for a specific purpose and aim. If one does not fulfil that purpose, one has done nothing. *We proposed the faith unto the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains; and they refused to undertake it, and were afraid of it; but the human being undertook it: and yet truly, he was unjust to himself, and foolish* [Qur’an 33:72].⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Fihī ma Fihī*, #4, in Kabir Helminski (ed.), *The Rumi Collection*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999, p.1.