Swarms Are Hell: Warfare as an Anti-Transhuman Choice

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Abstract

The use of advanced technologies, even of so-called transhuman technology, does not make militaries transhuman. Transhumanism includes dimensions of ethics that are themselves in direct conflict with many transhuman capabilities of soldiers in warfare. The use of advanced weapons of mass destruction represents an anti-humanism that undermines the modern, open, and high-tech nation state.

1. Transhuman warriors?

Warfare is becoming transhuman, in some senses. The dust-up that outgoing Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta caused by proposing the "Distinguished Warfare Medal" for drone operators in February 2013 was telling. Among those who supported the proposal was P.W. Singer, who concluded that "a Predator pilot carrying out an important mission, such as the 2006 operation that found the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, or a cyber-warrior taking down a key enemy network" should receive a medal for outstanding service (2013). Subsequently, however, incoming Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel canceled the plan. This controversy reminds us that there are sincere differences of opinion about the role, value, and honor of the jacked-in technicians working in virtual and augmented realities to advance geopolitical agendas with military might.

Arguments exist for accelerating the marriage of technology and warfare under the banner of transhumanism: "If transhumanism can become an important node in the semantic web of military terms, it might shine light into the shadows cast by the grim uses of the technologies associated with it" (Evans 2007). Part of the argument is that transhumanism is a force for morality in the military, and I will revisit this below; but part of the argument is that "transhuman technology" can bring to bear such overwhelming force that military (and, later, cultural and political) superiority is assured. This sounds akin to the promotion of a unipolar global order – the chief idea of the neoconservatives behind the Project for the New American Century (Vaisse 2010; Project for the New American Century 1997). We can advance evidence for the horrific failure of these neoconservatives' strategy and tactics in attempting to accomplish their goals (look for example to the fracturing of Iraq since March 2003), but that is not the same thing as critiquing their position about the form that the global order should take. In any case, transhumanism has been put forward as a means to global order (Evans 2013), and transhuman technologies "raise the prospect of a new dimension to human security: the protection of human identity and dignity in a posthuman world" (McIntosh 2010).

Tony Tether, head of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency from 2001 to 2009, opened a DARPAtech conference with a speech that included an invitation to imagine a transhuman military:

> Imagine 25 years from now where old guys like me put on a pair of glasses or a helmet and open our eyes. Somewhere there will be a robot that will open its eyes and we will be able to see what the robot sees. We will be able to remotely look down on a cave and think to ourselves, "Let's go down there and kick some butt." And the robots will respond, controlled by our thoughts. It's coming. Imagine a warrior – with the intellect of a human and the immortality of a machine – controlled by our thoughts. (Tether 2002)

Tether here blends the longstanding transhumanist concerns with artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented realities, and cognitive and physical enhancements with a sort of mid-life crisis pining for "kicking ass and taking names." Here we have a visionary call from the leader of the most influential defense and security visioning house in the world for a kind of transhumanist version of a retiree's red muscle car, but blended with a dissociated blood thirstiness. That particular vision has since had 11 years to advance into reality.

There are many military projects that take a cue from transhumanist concerns. From "Combat Zones that See" (total surveillance tracking every element and person), or the advanced military robots produced by Boston Dynamics (Petman, BigDog, etc., and acquired by Google in late 2013), to the REPAIR program (using implanted circuitry in the brain for direct control of how a warrior processes information in the battlefield), warfare has been set on a trajectory toward the posthuman.

2. Don't forget the humans

But transhumanism is not just about the appropriation of advanced technologies for transforming the human individual into a posthuman; nor is it only about taking strategic steps to funnel societies (or the world as a whole) into a technological singularity.

"Transhumanism has roots in rational humanism," writes Nick Bostrom; transhumanism cannot be separated from its roots in humanism, and indeed "encompasses many principles of modern humanism" (Bostrom 2005; Humanity+ 2009). Some of these principles are morality, personal choice, individual liberty, general well-being, reduction of existential risks, and the reduction of involuntary suffering in general (Humanity+ 2009).

One undeniable emphasis of transhumanism is the notion that individual persons (whether human or non-human, just in case you favor the idea of "uplift") should have the right to modify themselves with technology. The Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies posits an orientation toward liberty for technoprogressives: "[we] want to see all sentient beings protected in their rights for self-augmentation, enhancement, or modification, and we want everyone to have fair and equal access to such treatments" (IEET n.d.). It does not follow, however, that corporations, organizations, governments, or militaries have the right to modify themselves by modifying their customers and clients, participants, citizens, or personnel. The principles mentioned above are opposed to the imposition of modifications on individuals without consent. Yet in the case of both soldiers and their victims, militaries need no consent.

3. Tactics and values

Furthermore, and closer to the core of the issue: the use of advanced technologies that in any way erodes or inhibits morality, personal choice, individual liberty, or the general well-being of non-combatants is anti-transhumanist. As Spezio's discussion of the attempt to "Vulcanize" soldiers (make them emotionless for increased battlefield efficiency) makes clear, a twisting of the transhuman vision of modified humans might be used to horrifying effect: "DARPA's vision of the trans / posthuman 'war fighter'... runs counter to the most prevalent transhumanist aspirations with regard to enhancing the human condition" (2011). Indeed, to the extent that transhuman warfare infringes on the personal freedoms or well-being of any non-combatant, we must say that it (and warfare generally) is also anti-humanist.

Transhumanism is an ethical enterprise. Transhumanism has little place in warfare. In appropriating some of its aspects for warfare, militaries necessarily shift away from humanism. In the case of the United States military, wasn't it founded to protect and defend a humanist experiment?

Consider two types of advanced weaponry that undermine the ideals of an open, liberal democratic (humanist) nation state:

1. Robots and drones invite human participants to enter into a shared cognitive space, or a perception of space that replaces or augments normal sensory function (see Morales' and Cummings' survey of pilots' attitudes toward unmanned aerial vehicles, 2008), and at the same time allow for easier killing and loose legality. Actor-Network Theory might understand this as lending social agency to machines that exist only to kill – an anti-social social agency?

But also consider the "push-button" nature of extrajudicial killings of American citizens – the murder of Abdulrahman Anwar al-Awlaki, in October 2011, for example – and civilians of foreign countries (the dozens killed in the village of Wech Baghtu, Afghanistan, November 2008, for example), and the general permissiveness of warfare that drones engender. Singer sums it up well: "America's founding fathers may not have been able to imagine robotic drones, but … the Constitution did not leave war, no matter how it is waged, to the executive branch alone" (2012). As military robots advance to organize into self-directed swarms, they could, after being programmed with "simple rules" (complex algorithms, really), "spread around in an almost random search [and] broadcast to the group [of robots] any enemy targets they find. Swarms would then form to attack the targets" (Singer, 2009). In other words, human agency in decisions about who to kill and how to do it gets transferred to machines; and this might be okay if the twenty-first century battlefield did indeed have "fewer humans and more robots," as Singer says.

But only the hegemons will have the robots. Our swarms will target human beings in hot countries, and those humans will lack the potential benefit of the mercy or caution or good sense that a human warrior might show to a mother protecting her children. Robots and drones do not promote the personal choice, or individual liberty, of warriors or their victims. Since the activity of swarms is emergent, it "is not and cannot be centrally controlled" by human agents – though there is some slim hope that a form of ethics could spontaneously emerge from the swarms themselves (Coeckelbergh 2011). General well-being, the reduction of existential risks, or the reduction of involuntary suffering of civilians and non-combatants, however, is not (cannot be) a concern in the programming of robots meant for war.

2. Weapons of mass destruction are artifacts of the industrialization of war (and of almost everything) that took place in the early twentieth century (see extensive discussion in Carew 2009). They are used to kill efficiently, on a mass scale, and indiscriminately. Civilians and non-combatants die in large numbers when nuclear or chemical weapons are employed. Although Americans led in inventing nuclear weaponry, and some American scientists led in its promotion as a way to balance power and maintain peace (see Finkbeiner's discussion of Edward Teller, 2007, 14–19), the United States has since become a leader in attempting to create "a world without nuclear weapons" (Office of the Press Secretary 2013). What a horrific irony, then, that the US aided Saddam Hussein in his use of chemical weapons in the 1980s (Harris 2013), and that America and her allies used depleted uranium weaponry on civilians in Kosovo and Iraq (United Nations 2001). The debate about deterrence aside, weapons of mass destruction cannot be used to promote personal choice, individual liberty, general well-being, reduction of existential risks, or the reduction of involuntary suffering of the civilians and non-combatants who are killed by them.

Whether the technology is "transhuman" in its stylings or tone (as with robotics, augmented reality, and drones), or just plain technologically advanced (as with guidance systems that can carry radioactive munitions into civilian areas), warfare ends life. "With large nuclear arsenals on hair-trigger alert, there is inevitably a significant risk of accidental war. The same can happen with nanotechnology: it may be pressed into serving military objectives in a way that carries unavoidable risks of serious accidents" (Bostrom, 2002). Warfare,

whether sometimes necessary or not, is by its nature anti-life – and, with its primary focus on killing people, it is also anti-human.

Warfare is anti-humanist. It is anti-transhumanist.

Conclusion

We have seen that to discuss the role of transhumanism in military conflict in mere terms of technological advancement is tragically one-dimensional. "Militarized transhumanism" is a folly or worse, unless the humanism at the core of transhumanism informs the ethics of future warfare.

We as a species cannot afford to pursue some version of a posthuman warrior class without continuing the greater project of the marriage of ethics, diplomacy, and politics to war, until warfare itself becomes obviated.

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