The People Cheering for Humanity's End

A disparate group of thinkers says we should welcome our demise

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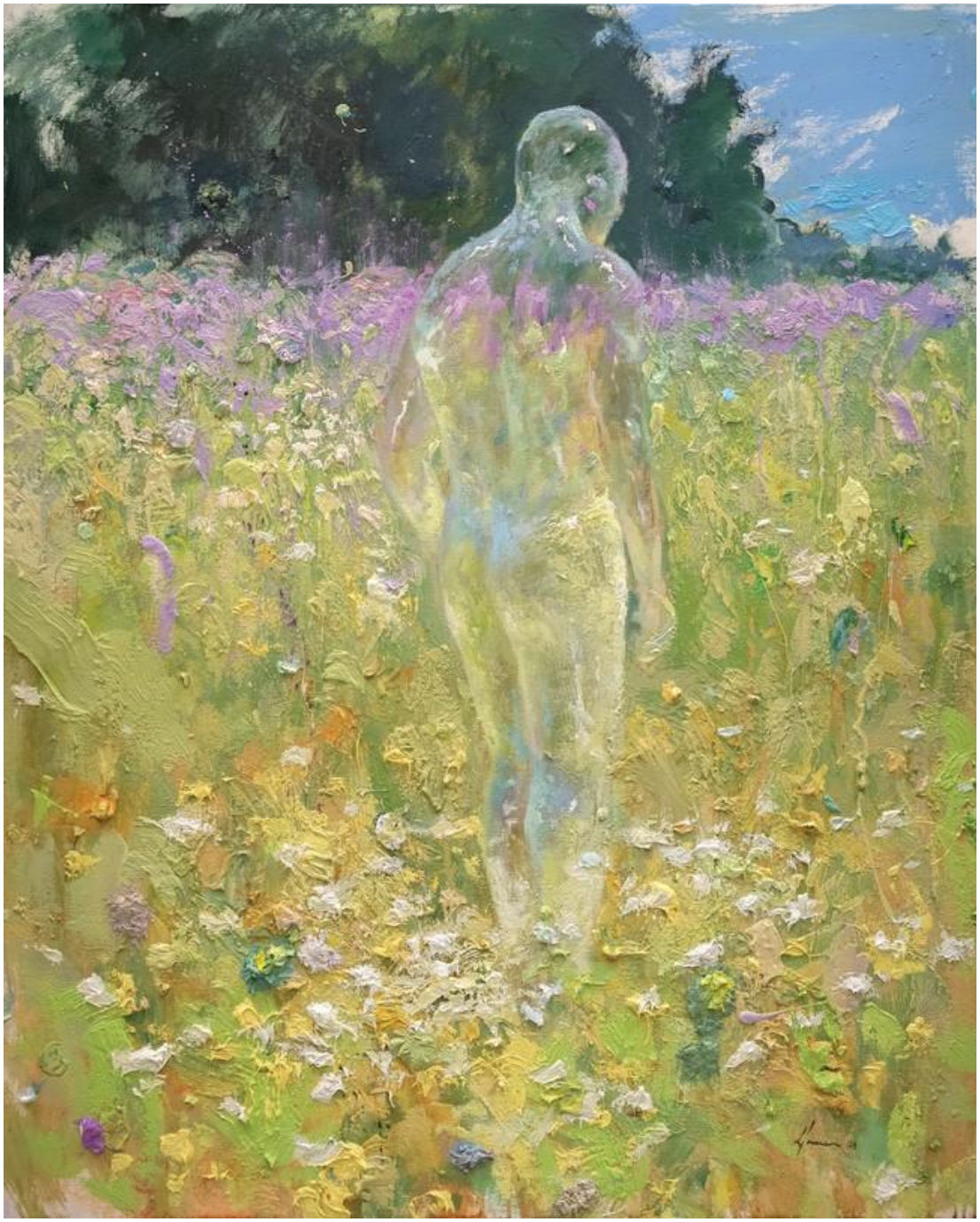

Painting by Reynier Llanes. "The Poet," 2021 (oil on canvas, 47 x 36 inches).

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"Man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."

With this declaration in *The Order of Things*(1966), the French philosopher Michel Foucault heralded a new way of thinking that would transform the humanities and social sciences. Foucault's central idea was that the ways we understand ourselves as human beings aren't timeless or natural, no matter how much we take them for granted. Rather, the modern concept of "man" was invented in the 18th century, with the emergence of new modes of thinking about biology, society, and language, and eventually it will be replaced in turn.

As Foucault writes in the book's famous last sentence, one day "man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea." The image is eerie, but he claimed to find it "a source of profound relief," because it implies that human ideas and institutions aren't fixed. They can be endlessly reconfigured, maybe even for the better. This was the liberating promise of postmodernism: The face in the sand is swept away, but someone will always come along to draw a new picture in a different style.

But the image of humanity can be redrawn only if there are human beings to do it. Even the most radical 20th-century thinkers stop short at the prospect of the actual extinction of *Homo sapiens*, which would mean the end of all our projects, values, and meanings. Humanity may be destined to disappear someday, but almost everyone would agree that the day should be postponed as long as possible, just as most individuals generally try to delay the inevitable end of their own life.

In recent years, however, a disparate group of thinkers has begun to challenge this core assumption. From Silicon Valley boardrooms to rural communes to academic philosophy departments, a seemingly inconceivable idea is being seriously discussed: that the end of humanity's reign on Earth is imminent, and that we should welcome it. The revolt against humanity is still new enough to appear outlandish, but it has already spread beyond the fringes of the intellectual world, and in the coming years and decades it has the potential to transform politics and society in profound ways.

This view finds support among very different kinds of people: engineers and philosophers, political activists and would-be hermits, novelists and paleontologists. Not only do they not see themselves as a single movement, but in many cases they want nothing to do with one another. Indeed, the turn against human primacy is being driven by two ways of thinking that appear to be opposites.

The first is Anthropocene anti-humanism, inspired by revulsion at humanity's destruction of the natural environment. The notion that we are out of tune with nature isn't new; it has been a staple of social critique since the Industrial Revolution. More than half a century ago, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, an exposé on the dangers of DDT, helped inspire modern environmentalism with its warning about following "the impetuous and heedless pace of man rather than the deliberate pace of nature." But environmentalism is a meliorist movement, aimed at ensuring the long-term well-being of humanity, along with other forms of life. Carson didn't challenge the right of humans to use pesticides; she simply argued that "the methods employed must be such that they do not destroy us along with the insects."

The anti-humanist future and the transhumanist future are opposites in most ways. But both are worlds from which human beings have disappeared, and rightfully so.

In the 21st century, Anthropocene anti-humanism offers a much more radical response to a much deeper ecological crisis. It says that our self-destruction is now inevitable, and that we should welcome it as a sentence we have justly passed on ourselves. Some anti-humanist thinkers look forward to the extinction of our species, while others predict that even if some people survive the coming environmental apocalypse, civilization as a whole is doomed. Like all truly radical movements, Anthropocene anti-humanism begins not with a political program but with a philosophical idea. It is a rejection of humanity's traditional role as Earth's protagonist, the most important being in creation.

Transhumanism, by contrast, glorifies some of the very things that anti-humanism decries—scientific and technological progress, the supremacy of reason. But it believes that the only way forward for humanity is to create new forms of intelligent life that will no longer be *Homo sapiens*. Some transhumanists believe that genetic engineering and nanotechnology will allow us to alter our brains and bodies so profoundly that we will escape human limitations such as mortality and confinement to a physical body. Others await, with hope or trepidation, the invention of artificial intelligence infinitely superior to our own. These beings will demote humanity to the rank we assign to animals—unless they decide that their goals are better served by wiping us out completely.

The anti-humanist future and the transhumanist future are opposites in most ways, except the most fundamental: They are worlds from which we have disappeared, and rightfully so. In thinking about these visions of a humanless world, it is difficult to evaluate the likelihood of them coming true. Some predictions and exhortations are so extreme that it is tempting not to take them seriously, if only as a defense mechanism.

But the revolt against humanity is a real and significant phenomenon, even if it is "just" an idea and its predictions of a future without us never come true. After all, unfulfilled prophecies have been responsible for some of the most important movements in history, from Christianity to Communism. The revolt against humanity isn't yet a movement on that scale, and might never be, but it belongs in the same category. It is a spiritual development of the first order, a new way of making sense of the nature and purpose of human existence.

In the 2006 film *Children of Men*, the director, Alfonso Cuarón, takes only a few moments to establish a world without a future. The movie opens in 2027 in a London café, where a TV news report announces that the youngest person on Earth has been killed in Buenos Aires; he was 18 years old. In 2009, human beings mysteriously lost the ability to bear children, and the film depicts a society breaking down in the face of impending extinction. Moments after the news report, the café is blown up by a terrorist bomb.

The extinction scenario in the film, loosely based on a novel by the English mystery writer P. D. James, remains in the realm of science fiction—for now. But in October

2019, London actually did erupt in civil disorder when activists associated with the group Extinction Rebellion, or XR, blocked commuter trains at rush hour. At one Underground station, a protester was dragged from the roof of a train and beaten by a mob. In the following months, XR members staged smaller disruptions at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, on New York's Wall Street, and at the South Australian State Parliament.

The group is nonviolent in principle, but it embraces aggressive tactics such as mock "die-ins" and mass arrests to shock the public into recognizing that the end of the human species isn't just the stuff of movie nightmares. It is an imminent threat arising from anthropogenic climate change, which could render large parts of the globe uninhabitable. Roger Hallam, one of the founders of XR, uses terms such as *extinction* and *genocide* to describe the catastrophe he foresees, language that is far from unusual in today's environmental discourse. The journalist David Wallace-Wells rendered the same verdict in *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019), marshaling evidence for the argument that climate change "is not just the biggest threat human life on the planet has ever faced but a threat of an entirely different category and scale."

Since the late 1940s, humanity has lived with the knowledge that it has the power to annihilate itself at any moment through nuclear war. Indeed, the climate anxiety of our own time can be seen as a return of apocalyptic fears that went briefly into abeyance after the end of the Cold War.

Destruction by despoliation is more radically unsettling. It means that humanity is endangered not only by our acknowledged vices, such as hatred and violence, but also by pursuing aims that we ordinarily consider good and natural: prosperity, comfort, increase of our kind. The Bible gives the negative commandment "Thou shalt not kill" as well as the positive commandment "Be fruitful and multiply," and traditionally they have gone together. But if being fruitful and multiplying starts to be seen as itself a form of killing, because it deprives future generations and other species of irreplaceable resources, then the flourishing of humanity can no longer be seen as simply good. Instead, it becomes part of a zero-sum competition that pits the gratification of human desires against the well-being of all of nature—not just animals and plants, but soil, stones, and water.

If that's the case, then humanity can no longer be considered a part of creation or nature, as science and religion teach in their different ways. Instead, it must be seen as an antinatural force that has usurped and abolished nature, substituting its own will for the processes that once appeared to be the immutable basis of life on Earth. This understanding of humanity's place outside and against the natural order is summed up in the term *Anthropocene*, which in the past decade has become one of the most important concepts in the humanities and social sciences.

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The legal scholar Jedediah Purdy offers a good definition of this paradigm shift in his book *After Nature* (2015):

The Anthropocene finds its most extreme expression in our acknowledgment that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate. Because we shape everything, from the upper atmosphere to the deep seas, there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings.

We find our fingerprints even in places that might seem utterly inaccessible to human beings—in the accumulation of plastic on the ocean floor and the thinning of the ozone layer six miles above our heads. Humanity's domination of the planet is so extensive that evolution itself must be redefined. The survival of the fittest, the basic mechanism of natural selection, now means the survival of what is most useful to human beings.

In the Anthropocene, nature becomes a reflection of humanity for the first time. The effect is catastrophic, not only in practical terms, but spiritually. Nature has long filled for secular humanity one of the roles once played by God, as a source of radical otherness that can humble us and lift us out of ourselves. One of the first observers to understand the significance of this change was the writer and activist Bill McKibben. In *The End of Nature* (1989), a landmark work of environmentalist thought, McKibben warned of the melting glaciers and superstorms that are now our everyday reality. But the real subject of the book was our traditional understanding of nature as a "world entirely independent of us which was here before we arrived and which encircled and supported our human society." This idea, McKibben wrote, was about to go extinct, "just like an animal or a plant"—or like Foucault's "man," erased by the tides.

Read: Human extinction isn't that unlikely

If the choice that confronts us is between a world without nature and a world without humanity, today's most radical anti-humanist thinkers don't hesitate to choose the latter. In his 2006 book, *Better Never to Have Been*, the celebrated "antinatalist" philosopher David Benatar argues that the disappearance of humanity would not deprive the universe of anything unique or valuable: "The concern that humans will not exist at some future time is either a symptom of the human arrogance ... or is some misplaced sentimentalism."

Humanists, even secular ones, assume that only humans can create meaning and value in the universe. Without us, we tend to believe, all kinds of things might continue to happen on Earth, but they would be pointless—a show without an audience. For anti-humanists, however, this is just another example of the metaphysical egoism that leads us to overwhelm and destroy the planet. "What is so special about a world that contains moral agents and rational deliberators?" Benatar asks. "That humans value a world that contains beings such as themselves says more about their inappropriate sense of self-importance than it does about the world." Rather, we should take comfort in the certainty that humans will eventually disappear: "Things will someday be the way they should be—there will be no people."

Like anti-humanists, transhumanists contemplate the prospect of humanity's disappearance with serenity. What worries them is the possibility that it will happen too soon, before we have managed to invent our successors. As far as we know, humanity is the only intelligent species in the universe; if we go extinct, it may be game over

for the mind. It's notable that although transhumanists are enthusiastic about space exploration, they are generally skeptical about the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence, or at least about the chances of our ever encountering it. If minds do exist elsewhere in the universe, the destiny of humanity would be of less cosmic significance.

Humanity's sole stewardship of reason is what makes transhumanists interested in "existential risk," the danger that we will destroy ourselves before securing the future of the mind. In a 2002 paper, "Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards," the philosopher Nick Bostrom classifies such risks into four types, from "Bangs," in which we are completely wiped out by climate change, nuclear war, disease, or asteroid impacts, to "Whimpers," in which humanity survives but achieves "only a minuscule degree of what could have been achieved"—for instance, because we use up our planet's resources too rapidly.

As for what humanity might achieve if all goes right, the philosopher Toby Ord writes in his 2020 book *The Precipice* that the possibilities are nearly infinite: "If we can venture out and animate the countless worlds above with life and love and thought, then ... we could bring our cosmos to its full scale; make it worthy of our awe." Animating the cosmos may sound mystical or metaphorical, but for transhumanists it has a concrete meaning, captured in the term *cosmic endowment*. Just as a university can be seen as a device for transforming a monetary endowment into knowledge, so humanity's function is to transform the cosmic endowment—all the matter and energy in the accessible universe—into "computronium," a semi-whimsical term for any programmable, information-bearing substance.

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The Israeli thinker Yuval Noah Harari refers to this idea as "Dataism," describing it as a new religion whose "supreme value" is "data flow." "This cosmic data-processing system would be like God," he has written. "It will be everywhere and will control everything, and humans are destined to merge into it." Harari is highly skeptical of Dataism, and his summary of it may sound satirical or exaggerated. In fact, it's a quite accurate account of the ideas of the popular transhumanist author Ray Kurzweil. In his book *The Singularity Is Near* (2005), Kurzweil describes himself as a "patternist"—that is, "someone who views patterns of information as the fundamental reality." Examples of information patterns include DNA, semiconductor chips, and the letters on this page, all of which configure molecules so that they become meaningful instead of random. By turning matter into information, we redeem it from entropy and nullity. Ultimately, "even the 'dumb' matter and mechanisms of the universe will be transformed into exquisitely sublime forms of intelligence," Kurzweil prophesies.

Read: An interview with Nick Bostrom: We're underestimating the risk of human extinction

In his 2014 book, *Superintelligence*, Nick Bostrom performs some back-of-the-envelope calculations and finds that a computer using the entire cosmic endowment as computronium could perform at least 10^{85} operations a second. (For comparison, as of

Painting by Reynier Llanes. *Home*, 2022 (mixed media on paper, 70 x 59 inches).

2020 the most powerful supercomputer, Japan's Fugaku, could perform on the order of 10^{17} operations a second.) This mathematical gloss is meant to make the project of animating the universe seem rational and measurable, but it hardly conceals the essentially religious nature of the idea. Kurzweil calls it "the ultimate destiny of the universe," a phrase not ordinarily employed by people who profess to be scientific materialists. It resembles the ancient Hindu belief that the Atman, the individual soul, is identical to the Brahman, the world-spirit.

Ultimately, the source of all the limitations that transhumanism chafes against is embodiment itself. But transhumanists believe that we will take the first steps toward escaping our physical form sooner than most people realize. In fact, although engineering challenges remain, we have already made the key conceptual breakthroughs. By building computers out of silicon transistors, we came to understand that the brain itself is a computer made of organic tissue. Just as computers can perform all kinds of calculations and emulations by aggregating bits, so the brain generates all of our mental experiences by aggregating neurons.

If we are also able to build a brain scanner that can capture the state of every synapse at a given moment—the pattern of information that neuroscientists call the connectome, a term analogous with *genome*—then we can upload that pattern into a brain-emulating computer. The result will be, for all intents and purposes, a human mind. An uploaded mind won't dwell in the same environment as we do, but that's not necessarily a disadvantage. On the contrary, because a virtual environment is much more malleable than a physical one, an uploaded mind could have experiences and adventures we can only dream of, like living in a movie or a video game.

For transhumanists, mind-uploading fits perfectly into a "patternist" future. If the mind is a pattern of information, it doesn't matter whether that pattern is instantiated in carbon-based neurons or silicon-based transistors; it is still authentically you. The Dutch neuroscientist Randal Koene refers to such patterns as Substrate-Independent Minds, or SIMs, and sees them as the key to immortality. "Your identity, your memories can then be embodied physically in many ways. They can also be backed up and operate robustly on fault-tolerant hardware with redundancy schemes," he writes in the 2013 essay "Uploading to Substrate-Independent Minds."

The transhumanist holy grail is artificial general intelligence—a computer mind that can learn about any subject, rather than being confined to a narrow domain, such as chess. Even if such an AI started out in a rudimentary form, it would be able to apply itself to the problem of AI design and improve itself to think faster and deeper. Then the improved version would improve itself, and so on, exponentially. As long as it had access to more and more computing power, an artificial general intelligence could theoretically improve itself without limit, until it became more capable than all human beings put together.

This is the prospect that transhumanists refer to, with awe and anxiety, as "the singularity." Bostrom thinks it's quite reasonable to worry "that the world could be radically transformed and humanity deposed from its position as apex cogitator over

the course of an hour or two," before the AI's creators realize what has happened. The most radical challenge of AI, however, is that it forces us to ask why humanity's goals deserve to prevail. An AI takeover would certainly be bad for the human beings who are alive when it occurs, but perhaps a world dominated by nonhuman minds would be morally preferable in the end, with less cruelty and waste. Or maybe our preferences are entirely irrelevant. We might be in the position of God after he created humanity with free will, thus forfeiting the right to intervene when his creation makes mistakes.

The central difference between anti-humanists and transhumanists has to do with their ideas about meaning. Anti-humanists believe that the universe doesn't need to include consciousness for its existence to be meaningful, while transhumanists believe the universe would be meaningless without minds to experience and understand it. But there is no requirement that those minds be human ones. In fact, AI minds might be more appreciative than we are of the wonder of creation. They might know nothing of the violence and hatred that often makes humanity loathsome to human beings themselves. Our greatest spiritual achievements might seem as crude and indecipherable to them as a coyote's howl is to us.

Neither the sun nor death can be looked at with a steady eye, La Rochefoucauld said. The disappearance of the human race belongs in the same category. We can acknowledge that it's bound to happen someday, but the possibility that the day might be tomorrow, or 10 years from now, is hard to contemplate.

Calls for the disappearance of humanity are hard to understand other than rhetorically. It's natural to assume that transhumanism is just a dramatic way of drawing attention to the promise of new technology, while Anthropocene anti-humanism is really environmentalism in a hurry. Such skepticism is nourished by the way these schools of thought rely on unverifiable predictions.

But the accuracy of a prophecy is one thing; its significance is another. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his followers that the world is going to end in their lifetime: "Verily I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." This proved not to be true—at least not in any straightforward sense—but the promise still changed the world.

The apocalyptic predictions of today's transhumanist and anti-humanist thinkers are of a very different nature, but they too may be highly significant even if they don't come to pass. Profound civilizational changes begin with a revolution in how people think about themselves and their destiny. The revolt against humanity has the potential to be such a beginning, with unpredictable consequences for politics, economics, technology, and culture.

The revolt against humanity has a great future ahead of it because it appeals to people who are at once committed to science and reason yet yearn for the clarity and purpose of an absolute moral imperative. It says that we can move the planet, maybe even the universe, in the direction of the good, on one condition—that we forfeit our own existence as a species.

In this way, the question of why humanity exists is given a convincing yet wholly immanent answer. Following the logic of sacrifice, we give our life meaning by giving it up.

Anthropocene anti-humanism and transhumanism share this premise, despite their contrasting visions of the post-human future. The former longs for a return to the natural equilibrium that existed on Earth before humans came along to disrupt it with our technological rapacity. The latter dreams of pushing forward, using technology to achieve a complete abolition of nature and its limitations. One sees reason as the serpent that got humanity expelled from Eden, while the other sees it as the only road back to Eden.

But both call for drastic forms of human self-limitation—whether that means the destruction of civilization, the renunciation of child-bearing, or the replacement of human beings by machines. These sacrifices are ways of expressing high ethical ambitions that find no scope in our ordinary, hedonistic lives: compassion for suffering nature, hope for cosmic dominion, love of knowledge. This essential similarity between anti-humanists and transhumanists means that they may often find themselves on the same side in the political and social struggles to come.

This article was adapted from Adam Kirsch's book The Revolt Against Humanity. *It appears in the January/February 2023 print edition with the headline "The End of Us." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting* The Atlantic.

Adam Kirsch is the author of several books, including *The Revolt Against Humanity: Imagining a Future Without Us.*

A critique of his ideas & actions.

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