



**AN
EXPLORATION
OF HUMANITY**

**WHAT MAKES US HUMAN? HOW IS THAT
DECIDED?**

BY LUSI WANG

INTRODUCTION

Like the title indicates, this zine is an exploration of humanity; specifically, how “the human” has been defined throughout history. This zine is organized into three parts, ordered by theme and chronology: I will begin by locating the origins of modern ideas of “the human” in Enlightenment-era thinking, philosophies, and the emergence of the biopolitical regime in Western Europe. The second part will focus on how colonization, dehumanization and necropolitical violence served to bolster Eurocentric ideas of humanity. The final part will explore the implications that advancements in science and technology have on ideas of “the human;” to do this, I will be outlining multiple theoretical perspectives that are prevalent in discourses regarding biotechnology: posthumanism and transhumanism. This last section also explores how biopower and necropower could manifest in a posthuman/transhuman future. To explore these questions, I will be analyzing a dystopian cyberpunk Netflix show, *Altered Carbon*, which poses interesting questions about what a posthuman/transhuman future could look like when imperialist and capitalist systems and projects remain in place. This project was definitely challenging because I’ve never made a zine before, and trying to convert my thoughts and ideas into a form that isn’t merely writing was a struggle for me to do, especially because I also don’t have much experience with graphic design. Through this project, I’ve been able to explore the potential of zines as an educational medium and the experience I’ve gained in making a zine is something that I’ll carry on outside of this class.

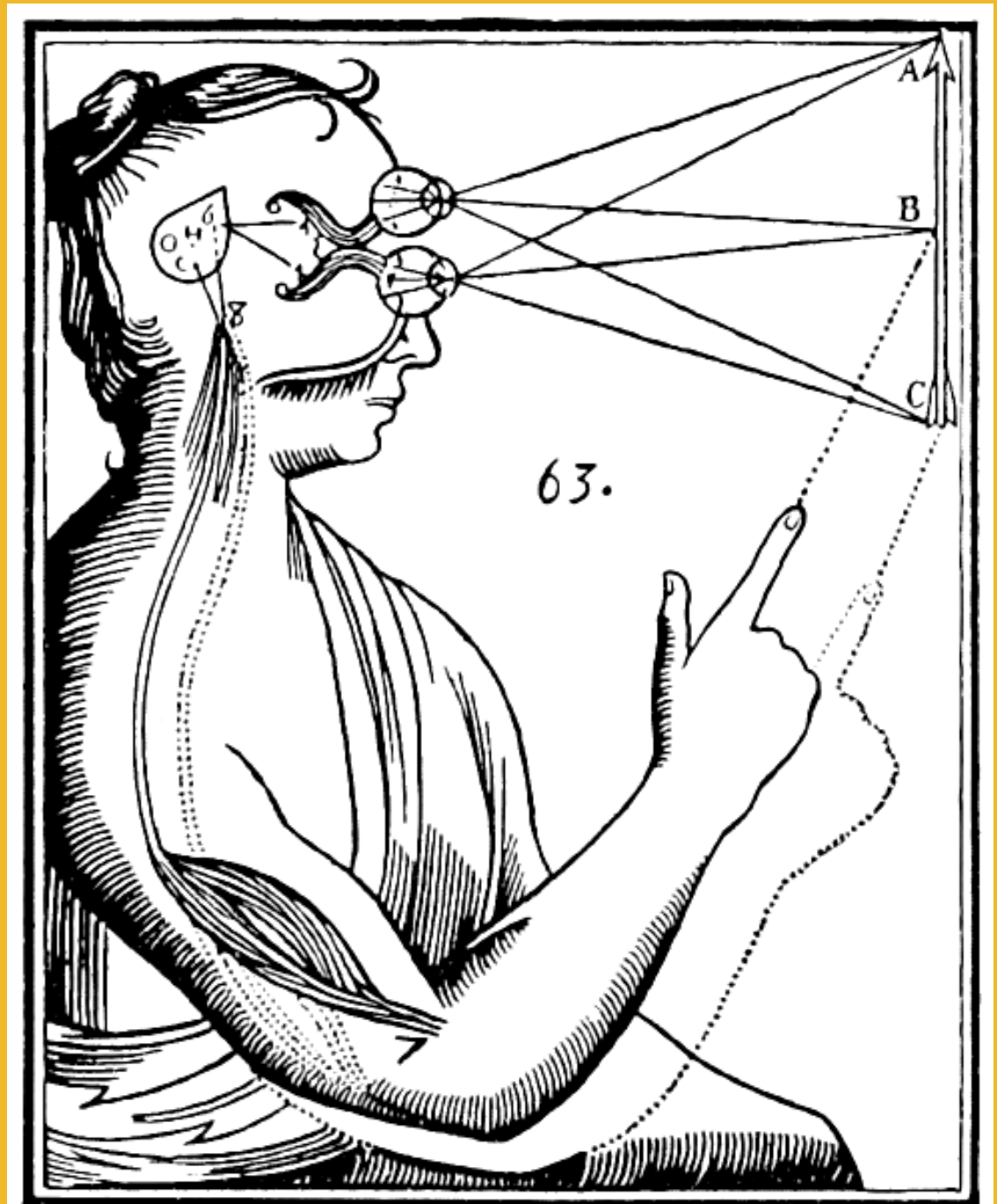
**PART I: HUMANISM
AND THE
EMERGENCE OF
BIOPOLITICS**

"I THINK, THEREFORE I AM." - RENE
DESCARTES

“Humanism... ‘appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential feature in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood.’” (Badmington 2000 p. 2).

The "core humanity" that Rene Descartes argues all humans have is **reason** and having **the capacity for rational thought** (Badmington 2000). This ability for rational thought is because humans possess a human mind, which is different from the body and the minds of non-human beings.

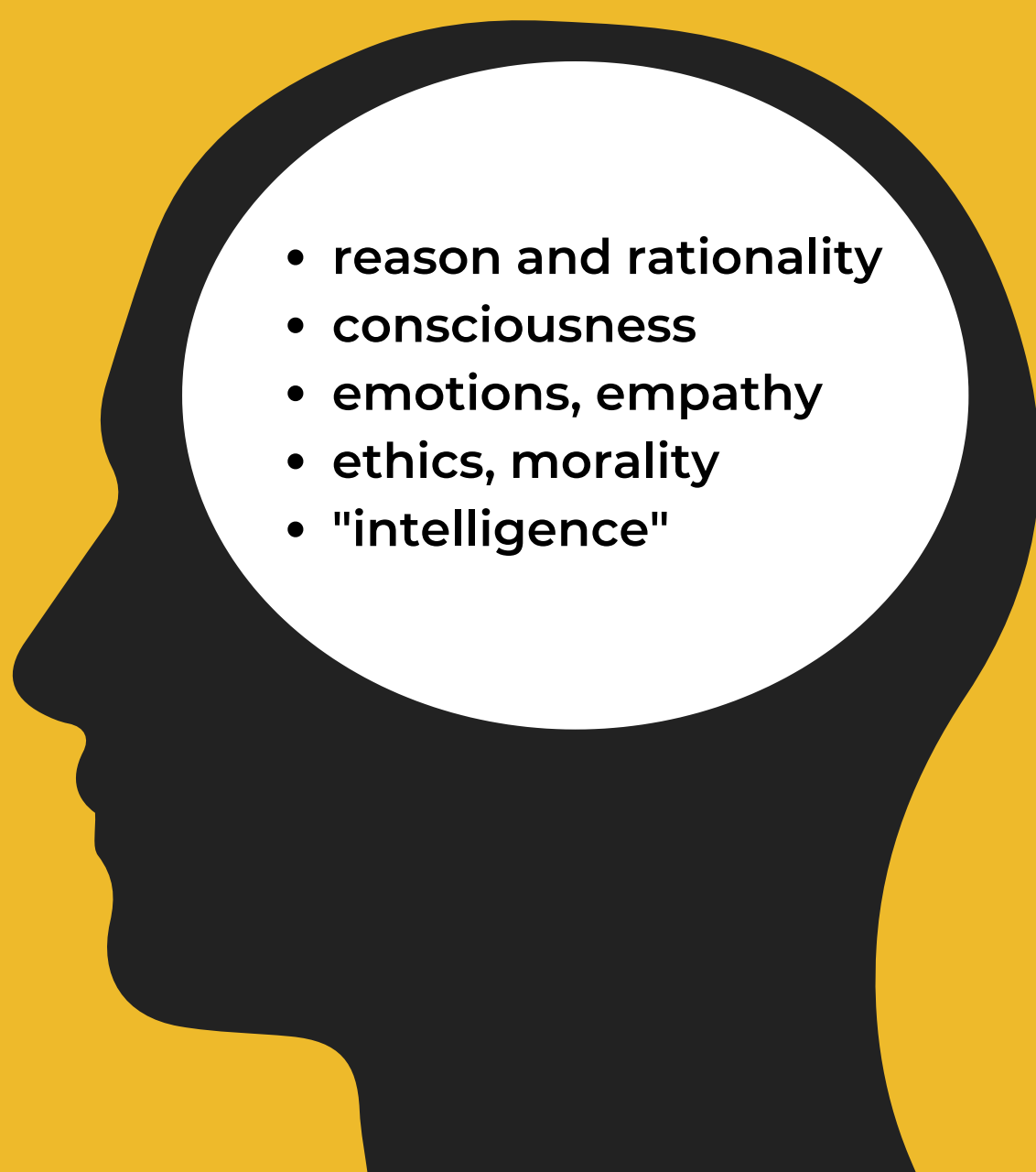
Descartes’s thinking was influential in the emergence and development of the natural and biological sciences, which set the framework for a new conceptualization of life apart from religious understandings of life. With the emergence of the natural sciences, life could be classified within a structure and nature was seen as a “continuous and graspable realm of being.” (Rentea 2017 p. 3)



Descartes's interpretation of the mind/body split

And with this, biology is able to emerge as a science of life. “Biology proposes the organism as the model for the organization of life.” (Rentea 2017 p. 3). The biological sciences allow for a new conceptualization of life to emerge, and this new discourse of life is what allowed for biopolitics to emerge, as this discourse of life is what biopolitics grounds itself in. With biopolitics, power is now exercised in a way that maximizes and ensures “the life and continuation of the [human] species” (Rentea 2017, p. 5). Under a biopolitical regime, biopower is now characterized by the ability to “make live and let die” (Foucault 2003, p. 241).

Biopower operates through dividing the population into those who are allowed to live and those who must die, and the “allowing” to live for some necessitates the dehumanization and “othering” of other groups. How this is defined depends on norms established by biopolitical regimes, norms that are heavily rooted in the aforementioned ideas of “the human.” What happens to those who are outside of the realm of biopower’s control?



- reason and rationality
- consciousness
- emotions, empathy
- ethics, morality
- "intelligence"

**PART II: THE
ABJECT,
DEHUMANIZATION,
AND
NECROPOLITICS**

“IF ONE IS NOT A HUMAN BEING, WHAT
IS ONE?” - ACHILLE MBEMBE

Guidotto (2007) describes abject bodies as those that lie at “the margins of the political order” and outside the realm of law (p. 49). Both the abject and the exception’s existence undermine the legitimacy of the law, which is a representation of and upholds the “norm.” Biopower is exercised on the basis of these “norms,” which are defined in reference to a “deviant” group. These norms serve to dictate and uphold essential ideas about “the human,” with those who are deviant being considered “inhuman.” Those deemed deviant exist in a state of exception, and those in this state are whom biopower “lets” die.

Monster narratives serve to stigmatize those who lie outside of the norm, dehumanizing them by literally turning them into something inhuman.

Monsters such as werewolves and vampires embody characteristics that fall outside the norm, and thus, outside of biopower’s control. The literal dehumanization of those who exhibit these characteristics serves to maintain these norms and biopower’s hold over life. Those outside of biopower’s control are subject to death in order to protect the interests of the biopolitical regime. This exercise of power, this subjection to death, is what Achille Mbembe (2003) defines as necropower, which is rooted in necropolitics.



**WHAT DETERMINES WHO IS
ALLOWED TO LIVE AND
WHO MUST BE PUT TO
DEATH?**

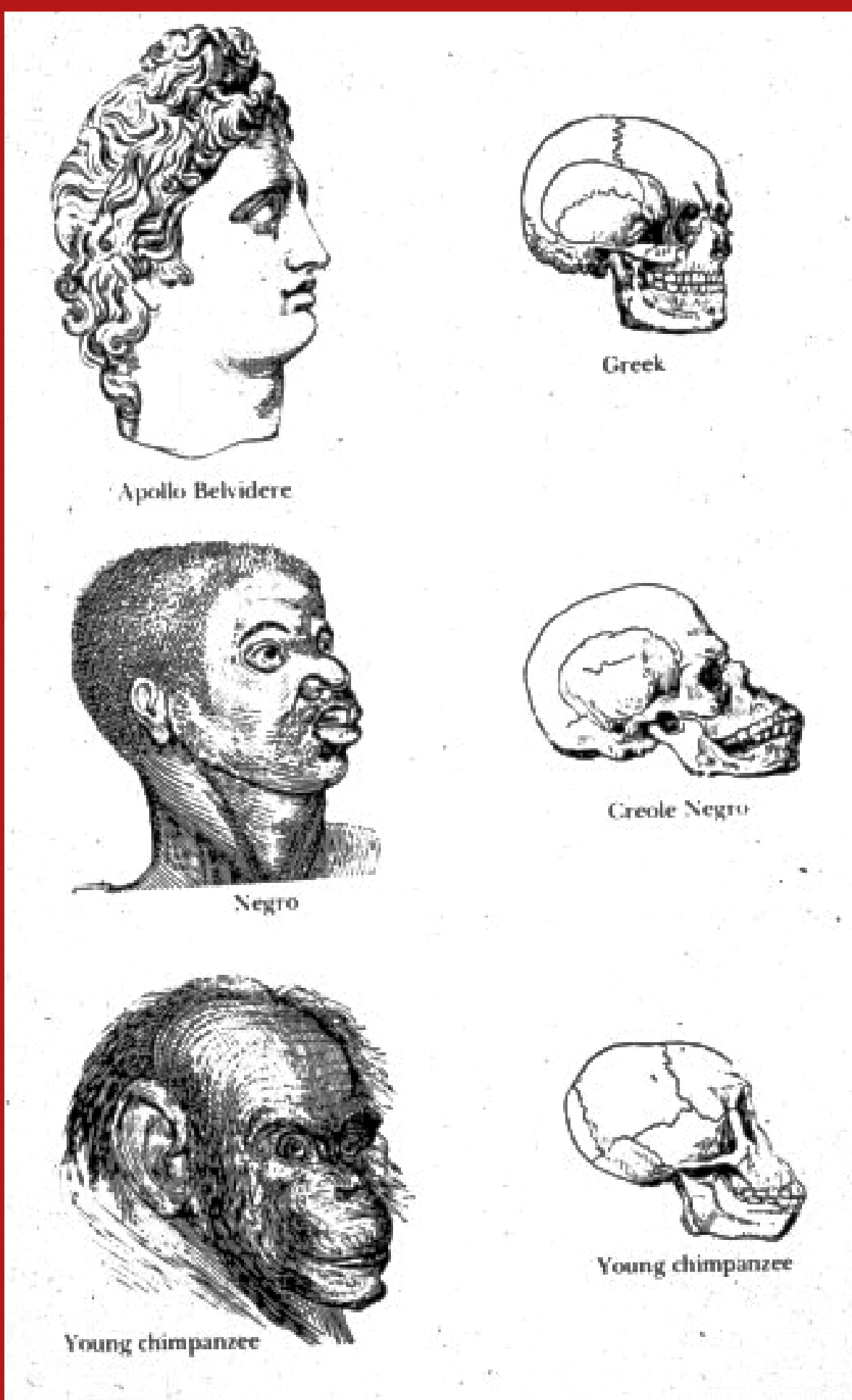
To answer the question posed, we must first return to biopolitics and biopower. Biopower “defines itself in relation to a biological field,” (Mbembe and Meintjes 2003, p. 17), a field that stems from the biological and natural sciences. The classification of life in these sciences enables the construction of a biological caesura between “man” and “Other,” a divide that is based on what Foucault calls race. The dehumanization of the abject and those who fall on the side of “Other” are subject to necropolitical violence, a concept that Achille Mbembe introduces to describe the ways in which power is exercised to subject certain groups to death for the survival of the “human race.”

Race is used to determine who lives and who dies, especially in colonized territories. It is thus used to justify necropolitical violence, sanctioning the death of those categorized as the “inferior race” for the purposes of biopolitical governance, which, as a reminder, is concerned with maximizing the vitality and longevity of the human species. Inferiority is used to justify colonial violence towards populations indigenous to colonized territories, such as Africa and the Americas.



How is this “inferior race” determined? What are the conditions of this “inferiority?” In essence, discourse around “inferior” races have always been based off of the qualities that they “lack” in comparison to white male colonizers. Colonized peoples are constructed as embodiments of evil, lacking in ethics and morality, and are considered to be incapable of “intelligence” and “reason,” which is the delineating characteristic between “human” and “inhuman,” with the “inhuman” being animals or animalistic (Fanon 1963). This rationale dehumanizes colonized peoples by turning them into animals (Fanon 1963), and this dehumanization affirms the idea of the white male as the only acceptable image of “the human.”

In sum, the dehumanization of those populations outside of biopower’s control affirms humanist conceptualizations of “the human,” which really only encompasses the heterosexual, cisgendered white male. In colonial contexts, race also works to dehumanize Indigenous populations, as it is the operating rationale that delineates who is human and who is not. Those part of an “inferior race” are considered to be “inhuman,” which justifies necropower, subjecting these “inferior” groups to conditions of death for the biopolitical goal of human survival (although it is clear that humanity is only afforded to a limited group).



**PART III:
POSTHUMANISM,
TRANSHUMANISM,
AND HUMANITY'S
FUTURE**

"THE DANGER OF LIVING TOO MANY
TIMES: YOU FORGET TO FEAR DEATH." -
TAKESHI KOVACS, FROM ALTERED
CARBON

In the previous section, I talked about the abject and “Other,” race and racism, and necropolitics and necropower. However, with the advent of new technologies and knowledge, Descartes’s conceptualization of “the human” is arguably becoming more and more outdated. Two related but distinct perspectives have become prevalent in discourses regarding “the human:” posthumanism and transhumanism.

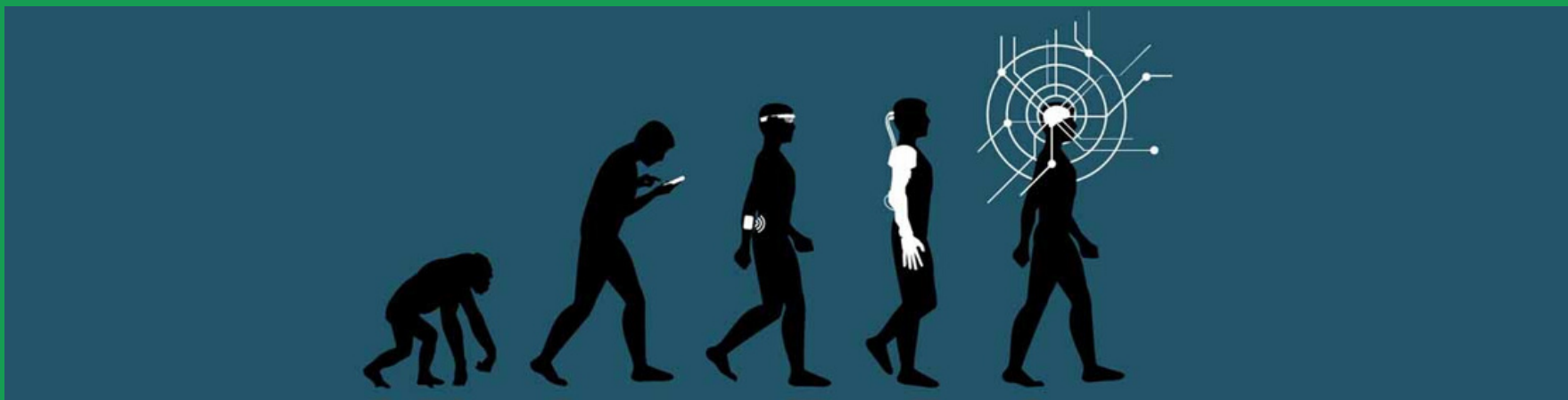


Posthumanism: a point of view characterized by the following assumptions (Hayles 1999):

- Privileges information pattern (how info is transferred and replicated) over material instantiation (where information exists)
- Consciousness isn’t everything and not the defining characteristic of “the human,” it’s a only a “sideshow” of evolution
- The body is the original prosthesis, and extending/replacing body parts is just a continuation of what we were meant to do
- The human being can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines

Transhumanism (British Institute of Posthuman Studies 2013 and BBC Ideas 2019): the drive to change what it means to be human through the use of technological and scientific developments to improve the human condition

- Views death as a disease
- Overall negative outlook on humanity’s current state socially and biologically due to presence of wars, environmental destruction, famine and limited lifespan and susceptibility to disease

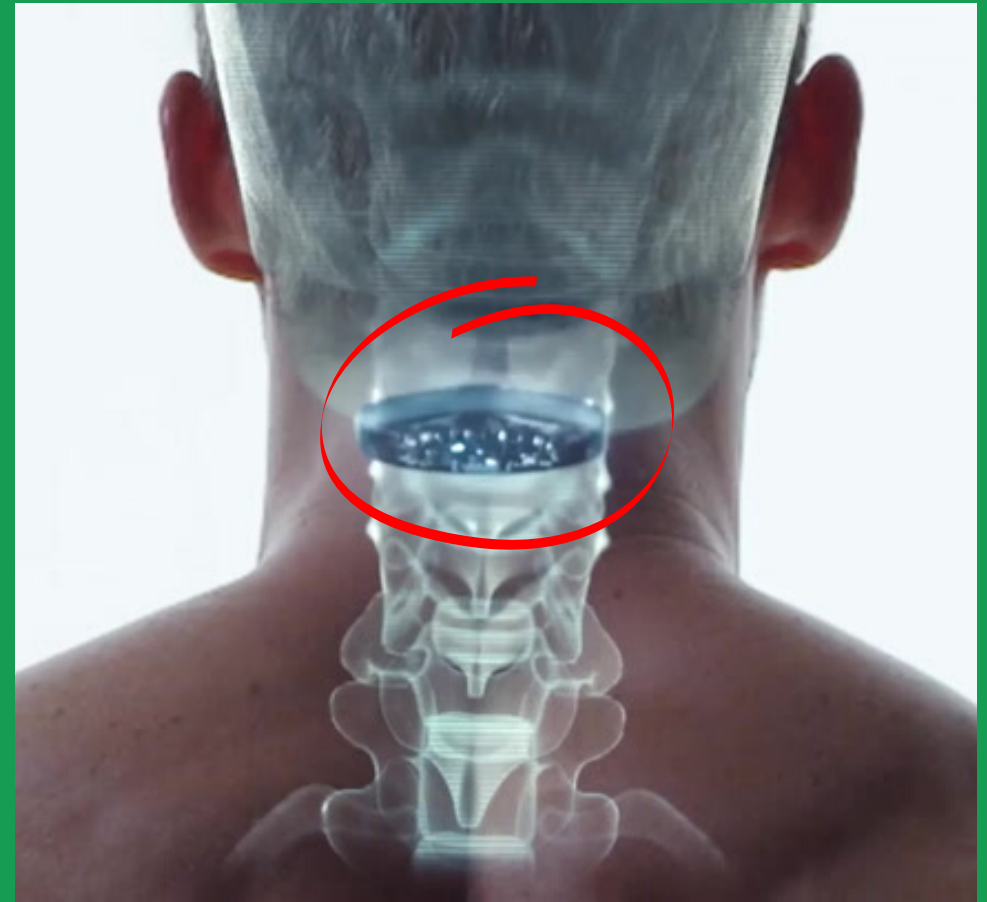


The two perspectives are similar in that they both move away from Enlightenment and Humanist conceptualizations of what it means to be human. They move beyond the human body as the only material “place” that the human mind and soul can exist and look towards cybernetic technologies, artificial intelligence, and computers to alter humanist ideas of embodiment.

To my understanding, posthumanism more broadly refers to the ways in which ideas regarding what it means to be human are constantly changing, constantly moving towards its “post” (Badmington 2000). While transhumanism is part of posthumanist thought, posthumanist thought also involves the deconstruction of the social categories that define “the human” (e.g. race, gender, ability, etc.) and the reimagining of “the human” as a figure that is fluid, and can embody different, even contradictory ideas and meanings (Maloney 2018). Hayles’s (1999) outline of the posthumanist view is very similar to how transhumanism is conceived, but I think an essential difference is that transhumanism concerns itself more with biopolitical goals of the longevity and vitality of the human species through using technology and science.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS THAT THESE IDEAS AND TECHNOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC ADVANCEMENTS HOLD FOR CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF “THE HUMAN?” ARE THESE IDEAS INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE TO ALL?

To explore these questions, I will be analyzing a dystopian cyber-punk Netflix show: *Altered Carbon*. *Altered Carbon* takes place in a transhumanist future, in which the human mind can be uploaded to something called a “cortical stack” that can be transferred from one body to another. Human bodies have become nothing more than “sleeves.” With this technology, humans have virtually achieved immortality, as they can continue “living” as long as their stack isn’t destroyed.



This show explores the necropolitical consequences that biotechnology and advances towards a transhumanist vision of the future can entail for humanity. For instance, it shows how economic inequality can be exacerbated by this vision through the characters called “Meths” and the separation of “Meths” from “grounders.” Meths are incredibly wealthy people who have lived for hundreds of years because they have the financial resources to 1) manufacture countless clones to be “sleeved” into and 2) back up their consciousness to off-planet satellites, so that if their stack is ever destroyed, they can reupload their last backup into a new stack to be inserted into one of their clones. The show physically separates Meths from regular people to further underscore the difference in power and wealth: Meths live in the sky (Aerium) while ordinary people, “grounders,” live on the ground in cargo containers organized into very compact spaces. This separation of Meths from grounders is foundational to the exercise of necropower on grounders. By nearly gaining immortality, Meths have the power to exercise power towards their advantage subjecting grounders to conditions of death through sex slavery, torture, and even murder for entertainment.



On top of all of this, the technological advancements made available in this society have made it incredibly easy to track and surveil individuals. Every movement is tracked and recorded, but this has now become accepted as a given in the world of the show. It is “needed” in order for society to function.

Another interesting question this show explores is the idea of morality and ethics in relation to “the human.” In this show, who are “human” repeatedly commit atrocious, violent acts towards other humans. We see AIs display more compassion and empathy than the humans in this show. Although the AIs are incredibly powerful and arguably “conscious,” with the ability to “reason” and develop independently of their creators, there is still a distinction between AI and humans, the distinction marked by cortical stacks and the “natural” birth that humans still undergo. But how clear is this distinction, when human minds are digitized and uploaded and AIs are artificially created, hyperintelligent computer minds?

This question is also complicated with Hewlett’s (2018) introduction of the Computation Theory of Mind, which “argues that what we perceive as cognition and consciousness is actually computation,” with the computing instrument being the brain. With this in mind (pun not intended), how different are the humans in *Altered Carbon* from the AI characters?

Although *Altered Carbon* is a work of fiction, by complicating the idealistic vision of transhumanism, it highlights incredibly real possibilities for humanity’s future and how ideas of “the human” can change as biotechnology continues to develop.



An AI, a Meth, and a grounder. Can you tell the difference?

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, there isn't only one way to conceptualize "the human." I think something important to note is that these ideas continuously change and are dependent on the social, cultural, political context that they exist in. Like Badmington (2000) said, humanism is constantly moving towards its "post," and science-fiction narratives like *Altered Carbon* illustrate this constant movement and continuously de/construct what it means to be "human."

I'd like to end with these questions: As the wealthy get wealthier, as investment in biotechnology increases, and as scientific advancements are made, what does the future of humanity look like? What form(s) will "the human" take? And lastly, what forces will define "the human?"

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