

‘Personhood Beyond the Human’: Reflections on an Important Conference^{1,2}
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[The issues discussed here will be taken forward at my keynote address to the British Sociological Association in Leeds, in April 2014.]

On 6-8 December 2013, Yale University played host to one of the most interesting and, I believe, significant conferences that I have ever attended. Its title [‘Personhood Beyond the Human’](#) captured the full range of speakers. However, the organizers were mainly concerned with the legal extension of personhood to animals, especially primates and aquatic mammals. They should be more comfortable with the label [‘posthumanist’](#) than [‘transhumanist’](#), though the sponsoring organization — [Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies](#) — normally portrays itself as a ‘technoprogressive’ transhumanist think-tank. Readers can judge for themselves by going to the conference’s comprehensive [website](#), which includes videos of all the talks.

The timing for the conference could not have been more apt. On 2 December, the [Nonhuman Rights Project](#), the brainchild of Harvard law professor [Steven Wise](#), had filed the first lawsuits of its kind, namely, to transfer four chimpanzees currently kept captive at various locations in New York State — as pets, entertainers, and lab subjects — to an animal sanctuary where their ‘right to bodily liberty’ can be properly secured. (As it turns out, on 10 December, the presiding judges denied the *prima facie* validity of the claim but encouraged appeal of their decision before a higher court with greater scope for reinterpreting legal personhood.) Wise and his intellectual inspiration, [Peter Singer](#), the leading philosopher of ‘animal liberation’, were the keynote speakers at this conference.

I shall review the conference as someone with decidedly transhumanist sympathies and hence not quite in sync with the animating concerns of the organizers. However, it is to the great credit of the organizers — James Hughes and George Dvorsky — that they included a broad church of thinkers, which as the conference moved into its second day became more concerned with the sorts of qualities that have traditionally separated humans from animals — and might be better instantiated in intelligent machines. Interestingly, the main media coverage of the conference to date — an op-ed piece in the 16 December edition of the *Boston Globe* penned by an on-site reporter — actually struck a blow for the distinctiveness of human personhood against the ambient pro-animal sentiment of the conference itself.

On Peter Singer’s Keynote and Related Ideas

Singer’s opening keynote was mostly boilerplate but two of his reference points were revealing, one to [Michael Tooley](#) and the other to [Bernard Williams](#). First, he cited Tooley’s classic 1972 *Philosophy and Public Affairs* article, ‘Abortion and Infanticide’,

¹ This paper also posted at *h+ Magazine* (<http://bit.ly/1gn7Kni>).

² The article was revived in 16 January 2014. Originally, the article wrongly referred to Bina Rothblatt as the “ex-wife” of Martine Rothblatt. Bina and Martine Rothblatt are married. In addition, a reference to “the Florida-based Terasem Foundation” was changed to “the Terasem Movement”.

as formative in his thinking about the conditions under which something has a ‘right to life’. Following Tooley, Singer argues that if a right to life presupposes the possession of future-oriented desires, then while some cognitively underdeveloped humans may not have a right to life, some cognitively developed animals may have just such a right. So far it sounds as if a reasonably strong sense of personal autonomy is required for a right to life. At the same time, though, both Tooley and Singer wish to make these judgements ‘on the spot’ without considering what the penultimate conference speaker, the science fiction writer [David Brin](#), calls ‘uplift’, that is, our capacity to enhance beings to a level at which we might accord them with a robust sense of rights.

Although Singer and his followers fancy themselves ‘progressive’ thinkers, they fail to acknowledge that broadly ‘welfarist’ projects have always required substantially transforming those who are deemed ‘unfairly disadvantaged’ as measured by some standard of social justice. This is why so much of civil rights legislation, while couched in the rhetoric of removing barriers based on race, class and gender, has involved compelling these disadvantaged people to attend schools, undergo medical treatments, and undertake employment — all designed, hopefully for better and not worse, to take the disadvantaged outside their comfort zones. (This has been the great promise of ‘affirmative action’.) By extension, one might suppose that at least certain animals might be somehow ‘enhanced’ so that the sense of autonomy of which we deem them capable is realized in a way we can recognize as our equals.

However, in practice, Singer and most of his followers revert to a much weaker sense of autonomy, whereby any being with a serviceable set of interests is deemed to possess a right to life, regardless of how those interests are established or satisfied. Indeed, throughout the conference, occasional disparaging remarks were made about autonomy as an especially ‘speciesist’ criterion of personhood that ignores the obligation that humans have to enable the flourishing of non-human species with interests radically different from their own. This relates to Singer’s second reference point, a posthumously published essay by Bernard Williams called ‘The Human Prejudice’, which attempts to defend pro-human attitudes on simple grounds of group loyalty (an ontological ‘us vs. them’), which unsurprisingly Singer finds not very persuasive — and neither do I. Moreover, Williams’ species chauvinism plays into Singer’s association of speciesism with racism and sexism in the index of politically incorrect attitudes for an enlightened age.

If autonomy in the strong (Kantian) sense is one great enemy of the animal rights activists, another is anthropomorphism, even though several of the speakers could not avoid referring (sympathetically) to animals in the same terms they might very young or disabled humans. Indeed, as I observe below, this comparison is crucial to Steven Wise’s strategy to gain legal recognition for animal rights. But make no mistake: Anthropomorphism in the service of animal rights is presumed to be no more than a necessary evil. In this context, suffering — understood as a liminal experience whereby a being’s sense of bodily integrity is under direct threat — plays an important conceptual, and perhaps ultimately forensic, role in providing a criterion of personhood that ideally

might be read off the physiological disposition of an organism without having to engage in any politically incorrect and epistemically dubious anthropic projections.

On Steven Wise's Keynote and Related Ideas

The second keynoter, Steven Wise, came across as modest and folksy but he too made some revealing stray remarks about how he teaches animal rights at Harvard. He alluded to the early 20th century Yale constitutional lawyer, [Wesley Hohfeld](#), who through his Oxford follower [Herbert Hart](#) laid the foundations for modern analytic philosophy of law. (The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [entry on 'Rights'](#) provides a good sense of Hohfeld's significance.) Hohfeld offered a self-styled 'molecular' analysis of right into its logical components, one element of which is immunity from others altering your constitution without your consent. However, for Hohfeld, this element provided only a quarter of the concept of right, which also includes more positive notions of power and privilege — that is, outright self-assertion, not merely protection from self-negation. As Wise and others explained during the conference, this rather limited sense of right — normally reserved for children and the disabled — is simply meant to be the thin edge of a thicker legal wedge. I'm not so sure. The default contempt for autonomy and anthropomorphism exhibited by many of the speakers suggested that were Wise's chimpanzees granted the relevant sanctuary, the matter would end there — as if Apartheid (or the segregationist policies practiced in the USA in the century after the formal emancipation of Black slaves) were a successful outcome to the end of slavery.

Philosophers have long wondered whether 'animal liberation' entails a serious commitment to 'animal rights'. This conference keeps the jury in deliberation without returning a verdict. Here it is worth recalling that the appeal to rights (i.e. 'civil rights') has historically required that those who would be treated as free-standing individuals worthy of bearing rights — and not simply the latest part of a self-perpetuating corporate whole — need to re-enact the original struggle of those who established those rights. This is why national service has been so prominent in republican democracies, the political system that has done the most to promote rights. Call it an ideological vaccination policy, if you will. In any case, your capacity for self-assertion against a countervailing force — as good an empirical definition of autonomy as any — marks you as worthy of rights. You don't simply capitulate or adapt: You leave *your* mark. As long as animals do not have the opportunity to prove themselves in such a manner, then the appeal to 'rights' on their behalf is no more than a euphemism for a state of protected dependency. Libertarians, often the scourge of self-styled 'progressives', understand this point better than anyone else.

Presentations by Lori Marino and Andrew Fenton

[Lori Marino](#), an animal neuroscientist at Emory University in Atlanta and the scientific advisor to the Nonhuman Rights Project, made the most explicit case for primates and aquatic mammals possessing the mental capacities relevant to attributions of a reasonably strong sense of 'autonomy'. She especially emphasized animals' powers of 'mental time-travel', a phrase nowadays used by cognitive psychologists to refer to the ability to

project oneself imaginatively into the future and design a plan that anticipates potential obstacles along the way. Let's grant Marino's interpretation of their behaviour and its neural underpinning. The question remains: Why can't we communicate with these creatures at the level implied by their advanced mental capacities?

Of course, the fault may be entirely our own. But then shouldn't there be a call for research aimed at opening channels of communication (e.g., prosthetic translation devices, if not trans-species pidgins) between humans and these cognitively advanced creatures, so that we might learn from each other and pool our efforts to mutual benefit? However, the conference was conspicuously silent on this point, as if apes and dolphins would obviously prefer to deal only with their own and not with humans. And so I continue to wonder about the sincerity of animal rights activists.

One of the cleverest people at the conference was [Andrew Fenton](#), a philosopher who divides his time between California and Nova Scotia and has written extensively on animal welfare in the context of animal experiments. He consistently asked incisive questions from the floor. Fenton's own talk took seriously that we might work toward some idea of chimp-based consent to experimental participation, modelled on pediatric research ethics. The basic idea is that we might 'persuade' chimps — as we do children — to consent to participate in scientific research by getting them used to experimental apparatus and lab conditions, so that they realize that their lives are not under any substantial threat. I put 'persuade' in scare quotes because Fenton concretely proposes that chimps be instructed in a way that allows their dissent to be clearly registered, even if we do not quite understand why they dissent. Here one might wonder whether Fenton's comparison is quite fair to children, who after all have the potential to demonstrate much greater powers of comprehension through language. However, it does reflect a common animals rights strategy of minimizing the difference between children and mature apes to establish an intuitive sense of continuity between humans and non-humans.

On the other hand, Fenton was also sensitive to a set of concerns closely associated with the late bioethicist [Raymond Frey](#), who argued that doing research on animals that is not permitted on humans may simply jeopardize animal lives without appreciably contributing to knowledge of how humans work. Fenton follows Frey in suspecting, perhaps rightly, that scientists routinely ignore doubts about the cross-species generalisability of the results of animal-based research out of a more general disregard for the value of animal life. The logic of this argument implies that the excessive restrictions on human participation in scientific research imposed by 'institutional review boards' — which are typically more concerned with institutional liability than the actual beliefs and desires of the would-be subjects — should be relaxed so that humans are allowed to participate in risky research that would otherwise needlessly endanger animals. Both epistemology and ethics would benefit from the move.

To be sure, neither Frey nor Fenton draw this conclusion, as they are more concerned with minimizing harm to animals than maximizing benefit to humans. However, Veronika Lipinska (also in attendance) and I draw just this conclusion in *The Proactionary Imperative* (due out from Palgrave Macmillan in 2014). Here we follow the

University of Manchester bioethicist [Sarah Chan](#) in supporting a culture in which the right to participate in scientific research would be promoted by potential human subjects who self-organize themselves as proactive interest groups.

Day Two of the Conference

The second day of the conference was more emotively charged, as various world-view assumptions were both asserted and imputed to positions that might be called ‘humanist’, ‘transhumanist’ and ‘posthumanist’. The animal rights activists — proper ‘posthumanists’ — clearly see transhumanism as humanism taken to what they regard as its absurd logical conclusion, an elaborate ‘denial of death’ based on a lingering attachment to the Abrahamic deity in whose image and likeness humans were supposedly created. (*The Proactionary Imperative* actually puts a positive spin on this allegedly damning diagnosis.) On more than one occasion, Albert Camus and ‘60s anthropologist [Ernest Becker](#) were invoked as witnesses to the narcissistic and dangerously delusional character of *Homo sapiens*, the species whose uniqueness lies in denying what it is.

But some posthumanists went even further, wanting to purge the residual anthropomorphism that privileges apes over, say, chickens as forms of animal life. Karen Davis, founder of the Virginia-based [United Poultry Concerns](#), spoke eloquently about her life among chickens. Between sessions she railed against more establishment animal rights activists whose views about human ‘stewardship’ over the planet she believed constitute species paternalism at its worst. She specifically declared Peter Singer to be not only speciesist but also sexist in terms of the species he privileged, in which chickens in particular and birds more generally are seen as ‘feminised’ species. (Singer’s 1999 manifesto, *A Darwinian Left*, might also be used to confirm Davis’ overall judgement.)

By the time of my own talk, which *per* usual was improvised, I had been already influenced by the issues already raised at the conference. My starting point was the historical specificity of the idea of ‘human rights’ as something with binding legal force. Despite much philosophical talk and political assertion about what *prima facie* look like ‘human rights’ (most notably the American and French Revolutions in the late 18th century and their intellectual antecedents), most of these ‘rights’ have been on closer inspection ‘civil rights’ — that is, the right for an individual to be treated as an equal in a self-governing polity, or ‘citizenship’. Such rights were never meant to be made indiscriminately available to anyone who happens to be a member of *Homo sapiens*. Rather, rights had to be earned by demonstrating a level of competence, traditionally evidenced in successful property management. Of course, this gave a default — yet still defeasible — advantage to inheritors of wealth to display their managerial competence.

The modern period has been about seeking alternative tests for the relevant competence so that inheritance doesn’t matter at all: One should simply be capable of sustaining something substantially more than one’s own physical survival. While a certain element of the Left still dislikes the appeal to cognitive criteria for citizenship (perhaps even including literacy), such criteria served historically to liberalise entry into the polity, as one no longer had to arrive with wealth but simply a detectable capacity to generate

wealth. Capitalism's focus of cognitive prowess — aka 'invention' — establishes the point. (See the US Constitution's creation of the Patent Office and Joseph Schumpeter's subsequent valorisation of Henry Ford as 'entrepreneur'.)

I have come to believe that most of the acrimony between capitalists and socialists over the past 200 years reduces to the simple issue of how to credit people properly for what they have done. This is of course a serious problem that requires redress, but quite different from how society should be organized in a progressive fashion. Indeed, the very idea that one should be concerned about who deserves credit for contributing to societal wealth is a normative principle shared by capitalism and socialism, predating their schism: It is what put both of these ideologies on the same side against those who continue to believe that heredity is ultimately the most reliable source of social order.

When I entered university nearly 40 years ago, the 'hereditarians' would have been seen as hopelessly reactionary. However, the emergence of 'sociobiology' and its second coming as 'evolutionary psychology' has breathed new life into the pro-heredity forces. Animal rights activists are empowered by this revival. Thus, instead of asking what new skills animals might need to acquire to survive in an increasingly anthropomorphic world, they simply observe that animals had survived perfectly well for millennia prior to human habitation. Whatever else one might wish to say about these contrasting attitudes, the former is 'forward-looking' and the latter 'backward-looking' in its normative orientation.

From this standpoint, 'human rights' is a curious hybrid. After the United Nations [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#) of 1948, the normative force of 'human rights' is that every member of *Homo sapiens*, no matter where they live and simply by virtue of species membership, is entitled to a range of rights that approximate those historically covered by civil rights legislation. In other words, an explicitly heredity-based definition of 'humanity' is invoked to justify attributions that previously had been based on potential or actual individual achievement. In jurisprudential terms, 'natural law' and 'positive law', increasingly at loggerheads in the modern era, found a mutually satisfactory conceptual meeting point in 'human rights'.

Natural law had indeed protected all members of *Homo sapiens* equally — but only relative to their 'natural' standing. So the 'right to revolution' was originally about allowing serfs to revolt against their masters who abused their power; but if serfs revolted against a benevolent master, then they would be in the wrong. For its part, positive law maintained an open-minded attitude about the composition of society just as long as it was composed of 'equals' in the deep sense of those who could support themselves in the face of potential opposition from fellow equals. Such societies, while typically 'advanced' by today's lights, functioned as what we nowadays call 'gated communities' but used to be called 'city-states'. In effect, 'human rights' resulted from removing natural law's hierarchical vision and positive law's elitist practice, while combining the universalism and paternalism of natural law with the egalitarianism and liberalism of positive law.

The United States of America — established as a republic with indefinitely expansive horizons — set an important practical precedent for the realizability of ‘human rights’, especially through its historically open-door immigration policy. However, the creative genius behind the UN Declaration was the Neo-Thomist Catholic philosopher, [Jacques Maritain](#) (1882-1973). (Here I take a cue from the Columbia University intellectual historian, [Samuel Moyn.](#)) I say ‘genius’ because many things were accomplished by the idea of human rights that are nowadays often taken for granted. First, it kept the Catholic legal tradition relevant in public life. Second, it removed political barriers within Christianity between Catholics and those Protestants who were theologically inclined to abandon natural law altogether. Third, it provided a clear legal grounding for welfare state and even socialist policies, since the existence of ‘human rights’ draws explicit international attention to ‘problems’ presented by the difference between what the Declaration says and the actual existence of *Homo sapiens*. Moreover, it does so in a way that shifts the burden of proof onto those who might still believe that human distress is merely a local concern that in the long term will somehow take care of itself, either through charity or benign neglect.

Sixty-five years later, the concept of human rights in Maritain’s original sense still really exists only in Europe, including the UK, where it has spawned various bottom-line ‘grand coalitions’ between parties of the mainstream Right (‘Christian Democratic’) and Left (‘Social Democratic’) to preserve the welfare state in the face of fiscal pressures. These governments have also been sensitive about maintaining international development aid as a constant percentage of the state budget.

The USA is still not fully signed up to the idea of human rights — though it is very much signed up to civil rights. Consider this: Prominent in the opposition to Barack Obama’s efforts to get Americans to invest in healthcare is the claim that it would deny Americans the right to live as they wish. In a classic republic, requiring that people have health insurance might make sense as a criterion for citizenship. However, if you’re already a citizen and you aren’t troubled by ‘natural law’ considerations about what makes a life objectively ‘decent’, then ‘Obamacare’ might well strike you as imposing an unreasonable tax burden. In this context, Europeans would play the socialist card and say that even citizens are ‘always already’ indebted to others who in various ways have enabled the conditions under which they thrive. This creates an obligation for citizens to respond in kind – to ‘pay it forward’, if you will -- to reaffirm the value of living in your society beyond the value of your own particular life. But you need to be receptive to the peculiar legal alchemy behind the idea of human rights for this argument not to sound ‘merely socialist’ in the sense that many Americans — and not only them — increasingly find offensive.

In an era when nonhumans are increasingly claiming rights (or more strictly, rights are being claimed on their behalf), the appeal to *human* rights as a rights benchmark poses a delicate problem for animal rights activists. The content of the UN Declaration mostly references ‘rights’ in the sense recognised in positive law, namely, a society of individuals each of whom is presumed to possess considerable autonomy. In the Declaration, freedom from bodily harm and security of material well-being simply

provide a platform for free expression through art, science and culture – the means by which humans assert their distinctiveness as a species. ([Abraham Maslow's](#) self-actualisation psychology is a natural concomitant of this idea of human rights.) In that case, might it not be possible for a being capable of art, science and culture, yet unencumbered by *Homo sapiens*' carbon-based needs, be eligible for 'human rights' — especially if humans can interact with such creatures and respect their achievements in these areas? This, of course, has been the promise of artificial intelligence research and other Golem-like projects. But we might also add the generation of avatars in cyberspace and perhaps even the [Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence](#) (SETI).

On Personhood and BINA48

At this point, the difference between the legal case for animal and machine personhood should be made explicit. Animal rights activists are clearly aiming for recognition of a sense of personhood that is detached from the possession of distinctly human qualities, even if that means conceding a diminished sense of 'right', as I have already suggested. In contrast, machine rights activists aim to build machines that match, if not surpass, supposedly distinctive human achievements — in a [Turing Test](#) fashion — in order to acquire personhood for those machines. Whereas animal rights activists tend to speak in terms of 'sanctuaries' and other segregated spaces that allow animals to live as they were biologically meant to live, machine rights activists favour increasing interaction and even integration with humans as part of an open-ended process of mutual learning and accommodation. In the more dystopic versions of this vision, the machines may even surpass and dominate the humans. I may be exaggerating the implied political differences here — but I believe only slightly.

It is to the credit of the conference organizers that they featured an extended session on the second day with BINA48, whose name and nature is very well explained in its informative [Wikipedia entry](#). 'BINA48' = 'Breakthrough Intelligence via Neural Architecture 48 exaflops per second processing speed and 48 exabytes of memory'. More concretely, BINA48 is an android consisting of a bust-like head and shoulders mounted on a frame who speaks answers in response to typed questions. The android appears to be modelled on a [Jackie Brown](#)-like African-American woman. In fact, BINA48 was based on — and named for — the wife of the media lawyer who has perhaps done the most to promote the idea of rights for machines capable of sustained creative extension of digitally uploaded cognitive processes. This lawyer, [Martine Rothblatt](#), who began life as Martin Rothblatt, is herself something of a transgender celebrity in the United States. However, her main concern these days, via the Terasem Movement, is the cultivation of 'cyberconsciousness' through the continuous upgrading and public exposure of BINA48. The basic idea is that BINA48 stores all that she learns and redeploys it in increasingly sophisticated and creative ways. Now entering her fourth year of existence, BINA48 came across at Yale as an insightful if rambling interlocutor — a pub philosopher functioning slightly over the limit. (She had difficulty deciding when the length of an answer was sufficient to the question, but otherwise was very fluent.)

The main source of scepticism about BINA48's powers came from those who saw everything she said as merely mimicking human thought and speech via a cleverly programmed algorithm. These sceptics may be intellectualising what roboticists call the 'uncanny valley' phenomenon, whereby people are spooked out by robots that physically resemble humans 'too much' and hence are unwilling to engage with them to the same extent as they would less human-looking robots. More worrisome is that simply the knowledge that a being is composed of silicon rather than carbon might serve as a source of prejudice, regardless of the being's demonstrated capacities. This suggests the need for lawyers with a transhumanist sensibility to craft a workable concept of 'Privacy 2.0' that allows access to 'track record' without access to 'material origin' — in other words, an enforceable notion of privacy that prevents cheating on the Turing Test.

Of course, it is easy to see that the likes of BINA48 are the products of robotics labs — and so it will continue, until we live in the world depicted in *Blade Runner*. However, the idea of standing as a 'legal person' is that one is literally regarded under a mask (as the *persona*, in Greek drama) with a clear sense of which properties of the being are relevant (or not) to the case at hand. This ideal will be harder to maintain in a world where the difference between track record and material origin is blurred by the political desire to pre-empt various forms of prohibited behaviour based on interpretive strategies explicitly designed to 'unmask' the suspect.

However, I don't mean this as an argument against the very idea of governments and businesses mining data for securing or promoting various forms of social life. After all, it is one thing to mine 'big data' to determine that someone is likely to commit a crime; it is quite another then to disarm that person of any defence against a criminal charge by claiming that it was 'in their nature' to commit the crime. In the latter case, a purported (scientific) understanding of the capacities of a particular configuration of matter serves to undermine the suspect's autonomy by preventing them from providing an alternative account of why they did what they seem to have done. Here Kant and Nietzsche would be on the same page in suspecting that such 'naturalistic' appeals are really shows of power that *ipso facto* dehumanise the being in question — whether its nature is carbon- or silicon-based.

On the Final Session

The final session of the conference did not disappoint in terms of the provocations raised. The Catholic philosopher [Daryl Wennemann](#) argued that while sufficient, it is not necessary to be a member of *Homo sapiens* to be deemed 'human', by which he meant 'person'. In that one deft logical manoeuvre, Wennemann managed to uphold the value of bringing all potential (including potentially aborted) members of *Homo sapiens* to maturity while placing a rather high bar for non-*Homo sapiens* to be credited with the same status. A telling moment came when in response to a question by Andrew Fenton, Wennemann asserted that the prospect of suffering did not figure as such in his criteria for personhood. This was a very brave thing to have said, which left Fenton silent. Animal rights activists normally capitalise on the capacity of animals to feel pain in captivity so as to gain emotional leverage with those who do not already believe that

animal lives are intrinsically valuable. For his part, Wennemann seemed to be alluding to the fact that in Abrahamic theology, suffering is the feeling associated with an opportunity for deep learning, on the basis of which a person's moral state may then be judged. In this respect, suffering is not something to be avoided at all cost or even mitigated as quickly as possible; rather, it is something to be overcome in a way that ideally leaves one stronger.

George Dvorsky, a co-organizer of the conference and contributing editor to the popular futurist website, [io9](http://io9.com), provided (in the style of a high school debater) a laundry list of items for realizing the animal-based 'nonhuman personhood' agenda. From the floor I raised an issue that built on a question put to Peter Singer in the first session, in which Singer conceded that Neanderthals might be seen as extinct species who bridge the human-nonhuman divide with regard to our intuitions of personhood. But (I observed) Neanderthals are no longer species that exist only in our imaginations. We have recovered DNA from Neanderthal fossils that at least in principle enables us to resurrect them, thereby potentially increasing the kinds of persons in the world, which is presumably an inherent good, given the value placed on personhood as a property of beings. Indeed, in an interview with *Der Spiegel* in January 2013, the Harvard medical geneticist George Church controversially claimed that a woman could well be a surrogate mother to a Neanderthal. However, Dvorsky was having none of this. His response suggested that adding candidate persons like Neanderthals by such non-natural means would likely result in their misery, if not increase the misery of the world more generally.

A declared Buddhist (along with the other co-organizer James Hughes), Dvorsky appeared to have a strong sense of nature's overriding normative character, but without attributing to nature the personality of a creative deity, as promoted in Christianity by, say, theistic evolution (Catholic) and intelligent design theory (Protestant). I must confess that I find it difficult to grasp this conception, except that it appears profoundly conservative, and certainly unbecoming of people who call themselves 'technoprogressive'. Nevertheless, I believe that in the future this largely suppressed Christian-Buddhist divide (which I called 'anthropic-karmic' in *The New Sociological Imagination*) will gain greater prominence as the terms of political discourse and public life — in ethics, economics and ecology — are more explicitly framed as questions about the source of value in the world.

Those interested in seeing the first shoots of this emerging world-historic conflict should study the academic philosophical debate between 'will theory' and 'interest theory' as alternative accounts of the nature of rights. (The former corresponds to the Christian/anthropic side, the latter the Buddhist/karmic side of the personhood divide.) On the one hand, will theorists see rights as vehicles for *self-assertion* in a presumably free and open space, which places a premium on limited liability so that agents effectively possess a 'right to be wrong'. On the other hand, interest theorists see rights as vehicles for *self-protection*, as if the 'self' were a plot of land — the 'body' — whose jurisdiction is determined more by entitlement than actual agency.

We got a taste of the impending conflict when, via Skype from his home in San Diego, David Brin made a clear and vigorous case for human exceptionalism in terms of the obligation it places on humans to ‘upgrade’ the creatures that we care most about. He argued that any ‘nonhuman persons’ movement that did not put this matter on the top of its research and policy agenda was operating in bad faith. Whatever else one wishes to say about humans, we are the ones who sufficiently understand the natural world to take actions to direct its future course in decisive ways. Maybe it has been all a cosmic accident, as Darwinists seem to believe — but we don’t know that for a fact, either. Humanity’s track record, while chequered, is arguably improving. In any case, given our emerging sense of what constitutes a good life for ourselves, why not try to extend that across nature? Yes, we may fail but then, as the cosmic accident people gladly admit, there’s no reason to think that life will continue to flourish by our *not* intervening so directly.

Needless to say, Brin was not received well by most of the audience, which already had form in trashing autonomy (aka ‘will theory’) as a criterion of personhood. In effect, Brin had provided an updated version of [Julian Huxley’s](#) motivation for coining ‘transhumanism’ in the 1950s. Huxley wanted to reassert humanity’s uniqueness in the face of Darwin’s own default species egalitarianism, whereby all life is composed of exactly the same stuff and, at least in species form, we are all ultimately condemned to extinction. Huxley’s solution was to use our very knowledge of evolution as a moral lever for our self-transcendence — and, following Brin, the self-transcendence of other species. This argument requires that we trust the historical track record in science and technology. People like Huxley, Brin — and I — believe that the record speaks to a sincere, open, productive but certainly fallible, conversation with a larger reality that seems to be always prodding us to move on. Of course, one does not need to be an Abrahamic adherent to have such a sensibility. Nevertheless, this conference showed that transhumanism has yet to distinguish itself clearly from the ‘posthumanism’ (which sometimes bled into anti-humanism) generally on display.

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