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H+ in Greece?

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ABSTRACT

Transhumanism is a movement of thought, cultural and philosophical, which has been gradually irrigating the contemporary world for over forty years. It invites us to reconsider our conceptions of the human being, seeing it as an open project. We can see it at work behind the reflections of personalities from the economic world such as Larry Page¹, Elon Musk² or Klaus Schwab³. It is also already being taken into account by the military⁴. It has given rise to a great deal of philosophical and sociological controversy and has been the subject of numerous books. But what about the citizen debate? This reflection is on how these issues are addressed in Greece, my adopted country. But these thinkings may be valid for other countries, especially in Europe. The issues raised by transhumanism - for example, the relationship between humans and technology, the possibility of choosing our biological evolution, the benefits and risks of living much longer in good health, of considering ageing as a disease, etc. - are often difficult and very sensitive at the same time. They go to the very heart of our identity, both as individuals and as Humanity. However, although contemporary transhumanist thought has emerged over the last forty decades, it remains mostly either confined to elitist circles or presented to the general public in a caricatured or sensationalist manner, and therefore largely incomprehensible. So, the question is: How can the academic community work to ensure that these issues are both accessible and clear, and that the public debate they involve takes place in a peaceful manner?

Keywords: Greek transhumanism, “dianthropismos”, academic transhumanism

¹Ben Popper, The Verge, “Google’s project to ‘cure death,’ Calico, announces \$1.5 billion research center”, 03/09/2014.

²Liat Clark, WIRED, “Why Elon Musk’s transhumanism claims may not be that far-fetched”, 15/02/2017.

³Klaus-Gerd Giesen, Journal international de bioéthique et d'éthique des sciences, “Transhumanism as the dominant ideology of the fourth industrial revolution”, Issue 3-4, 2018, pages 189 to 203.

⁴Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), Human Augmentation – The Dawn of a New Paradigm, 13/05/2021.

An Overview of the Debate on Transhumanism in Greece, and Elsewhere

I have been living in Greece for fifteen years, but I also direct the French Transhumanist Association. Therefore, I am in contact with almost all the major transhumanist associations in the world, whether Humanity+ (the former World Transhumanist Association), the IEET (Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies), the London Futurists, the AIT (Associazione Italiana Transumanisti), the Spanish Alianza Futurista, the Russian transhumanists, German, etc.

At the same time, I collected all the information I could about the manifestations of the debate on transhumanism in Greece. Based on comparisons, here is a quick assessment.

Of course, there is an interest in the leading circles. This can be seen in the organization of a major annual conference by the Singularity University in Athens since 2018⁵. There, the big means are deployed, with an American-style show at the Megaro Mousikis. The whole of Athens rushes there. The only problem is that the entrance fee is several hundred Euros. This great mass is therefore only for the elite, especially the economic ones. Moreover, for marketing reasons, Singularity University has chosen for a few years to remove from its speech any clear reference to transhumanism. This institution created by Ray Kurzweil and Peter Diamandis, two very notorious transhumanists, does transhumanism without saying so⁶.

There is also an interest in some political spaces. For example, Greece is present at the highest level in these reflections in the European Parliament, and more particularly through the STOA (European Parliament Office for Scientific and Technological Option Assessment) with Eva Kaili, Member of Parliament, who, in the spring of 2022, has just been elected as its vice-president⁷, and Theodoros Karapiperis who is the head of its scientific section⁸. On the other hand, the country has an Ethics Council whose vice-president is Charalambos Tsekeris⁹. I met and I was invited by these people and I had the opportunity to realize how much the transhumanist questioning was not unknown to them. Nevertheless, there too, the prospect of speaking openly about transhumanism is almost taboo. We talk about it openly when we are in small group. It is even sometimes considered that a transhumanist evolution is inevitable. But, in these political circles, almost nobody dares to assume this perspective.

⁵See: <https://su.gr/>; Alexis Papachelas, Yannis Palaiologos, www.ekathimerini.com, “Diamandis: Technology is a great tool of democratization”, 02/10/2018.

⁶Margarita Boenig-Liptsin and J. Benjamin Hurlbut, Perfecting Human Futures, “Technologies of Transcendence at Singularity University”, 23/02/2016, pp 239–267.

⁷See: “STOA Panel elected its leadership for the second half of the 9th parliamentary term”: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/stoa/en/home/news/details/stoa-panel-elected-its-leadership-for-th/20191030CDT03061>.

⁸See: https://www.linkedin.com/in/theo-karapiperis-0464b130/?original_referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2F&originalSubdomain=be.

⁹Composition of the National Commission for Bioethics & Technoethics: <https://bioethics.gr/en/news/composition-of-the-national-commission-for-bioethics-technoethics-3018>.

I'm Here

I discovered some people really involved in transhumanist thought in some academic environments. The most advanced pole is, to my knowledge, that of the University of the Aegean, notably around Professor Evi Sampanikou. For more than ten years, she has been working regularly with the German transhumanist philosopher Stefan Sorgner, with whom she has organized the annual international colloquium Beyond Humanism three times¹⁰. This colloquium attracts every year dozens of scholars from all over the world who work on the development of post-humanist philosophy. I have participated in their work several times and what they do is very good. Except that their results remain essentially shared in the small world of the academy.

I have also spotted other Greek academics who have taken an interest in transhumanism, such as Maria Kanellopoulou-Boti, a law professor in Corfu who has studied transhumanist perspectives through the lens of Greek law¹¹.

But again, these initiatives remain confined within the walls of universities.

In the media now, there are some sporadic mentions, rare documentaries on TV, rare press articles, but they are mostly sensationalist. For example, a recent article in the Kathemerini newspaper in early April headlined “Humans could live forever by downloading their brains into robots, Elon Musk believes”¹². I'm not saying that Elon Musk doesn't make such statements. I am saying that it is possible to talk about transhumanism to the general public without systematically leaning on the most extreme statements.

A small part of the general public is interested in these questions. If you look, you can find for example some enthusiasts active online, animating blogs or discussion lists, or even more, present on the English-speaking transhumanist discussion lists¹³. But these people are isolated from each other and have not been able, until now, to make emerge in Greece a movement or an organization which is able to be heard in the media. Moreover, as they remain among themselves, they can afford to make sometimes very radical and sometimes excessive statements, or not based on sufficiently serious scientific grounds.

On the other hand, you find more sites that affirm their strong opposition to transhumanism, including sites of religious obedience¹⁴.

The consequence of these different trends is the near absence of transhumanism in the public debate. A recent Google search done with the keyword “dianthropismos” does not give any reference since 2020, with

¹⁰See: 12th Beyond Humanism Conference Critical Posthumanism and Transhumanism Antagonism or Convergence?, Call for Paper: <http://beyondhumanism.org/12th-beyond-humanism-conference/?ckattempt=1>.

¹¹Maria Canellopoulou-Bottis, “The Greek Law on Human Enhancement”, 4/12/2018. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3295619> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3295619>.

¹²Η Καθημερινή, Money revue, “Ζωή για πάντα: Download του ανθρώπινου εγκεφάλου σε ρομπότ βλέπει ο Elon Musk”, 9/04/2022, <<https://www.moneyreview.gr/business-and-finance/international/73319/zoi-gia-panta-download-toy-anthropino-y-egkefaloy-se-rompot-vlepei-o-elon-musk/>>.

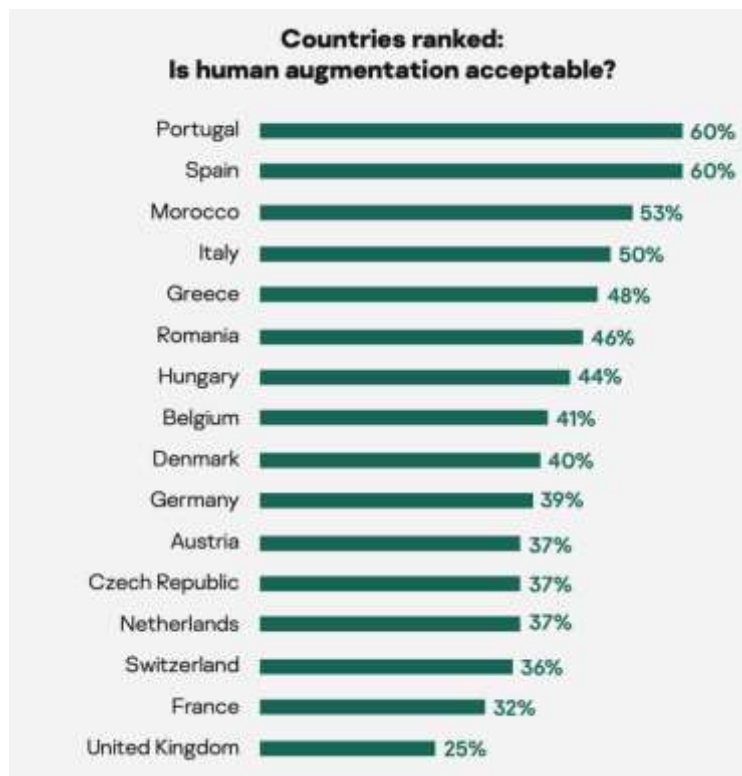
¹³See: <https://www.facebook.com/Transhumanism-Greece-2264759473806199/>.

¹⁴For instance: Χρυσούλα Μπουκουβάλα, Απεροπία, “Είναι επικίνδυνος ο διανθρωπισμός;”, 05/11/2017, <<https://aperopia.fr/11-2017/giati-einai-epikindynos-o-dianthropismos/#i>>.

“metanthropismos”, you only find critical references of more recent nails dated 2021. There seems to be almost no books, and the few you can found are all translations from English. Some attempts to find lectures on the subject remain unsuccessful. As for television programs, they are almost non-existent.

As a result, when you talk about it in a daily Greek environment, people just discover the subject.

However, there are some sociological studies on these issues. For instance, in 2020 was published the report of the firm Kaspersky The Future of Human Augmentation 2020: Opportunity or Dangerous Dream? This report is built on a questionnaire that was submitted to representative samples of the population in 15 European countries, plus Morocco. To the question, “Is human augmentation acceptable?”, the five countries with the most positive responses, at over 45%, are: Portugal 60%, Spain 60%, Morocco 53%, Italy 50%, and Greece 48%. Next are Balkan countries such as Romania and Hungary, and finally the countries of northern Europe. The two countries where the populations seem to be the most opposed are the United Kingdom 25% and France with only 32% of positive response¹⁵.



This study also corroborates other observations. If you compare, for example, the positions of Greece and France on the questions of the detection of embryonic cells in maternal blood, a technique developed to avoid amnio-

¹⁵Marco Preuss, Kaspersky The Future of Human Augmentation 2020: Opportunity or Dangerous Dream?, 2020, <<https://www.readkong.com/page/the-future-of-human-augmentation-2020-opportunity-or-3782752>>.

synthesis, Greece validated it before France. If you are interested in the issue of Surrogate motherhood, You note that France still condemns this use which is a matter of freedom of disposal of one's body¹⁶, while in Greece, the birth, in December 2016 of a baby carried by her 67-year-old grandmother for the benefit of her daughter had given rise to a real national celebration, praised even by the Orthodox Church¹⁷.

However, maybe the main ethical questions posed by transhumanism to Greece and the Greeks should be different. Should they be that of Longevityism, which invites us to a great medical paradigm shift, thinking of ageing as a disease? Should it be that of moral enhancement, which dares to consider touching the brain in order to improve our cognitive capacities and allow us to modulate our emotions? Indeed, in general, transhumanists propose to return from “the map to the territory”, as Alfred Korbsky said, that is to say to distrust the abstract constructions that we have drawn to try to circumscribe reality. They encourage us to stop considering limits as taboos. That said, we could also consider that an authentically Greek thought would have something to say to rethink the place of the ancient Greek thought tradition in view of transhumanism: Wouldn't the Greeks be the most legitimate to criticize the concept of hubris, to rethink the relationship to measure? Wouldn't they be in the best position to criticise the dialectic? It is fundamental to Think, in Greek, a Greek transhumanism. The Greeks must not be satisfied with translating Anglo-Saxon (or even French-speaking) transhumanism, but choose ways of thinking about transhumanism with Greek words. They need to multiply and deepen the debates to choose the meaning to be given to “dianthropismos”, “metanthropismos”, “hyperanthropismos”, etc. How to think in Greek about “enhancement”, “moral enhancement”? So far, however, this debate seems to exist only in the sphere of Greek bioconservatism.

Conclusion

The issues mentioned in the introduction is of major importance. Deciding what will be the future of the biological condition of humans is a subject as serious as the climate crisis, the collapse of biodiversity or the war in Ukraine. In the long run, it is even more serious.

To allow access to the understanding of these issues only to a small minority of a political, economic or intellectual elite seems both unacceptable and a serious mistake.

¹⁶See: World Center of Baby, “Surrogacy in France”, <https://worldcenterofbaby.com/countries/france/>, accessed on 12/06/2022 ; or, Vie publique, “Gestation pour autrui: quelles sont les évolutions du droit ? ”, <<https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/18636-gestation-pour-autrui-queelles-sont-les-evolutions-du-droit>>, 01/12/2018.

¹⁷See: www.protothema.gr, “‘δεν νιώθω μάνα, γιατί νιώθω’, λέει η 67χρονη που έφερε στον κόσμο το παιδί της κόρης της” <<https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/639615/den-niotho-mana-giagia-niotho-leei-i-gunaika-pou-efere-ston-kosmo-to-paidi-tis-koris-tis/>>.

It would be unacceptable on the one hand, because decisions involving the very identity of individuals and of humanity cannot be taken without a broad debate and democratic deliberation processes. On the other hand, it would be counterproductive, because we see all over the world how rapid scientific advances that are imposed from above and that the populations have not appropriated lead to phenomena of rejection that are partly irrational.

On the other hand, technoproggressives believe that we must rely on intelligence and education. We need to communicate information and explain the issues in a transparent way so that everyone can make an informed decision.

Speakers at an ethics forum can play a role in this democratisation effort. To begin with, all academics, whatever their field of specialisation, can and should inform themselves about these issues. After that, everyone can contribute to the dissemination and popularisation of this questioning. They can do so within the framework of their work, but it is desirable that, at some point, they leave the academic conferences.

We cannot wait for journalists or institutional organisers to organise these debates, because their approach remains elitist. It is therefore desirable to organise debates that are open to the general public - which means that they must be financially accessible.

It is also important to help produce audio-visual content that is easy to find online, on social networks and sharing platforms, so that it can be accessed by all generations.

At the same time, we must strive to provide access to information that is free of sensationalism and simplism. Transhumanism is a complex thought, which is based on scientific expectations. This complexity needs to be explained, not hidden.