

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw
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Center for Ecology and Ecophilosophy

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Quality of Life from a Transhumanist Perspective

Jakość życia z perspektywy transhumanistycznej

Zlatica Plašienková¹, Martin Farbák¹, Eva Smolková²

¹ Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia

² Institute of Philosophy, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

ORCID ZP <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3201-3722>; MF <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1076-3338>; ES <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1450-8692> •
zlatica.plasienkova@uniba.sk

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Abstract: The issue of quality of life has been a subject of major interest in the course of history, even though it was originally related to a specific philosophical question of a good life. Nowadays, the quality-of-life issue represents a more complex term, related to a lot of aspects that make human life good, valuable and meaningful. In this article, the authors aim to reflect on the new role of transhumanism, which is promoting a radical scientific and technological enhancement of humans. In its promising visions, the level of quality of human life should be supposedly increased to an almost ideal state for all people. Initially, the authors deal with the issue of the quality of human life concerning individual preferences and social solutions, and they proceed with their beliefs based on the assumption that the guarantor of the life of citizens is the state government. Later on, the authors of the article focus on the given issue relating to transhumanist positions. They critically analyse the transhumanist absolutization of technology as the primary tool for achieving a good human life, whilst overlooking the ethical context of the issue. The authors express their positive standpoint towards human progress and enhancement (especially in medicine), but they recognise a possible risk of dehumanisation. If the transhumanist visions are to be carried out by prioritizing the progress itself before the actual humans, there are deep ethical questions that should be answered.

Keywords: good life, quality of life, transhumanism, human enhancement, humans, post-humans, absolutization

Streszczenie: Problematyka jakości życia była przedmiotem zainteresowania na przestrzeni dziejów, choć pierwotnie była związana z konkretną filozoficzną kwestią dobrego życia. W dzisiejszych czasach kwestia jakości życia jest pojęciem bardziej złożonym, związanym z wieloma aspektami, które sprawiają, że ludzkie życie jest dobre, wartościowe i znaczące. W tym artykule autorzy zamierzają zastanowić się nad nową rolą transhumanizmu, który promuje radykalne naukowe i technologiczne udoskonalenie człowieka. W swoich obiecujących wizjach poziom jakości życia ludzkiego powinien zostać podobno podniesiony do stanu niemal idealnego dla wszystkich ludzi. Początkowo autorzy zajmują się kwestią jakości życia człowieka w odniesieniu do indywidualnych preferencji i rozwiązań społecznych, pracując przy założeniu, że gwarantem życia obywateli jest władza państwowa. Następnie autorzy artykułu skupiają się na danym zagadnieniu dotyczącym pozycji transhumanistycznych. Krytycznie analizują transhumanistyczną absolutyzację technologii jako podstawowego narzędzia osiągnięcia dobrego życia ludzkiego i pomijanie etycznego kontekstu zagadnienia. Autorzy wyrazili swoje pozytywne stanowisko wobec postępu i rozwoju człowieka (zwłaszcza w medycynie), ale dostrzegają możliwe ryzyko dehumanizacji. Jeśli wizje transhumanistyczne miałyby być realizowane poprzez nadanie priorytetu samemu postępowi przed rzeczywistymi ludźmi, pojawiają się poważne pytania natury etycznej, na które należałoby odpowiedzieć.

Słowa kluczowe: dobre życie, jakość życia, transhumanizm, doskonalenie człowieka, ludzie, postludzie, absolutyzacja

Introduction

The quality-of-life issue is a traditional topic in philosophy that has been addressed by many philosophers throughout history. In the context of philosophical research, this is above all primarily an ethical issue associated with a question of a good life. Aside from philosophical and ethical research, however, the issue of quality of life is also a subject of interest in sociology, psychology, economics, pharmacology and medicine, and there are also relations to the possibilities of certain modern biotechnologies. We can expressly talk about this as a complex interdisciplinary issue, and although in various periods of human history and in different cultures this issue has been approached in different ways, the common tendency in all approaches is to define the basic criteria that make it possible to live a full and meaningful life. In philosophical terms, this means living a good, prosperous and happy life. In modern history, the very term *quality of life* arose in connection with the need to understand human life as a social value that needs to be secured. The issue of quality of life is very often dealt with at the government level¹ because it concerns citizens and their rights. It is also associated with the promotion of the idea of equal chances for all, i.e., a concept resting on the idea of equality contained in the idea of human rights, primarily those aimed at levelling social differences, increasing the quality of health care and the standards of a dignified life. Human rights namely contain social guarantees of a dignified human existence. They are the rights whose goal is to guarantee the dignified existence for every person, and therefore also a range of basic living conditions that are necessary for a high-quality, or full life.²

If we reflect on some philosophical and theological texts which focus on the issue of human life, we find that they are also dedicated to the issue of protecting life, its inviolability and sanctity. We can state that questions on protecting human life from an individual's birth, the concept of life as God's gift, and the need to protect it in case of danger were and still are components not only of moral philosophy but also of legislative principles and standards that are part of legal social norms. In this context, it has always been and still is necessary to define whether the certain quality of life criteria exist, and how they can be secured and promoted. It is further necessary to take into account that from birth to death a person changes, develops, matures and ages, and how one lives life, whether one is satisfied with it and whether one has the possibilities and opportunities to realise one's strategies and goals to live what is called a full life, is important at every stage of life. This is also why the quality of life is a topic that needs to be interpreted in every phase of life, both in an individual and social context. Furthermore, it is necessary to talk about the quality of life of disabled persons and to create chances for them to apply themselves and live life according to their own ideas. Although a person's quality of life – the chance to live a full life despite a disability – is a separate issue, we mention it because the impact of different types of disabilities (physical and mental) is also a topic that is often mentioned within the scope of contemporary transhumanism.³ In particular, the chance to positively affect (i.e. enhance) the quality of life of such disadvantaged people is declared, but we need to add there are ethical dilemmas

¹ An exception here is the activities of non-governmental organisations, which operate globally as part of their mission, or in countries where they address specific problems related to some aspect of quality of life. An example is the organisation *Doctors Without Borders*.

² The term *quality life* is used only less often. In English scientific texts, the notions of *well-being* and

welfare have mainly been established. The term quality of life is used particularly when dealing with the complexity of the given issues.

³ We focused on a similar issue, which relates mainly to people with Down Syndrome, in the paper entitled *Paradigmatic Changes in Understanding the Essence of Humanity – Transhumanism and Mentally Disabled People* (Plašienková and Farbák 2022).

regarding the means of enhancement proposed by the transhumanist philosophy.

In this paper, we deal first with the issue of the quality of human life concerning individual preferences and social solutions, and we work with the assumption that the state government is the guarantor of the life of its citizens and their quality of life. We then later focus on the given issue from transhumanist positions.

1. The social context of the quality-of-life issue

As we have already mentioned, the basis of all criteria relating to the issue of quality of life is the system of human rights and freedoms, which today are considered to be absolute rights and are presented as inviolable (Palovičová 2017, 31). Their gradual expansion within social concepts in philosophy or sociology has influenced assessments of the principle of justice because this is a principle that guarantees an equal approach to all persons. The discourse on human rights in philosophy points out that human rights are also social tools for affecting the quality of life. This is also a reason for further considerations on whether they need to be expanded even further. However, in this concept, it is always possible to think only in the framework of a specific government and about the formulations that are established in the law and that are usually anchored in the constitutions of specific states. We are speaking, for example, about the right to health care, the right to education, the right to a healthy environment and the right to a dignified life.

These social rights as components of human rights are derived from the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*,⁴ but histori-

4 Article 25 states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control" (United Nations 1948).

cally most of them are significantly older. Their philosophical roots stretch back to the Enlightenment, and as social rights, they began to appear on the European political scene at the end of the 19th century.⁵ At present, it is the state's responsibility to create conditions for the dignified life of its citizens and to secure the performance of the services connected with social rights.

In the context of the issue of human rights, it needs to be said that all human rights "take the form of claims, rights, freedoms, competencies, immunity" (Smolková 2020, 556). Despite the fact that differentiating criteria are used in relation to human rights and are divided into civil, economic, social, cultural or community rights, they are all interconnected, and the border between them is not well-defined. In most cases, it even applies that they should not and cannot be asserted in isolation, because they are linked to others.⁶ The system of human rights is not a closed system; therefore, human rights gradually include other groups of persons that were not explicitly mentioned in the original conventions. We can mention the special protection of children, women, elderly people, or disabled persons as well as others disadvantaged as an example.⁷

The creation and promotion of human rights is closely associated with the possibility of influencing the lives of citizens of a specific state that implements human rights in its legislation and ensures their enforcement. The overall context and the concept of social rights itself seems to depend

5 In 1881, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck initiated social reforms and introduced a system of compulsory insurance for those groups of residents who were socially imperiled. The aim was to prevent threats connected with the social problems of the German population and to guarantee social stability and social harmony.

6 This is also expressed on a practical level, an example of which is the work of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

7 The fundamental turning point in this context was the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993.

on two basic factors: what *human image*⁸ government has regarding its own citizen and his/her social rights, and whether resources are allocated to ensure the social needs of citizens. Therefore, individual conceptual models differ from one another, and the implementation of the same and equally declared right takes a different form in different states. The current form of social rights in a state depends not only on legislation but also on culture and moral principles valid in society. A legal norm may lead to the deformation of legal practice implemented in the country.⁹ Under conditions of significant social inequalities, structural limitations may be a consequence of unequally distributed opportunities for life and development. Each existing social right has its own specifics and asserting them requires a functional strategy at the government level and assumes the subsequent formulation of the state policy aims and functional features of the system that then emerge.¹⁰

2. Quality of human life and transhumanism

The question of what kind of life can be considered good (or high-quality) and why – has been asked by many contemporary thinkers. Answers are sought in the scope of social and moral philosophy, the philosophy of well-being, the concept of effective altruism, transhumanism and many other currents of opinion that have been promoted at the turn of the 21st century. We will now focus on the issue of quality of life in the context of transhumanism.

Transhumanism is an interdisciplinary (philosophical, scientific, and cultural)

⁸ German theorist M. Krennerich uses this term (Krennerich 2013).

⁹ In socialist countries, the right to work was transformed into an obligation to work. Additional examples could be given from Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union or currently North Korea.

¹⁰ Three systems can be identified within social security: 1. social insurance, 2. a system of state social support and 3. a system of social assistance for citizens who find themselves without income.

movement that plays an important role in the conceptual redefining of human nature and man's place in the modern world. This is a concept that represents the current version of posthumanism in the era of modern science and technology.¹¹ This movement, whose visions and goals are focused on the evolution and artificial enhancement of human beings, has both theoretical and practical dimensions. In a certain sense, it is also an ideology whose goal is to overcome human limits by various biological or, more precisely, biotechnological methods and means. Transhumanism takes many forms, which, however, have a common goal – to make our existence easier, happier and, speaking in a more general sense, of higher quality. From a philosophical point of view, the ideas of transhumanism are conceived as an effort to overcome the evolutionary limitations of the human species and influence the length and quality of human life. The primary concern is the use of biotechnology and nanotechnology. We can also mention bionic technologies that are compatible with human tissue, as well as chemical and pharmacological technologies in the form of effective chemical compounds, and software and hardware solutions for monitoring or influencing the functions of the human organism and influencing genetic information before and during a person's life. Additionally, there is the transplantation of organs, the creation of growth or regeneration factors of the organism or organs outside or inside the human body as well as many others. Obviously, the possibilities of technologies do not just depend on their implementation, primarily in health care systems, but also on their social acceptance and a moral assessment of their introduction.

The promotion of several basic ideas can be spoken about in association with trans-humanism. This mainly involves the possibility of biological transcendence,

¹¹ The term *posthumanism* was first used by the scholar Ihab Hassan (1925–2015), who anticipated the end of humanism and the beginning of the era of posthumanism (Hassan 1977).

i.e., overcoming the boundaries and limits of natural life, the idea of universal technologization, through which technology is presented as a solution to all social and health problems, ageing, genetic diseases and even death.¹² This idea is closely associated with the presentation of the need for human enhancement, behind which lies the desire for self-improvement. Who would not want to be wiser, more capable, live a longer and more fulfilling life and have healthy and intelligent children? The allurements of the ideas of transhumanism can vary widely, as can the degree of refinement or enhancement. Some transhumanism ideas are presented as overcoming human mortality, a way to open the possibility of humans being immortal, including in the physical or biological sense of the word (Danaylov 2016). It is a combination of the idea of immortality and the idea of superman (Ettinger 1972) that is attractive but likewise the most problematic. This is why transhumanism is very often presented as a futurological concept, as a basic idea that needs to be accepted as techno-evolution, with awareness of the fact that man cannot affect the natural boundaries of evolution, but that there are technological methods and means that allow solving human problems, crossing biological limits, thereby enabling every person in the community to live a quality life. Lastly, the question of quality of life is a manifestation of the well-known desire of man to improve life or to make it easier, but representatives of transhumanism have no problem with crossing the boundaries of this desire, which are controversial from an ethical point of view.

The manifesto of transhumanism written by Natasha Vita-More (Vita-More 2020) can help us acquire a better idea of some of the ambitious visions of the movement. There are claims, for example, that ageing

is a disease that must be fought against, and that modifications or enhancements to the human body and brain are necessary to increase the quality of life. In her presentation, it is a defence of the ethical use of technology and exact science in the battle for an enhanced human being. She emphasises the correlation of responsibility and freedom on the genetic level, which she expresses with a formulation of the type: *genetic liability* is promoted through *genetic liberty*. Vita-More specifies that understanding these conditions is the core of the scientifically and rationally justified philosophy of transhumanism. She says that transhumanism here clearly represents a radical form of philosophy of science and knowledge and is manifested as a strongly motivated movement of philosophers, futurists, and scientists, who declare their interest in improving the quality of life throughout society.

The general view today on how much we can manipulate our body to enhance it has changed greatly. Although it is difficult to quantify the share transhumanism has had in this paradigmatic shift in the understanding of the human body and its possible modifications, we are seeing an increase in the popularity of cosmetic procedures in particular. The reason for them is often not only an effort to prevent the visual manifestations of ageing but also to adapt one's appearance to current aesthetic trends, which is demonstrated by the decreasing age of those interested in plastic surgery. In such a case, an increase in the quality of life is defended by the slogan *looking good = feeling good* (Monaghan 2022), though experts point out that the growing interest in aesthetic body modification is mainly due to the development of social networks (Atiyeh and Ibrahim 2020) and does not always lead to true improvement in the quality of life. Lidia Zuin, a Brazilian journalist and researcher in the field of semiotics and visual arts, points out that the transhumanist vision of *eternal youth* and the resolution to defeat, or at least delay death as much as

¹² It is indisputable that a long life has always been an ideal, an aim and a goal of humanity, and today it is precisely in connection with transhumanism that people talk about the possibilities of extending life and even immortality.

possible, indirectly reinforces controversial standards of beauty, with unfortunate consequences in the area of social inequality (Zuin 2021).

The question of the quality of life is also present in transhumanism from a completely different point of view. Philosopher David Benatar speaks of it (in a positive sense) as an approach that does not fetishize humanity. He follows an anti-natalist philosophy, according to which human life does not achieve a sufficient quality to make it worth reproducing. Transhumanism here occupies an optimistic stance based on the belief that the quality of human life can be raised to an ideal level. However, Benatar notes that in transhumanism, improving the quality of life itself is much more important than whether future beings will remain human. We are thus talking about the possible future dehumanisation of people. Transhumanists believe that enhancements will advance the quality of life so much that life will not only be better but will achieve its ideal quality (Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 60). However, Benatar, a defender of anti-natalism, questions the premises on which transhumanism is based in its prognosis of human enhancement. In his view, the expected enhancements will probably not be achievable (or achievable within the planned time frame), something that we agree with. In his view, it is naively optimistic to think, for example, that human life can be extended as much as transhumanists estimate, or that human cognitive abilities can be radically increased. It is also not clear whether the life of enhanced people or post-people will really be ideally good. They would still have to come to terms with death, but also with how to fill an unreasonably long life with meaning, and they would still possess far more ignorance than knowledge. Transhumanist enhancement is thus only a softening of the harshness of life, not a promise of Eden, adds Benatar (Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 61).

Despite the criticism of the exaggerated positive prognosis that transhumanism

promotes in its visions, it needs to be said that the general level of quality of life of contemporary man has improved according to measurements (Heylighen and Bernheim 2000) and is still improving together with the general progress that is associated with consolidation and expansion of basic human rights and freedoms and the advancement of science, medicine, and technology. In this way, we want to express our positive (although moderate) approach to human progress and enhancement.

From a philosophical (in this case also psychological) point of view, we could also call the question of quality of life an ontology of the individual meaning of life, in which happiness and satisfaction should be present, in the sense of individual or subjective well-being of the individual. The issue of quality of life thus has social and individual dimensions, as well as solutions for how and whether at all to influence a person's quality of life and the tools and resources needed to take these two dimensions into account. This depends, however, on the individual authors addressing the issue, whether they prefer its individual or social dimension. In principle, it depends on the scientific discipline. Psychologists deal much more with individual preferences, and economists and sociologists, for example, with social factors. Philosophy is a discipline that should consider and analyse all approaches because the essence and meaning of life can only be grasped through questions related to the quality of life as an interdisciplinary issue.

Philosophers Mike McNamee and Stephen Edwards note that even among supporters of transhumanism there is conflict regarding the understanding of the quality of life, which is related to whether the given quality of life becomes an individual or a social issue. Some advocates see transhumanism simply as a way to improve their own lives, according to their own standards of quality of life, for example, the implanting of electronic chips under the skin that can serve as a payment card, health record

or apartment key is a simple enhancement.¹³ However, this can also be a decision to increase your intelligence or extend your life. This is an example of people who understand transhumanism as a tool to expand their own autonomy in the subjective improvement of their lives. A less expressive group of supporters does not see the project of transhumanism directed only at expanding personal autonomy; they see it as a potential to improve the quality of life of people in general. Unlike the first group, who link transhumanism mainly with their own conception of the subjective good or the extension of their personal life choices, for this group, the relationship between transhumanism and the common good is what makes transhumanism worthy of support (McNamee and Edwards 2006, 514). Regardless of the fact that transhumanists do not agree on what objective goods should be their goal in the enhancement of humans or post-humans, we must acknowledge that transhumanism as a philosophical vision is based on a certain concept of good, which is linked to the concept of quality of life.¹⁴ But some radical critics of transhumanism consider such an understanding of the good life to be a threat to morality itself. McNamee and Edwards justify this by saying that more conservative authors perceive morality as necessarily connected to a kind of vulnerability that accompanies human nature (McNamee and Edwards 2006, 515).

If we attempt to name what criteria – qualitative and quantitative – are taken

¹³ In a report for BBC Scotland, Fraser Gillan focused on transhumanists who want to enhance their own bodies by implanting various technological accessories, thereby improving their quality of life from a subjective point of view (Gillan 2019).

¹⁴ Reflections on a good and happy life have been known in Western culture since ancient times. The most important philosopher who comprehensively approached the issue was Aristotle. In his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, he pointed out how good, happy life is related to the virtuous life of an individual, which is constituted within the framework of social, therefore political life. Aristotle thus reflected on the individual and social context of a good life (*eudaimonia*).

into consideration in the question of quality of life, whether they are related to the entire course of human life, on the basis of what values the criteria are created, and if we also reflect on moral relationships and contexts, we find that some criteria, such as age (i.e. life expectancy), play a significant role in statistical indicators. We need to know, however, what informative value these criteria have in relation to the quality of life; furthermore, what kind of life was lived by the people included in the statistics and whether it can be considered good, full-fledged and meaningful. A whole scale of measurements has been developed to measure the level of quality of life as objectively as possible. They are usually based on the subjective perception of the individual since each person perceives the measurable aspects of quality of life differently. However, such measurements were also developed in a way to avoid biases and to be applicable interculturally. Among the currently most well-known is the International Health Organization's WHOQOL test, which defines the quality of life as an "individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns." (World Health Organization 1998, 11). In the context of measuring the quality of life, transhumanists emphasise the subjective perception of well-being as one of their main values (Bostrom 2005, 4). Nevertheless, in their case, this is more of a declarative statement lacking an objective dimension and depth. Ultimately, any visions that predict the future in a certain way are naturally uncertain.

Conclusion

Transhumanism is often presented by its proponents as a continuation of Enlightenment humanism, which is supplemented by scientific and technological knowledge. The well-known transhumanist Max More also presents such an opinion: "Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science,

a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural «after-life»” (More 1990).

We are convinced, however, that the presentation of transhumanism as a continuation of Enlightenment humanism and evolutionism is extremely problematic from a moral point of view. Many authors even consider transhumanism to be *antihumanism*, an ideology that denies and confutes humanism in its historical form. Arguments that transhumanism threatens human values are among those most often heard from philosophers as well as theologians, who accept the idea of human enhancement with great reluctance. It is possible to identify with the transhumanist call for better adaptation to scientific-technological progress and the need for its social acceptance, but it is exceedingly important to examine, analyse and assess the possible threats related to the use of scientific-technological tools, which, for example, Nicholas Agar, an advocate of *truly human enhancement*, points out in his theoretical work (Agar 2013). The positive potential of scientific-technological progress is presently visible mainly in the development of modern health technologies, and these are generally received positively; they are even welcomed and considered as a promising development in the area of medicine or pharmacology, which could lead to an essential increase in the overall quality of life of the human population.

From a philosophical view, the problem lies in the assessment of technologies as the main tools for solving the problem of quality and prolonging human life. Transhumanism absolutizes technology as the potential primary tool for a good human life and overlooks the ethical, psychological, political, sociological and economic aspects of the issue. Transhumanist authors actually believe that mankind can artificially accelerate its own evolution so much that it will develop into a new post-human man. There is a lack of philosophical and holistic reflection on the consequences for a person

of the current type, however. The argument of Hans Jonas, that traditional ethics cannot be prepared for the power man has gained over nature (Jonas 1997, 27) and continues to gain through technology over himself and his body, applies here. Breaking free, or overcoming evolutionary mechanisms – i.e., overcoming the physical limits of the human being – is linked with the philosophical concept of superman, but also with efforts to populate the universe, for example.

We can thus state that transhumanism approaches the issue of quality of life in a liberal and innovative way. It represents an optimistic opinion that promotes the belief that science and technology can solve the current crisis of humanity and, together with it, increase the individually experienced quality of life of Earth’s inhabitants. In this article, however, we have pointed out that the probability of implementing the optimistic visions of transhumanism is low and that there are too many unanswered questions connected with them. We have further pointed out the threat of dehumanisation of mankind as we know it. We call for a deeper philosophical and ethical analysis of artificial human enhancement, but not techno-pessimism. We believe in human progress, thanks to which we have already reached many very important milestones, but we advocate for a more cautious approach, which adheres more to classical humanist values, within which man, as is known today, has a firm place (but not, however, in an arrogant anthropocentric meaning).

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