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Transhumanism in the Schools Redux

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On 7 February 2022, at the request of one of my former Warwick students, Juvan Gowreeswara, I visited [Lady Margaret School](#) in London, one of the UK's leading girls' schools, to talk about transhumanism. It wasn't the first time I had discussed the topic with high school students (Whitaker 2014). And once again, it was a very interesting experience. The twelve girls in attendance were well informed and interested in transhumanism, yet their responses were not quite as I had expected, given my knowledge of the 'adult' transhumanist community.

This matters because transhumanism is clearly a future-oriented movement, the ultimate survival of which depends on how later generations take the idea forward. To be sure, much of transhumanism is about predicting that certain radical things will happen in the lifetime of the (middle-aged) people usually making the predictions. But even if those predictions fail, we still need to consider which of the various transhumanist proposals on the table—some of which have already attracted enormous (mainly private) capital—are likely to find favor with the next generation. With that in mind, shortly before my visit to the school, I sent the students a survey. It is reproduced below, along with a breakdown of their responses:

How Transhuman Are You?

The following are a series of true statements, and this survey is about your attitude towards them. You simply need to say whether you (1) like it, (2) have mixed feelings about it or (3) hate it. Simply use the number.

1. A recent US Supreme Court case decided that a smartphone is not merely something that someone owns but part of their proper person. Thus, confiscating a smartphone was judged to be comparable to giving someone a serious blow to the brain, given both the phone's information and the person's relationship to it.
2. Neil Harbisson is a musician whose art consists of translating light signals into sound. He had an antenna implanted in his skull at an early age because he was colorblind. But he believes that this no longer makes him a human but a 'cyborg' (i.e., an entity that combines organic and machine elements) who is entitled to distinctive rights.
3. There are teams of researchers across the world trying to arrest the aging process by developing gene therapies that stop our cells from degenerating as they reproduce in our bodies over time. If they succeed, it might allow us to remain, say, 30 or 40 forever.
4. 'Digital afterlife' is an emerging industry that compiles all the text, audio and video files of the dead (with their prior consent) and inputs them as data to a computer program that can mix and match them in various ways. The resulting avatar of the person can then exist and even evolve indefinitely in cyberspace.

5. If humans are allowed to expand their powers by implanting technology or undergoing radical therapies, why shouldn't the same privilege of 'uplift' be extended to other animals? Thus, there is research underway on devices that would enable both humans and animals to communicate more effectively and develop deeper social relations with each other.

QUESTION\ANSWER	1	2	3
1	0	7	5
2	0	8	4
3	2	4	6
4	2	5	5
5	8	2	2

N = 12

The Presentation and Discussion

I began my presentation by addressing the gender question in transhumanism, since (unlike posthumanism) it tends to be dominated by males and masculine imagery. I pointed out that Mary Shelley, wife of the Romantic poet Percy, wrote the book that planted the idea of a synthetically created and even enhanced human in the modern mind, *Frankenstein*. She, in turn, was the daughter of the anarchist philosopher and publicist William Godwin and, of course, the UK founder of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, to whom a controversial modernist statue has recently been erected in North London. I next turned to Ada Lovelace, the child of another Romantic poet, Lord Byron, and Lady Byron, a mathematician who applied the rigor of her field to object to her husband's reckless behavior. For her own part, their offspring Ada (named after her husband) is known mainly as a friend of Charles Babbage, who created the first concrete model of a 'thinking machine'. Lovelace is now often credited with having generalized the procedure used by Babbage to describe the machine's operations, resulting in the first 'algorithm', the terms in which we talk about the logic of computers today. The students were sufficiently knowledgeable about early nineteenth-century Romanticism to appreciate this entry point.

The rest of the presentation and discussion focused on the relationship between the features of the transhumanist imaginary that the students most liked and disliked, which in the survey is represented by their responses to questions 5 and 3, respectively. I started with the disliked bit, which I personally found most surprising in the results, given that 'Forever Young' is so central to transhumanism's public sales pitch (MacFarlane 2021). However, students clearly had some intuitive sense of the disruption to the social order that indefinite individual life expectancy would cause, especially given the difficulties that young people already experience in trying to get ahead in the world. I believe that a full articulation of this concern may turn out to be the socio-political Achilles heel of transhumanism, even if the relevant technologies to extend and enhance individual lives come on stream. Indeed, the classic philosophical idea that meaning in one's life is found through its finitude emerged during

the discussion, including the suggestion that without limits, people would never acquire a sense of what's important in life.

In the context of this discussion, issues about the family as a core social unit also emerged. Again, this is something that transhumanists tend not to emphasize, but figures in how younger people think about the movement, since their primary social frame of reference is still the family. Yet, it was equally clear from their response to question 5 that the students had an expanded sense of the 'social', in terms of which I mentioned St Francis of Assisi's 'communion of humanity' as including animals. I did not explore whether this came from specific relationships to pets or a more general attitude to nature. However, in response to one student's question, I referred her to Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's *Zoopolis*, which is aimed towards animals that humans normally sustain (e.g., pets and farm animals) rather than captured 'wild' animals (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2010).

In the end, I was left with an unresolved tension about how the family as a social unit relates to the expanded social order that the students seemed willing to countenance. Part of the problem may lie in the ambiguous character of 'family' as being both past- and future-oriented: I.e., the family you're born into versus the family you create. In any case, the family remains the default way of thinking about the unit of societal reproduction, regardless of who or what is included as part of a 'family'. To be sure, any hope of resolving the tension is not helped by the fact that transhumanists, in their single-minded quest to live forever, typically don't have children!

As it turns out, after my hourlong formal meeting with the students, I ran into one of them and we spoke for close to another hour about some of the other issues in the survey that weren't covered in the class, including the role of cyborgs—are they human or not?—and the shifting standards of 'normal' (and the potential for new and potentially more virulent forms of social inequality) in a world driven by transhumanist values. This student said she was thinking about pursuing law as a career, and I strongly recommended it because most of this stuff will eventually be decided in the courts. In fact, I co-authored a transhumanist book with a former law student (Fuller and Lipinska 2014).

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