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Humanism for Personhood, and against Human-Racism

By J. Hughes

Yesterday the Bush administration found pro-life bioethicists to replace two members of the President's Commission on Bioethics who had defended the use of embryos in stem cell research. In the Florida case of Terri Schiavo, the religious right continues to fight to keep "alive" a permanently unconscious woman whose husband would like to pull the plug. The Great Ape Project is fighting to ban experimentation on chimpanzees and gorillas. Technology critics like Langdon Winner, Francis Fukuyama and Bill McKibben warn humanity is threatened by an emergent posthumanity, while the National Science Foundation encourages the cross-fertilization of nanotechnology, biotechnology, and the information and cognitive sciences (NBIC) towards the goal of "improving human performance."

All these issues are connected as part of a broad political struggle between advocates and opponents of two basic humanist propositions. First, humanists believe that what is of value in human life is our capacity for thought, feeling and conscience, our "personhood," and not our biological characteristics like our genders, race or genomes. Secondly, humanists believe we should be free from superstitious taboos and religious authority in our free use of reason and science, that we should be able to freely use human powers to reach our fullest potentials. In previous eras the struggle over these propositions emancipated slaves and gave women suffrage. The anti-humanists insisted that women and Africans were biologically incapable of equality with white men, while the humanists insisted that women and Africans had the same capacities for thought and feeling, and therefore the same right to citizenship.

In the emerging biopolitics of the 21st century, the struggle will be to determine which kinds of life have rights and

citizenship. For human-racists fetuses and the brain dead are vulnerable human beings facing slaughter. Champions of personhood see fetuses and the brain-dead as pre- and post-persons, lives whose interests are trumped by the interests of existing persons, such as women wanting to control their bodies, the disabled and sick looking for therapies from stem cells, and families waiting to bury their dead. Advocates of personhood take seriously the claims of great apes and cetaceans to some rough moral parity with humanity on the basis of their cognitive complexity, while human-racists reject rights for non-humans out of hand.

Now that we are on the cusp of transcending the human condition, of living longer, healthier and smarter than our ancestors, the human-racists insist on divine prohibitions and dire consequences for hubris. In their essay “Protecting the Endangered Human,” for instance, bioethicists George Annas and Lori Andrews call for an international treaty to make it a “crime against humanity” to improve your genome in ways your children could inherit. Inheritable genetic modification, they say, “can alter the essence of humanity itself (and thus threaten to change the foundation of human rights) by taking human evolution into our own hands and directing it toward the development of a new species, sometimes termed the ‘posthuman.’...Membership in the human species is central to the meaning and enforcement of human rights.”

But the humanist tradition does not fetishize biological humanness, and human rights do not depend on biological similarity. Not all biological humans are persons (fetuses, the brain dead) and biological humanness is irrelevant to personhood. John Locke defined a person as a “thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.” As humanists facing the challenges of contemporary biotechnology we need to embrace a trans-human understanding of the humanist project and humanist values, a humanism beyond human-racism.

The trans-humanist works toward the fullest flowering of each person’s potential, freeing them from the domination of other

people, ensuring they are educated, housed and fed, and that they are empowered to control their own lives. John Stuart Mill said, "What more can be said of any condition of human affairs, than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be?" Creating institutions to fulfill the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would be a great step towards this goal. But reaching our fullest potential also requires access to technology, from the printed word and electricity to vaccinations and birth control. With democracy and human rights we push back the social and economic constraints on our personhood. With technology we push back the natural constraints.

In the coming decades humanists and trans-humanists need to wage a global campaign to radicalize the idea of human rights. We need to assert our rights to control our own bodies and brains, whether we choose to change our genders or medicate our brains. We need to assert that the measure of a society's fairness is how universally available we make the prerequisites for achieving our fullest potential. We need to defend the right to enhance ourselves - whether through education and exercise or genetic engineering and cybernetic implants. We need to extend these "human rights" and citizenship not only to all humans, regardless of nationality, but to all persons, ape, human, posthuman or machine. We need to build the global institutions that can protect the rights of persons, and expand the freedoms they enjoy.

To the degree that we succeed in our campaign for personhood over human-racism we will fulfill the dreams of our humanist forebears, like the Pico della Mirandola who wrote in the "Oration on the Dignity of Man" that humans "with no limit or no bound, may choose for yourself the limits and bounds of your nature...to you is granted the power, contained in your intellect and judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, the divine....To man it is allowed to be whatever he chooses to be!"

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Transhumanist Association, a nonprofit organization devoted to encouraging the use of technology to transcend the limitations of the human body. His weekly radio program, Changesurfer Radio, can be heard in streaming MP3, he writes a bi-weekly column for Betterhumans.com, and his book Citizen Cyborg: Transhuman Technology and the Challenge to Democracy will be available in October from Westview Press. You can reach him at jhughes@changesurfer.com.