

Transhumanist Elements in ‘Understand’

“Understand” Eserindeki Transhümanist Unsurlar

Abstract

Humans are progressing machines. Naturally, it is continuously changing and modifying not only itself but also everything around it, from a simple gadget to abstract concepts or questions asked from the very beginning of conscious ancestors’ times. Therefore, it is universally accepted that the human evolution process has never ceased and never will. In today’s world, Homo Sapiens are considered as human. However, if there is evolution, new, more intelligent, much healthier, and morally better individuals will emerge in time.

The second half of the twentieth century paved the way for a thought on transcendent human with the popularized science fiction works. Aliens and robots, with their brain capacities and bodily functions, were depicted as beings to superior to humans. It was the superhero comics and books that reinforced the thought of a possibility of a superman seeded by the medical experiments conducted during WWII. Now, people are discussing immortality, or at least anti-aging. New drugs are tested to see whether deadly diseases can be cured. There are countless areas working to enhance and make better human conditions. Once the aimed goals are achieved, human will be called post-human. But, since we are in an epoch between the former and the latter, our first milestone to reach is being a transhuman.

Nebula and Hugo-awarded author, Ted Chiang, is an American science fiction writer. His novellas are best known for their transhumanist features. As a computer science graduate, Chiang, in his short story called ‘Understand’, successfully fictionalizes the possible outcomes of a world in which a minority is privileged with abilities beyond human limitation. His portrayal of such a world makes one ponder whether humanity is “really” ready for such a move up on the genetic ladder or whether we are pushing fast ourselves to our own demise.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Ted Chiang, Understand, hormone K, hubris

Öz

İnsan gelişen bir makinedir. Doğal olarak sadece kendisini değil, etrafındaki her şeyi, basit bir aletten soyut kavramlara veya bilinçli atalarının başlangıcından beri sorulan sorulara kadar sürekli olarak değiştirir ve geliştirir. Dolayısıyla insanın evrim sürecinin hiçbir zaman durmadığı ve durmayacağı evrensel olarak kabul edilmektedir. Günümüz dünyasında insan Homo Sapiens olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Ancak eğer evrim varsa zamanla yeni, daha zeki, çok daha sağlıklı, daha ahlaklı bireyler ortaya çıkacaktır.

Yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısı popülerleşen bilim kurgu eserleriyle birlikte üstün insan düşüncesinin yolunu açmıştır. Uzaylılar ve robotlar, beyin kapasiteleri ve bedensel fonksiyonlarıyla insanlardan üstün varlıklar olarak tasvir edilmektedir. Ancak İkinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında yapılan tıbbi deneylerle ortaya çıkan bir süper insanın olasılığı düşüncesini güçlendiren şey, süper kahraman çizgi romanları ve kitaplarıydı. Artık insanlar ölümsüzlüğü ya da en azından yaşlanma karşısını tartışıyor. Ölümcül hastalıkların tedavi edilip edilemeyeceğini görmek için yeni ilaçlar test ediliyor. Amaçlanan hedeflere ulaşıldığında insana post-insan (insan ötesi) denilecektir. Ancak önceki ile sonraki arasında bir dönemde olduğumuz için ulaşacağımız ilk kilometre taşı transhuman olmaktır. Nebula ve Hugo ödüllü yazar Ted Chiang, Amerikalı bir Bilim Kurgu yazardır. Romanları en çok transhümanist özellikleriyle tanınır. Bilgisayar bilimi mezunu olan Chiang, ‘Understand’ adlı kısa öyküsünde, bir azınlığın insan sınırlarının ötesinde yeteneklerle ayrıcalıklı olduğu bir dünyanın olası sonuçlarını başarılı bir şekilde kurgular. Onun böyle bir dünyayı tasvir etmesi, insanlığın genetik merdivende bu denli bir yükselişe "gerçekten" hazır olup olmadığını, yoksa kendimizi hızla kendi yok oluşumuza mı ittiğimizi düşündürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Transhumanizm, Ted Chiang, Understand, K hormonu, kibir

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Geliş Tarihi/Received 09.01.2024
Kabul Tarihi/Accepted 06.05.2024
Yayın Tarihi/Publication Date 22.06.2024

Cite this article as: Erkan E. (2024).
Transhumanit elements in ‘Understand’.
Current Perspectives in Social Sciences,
28(2), 204-209.



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Introduction

Nick Bostrom defines transhumanism as “a loosely movement” that has developed over the past three decades (2005). A movement is an umbrella term for an era in which some specific features stand out. Therefore, it can be concluded that he is right because transhumanism is a compound notion which consists of many components such as advancements in nanotechnology, biotechnology, robotics, information, and communication technology, and applied cognate science, along with sociology, philosophy, linguistics, and medicine.

Transhumanism is basically a transitional stage between humans and posthumans. Humans are weak, limited, deprived and in need of lots of external factors to maintain survival. Simply, even overcast weather may easily affect human being's psychology in a bad way. Transhumanism seeks to make humanity much stronger than it is and looks for ways of immortality in its core. While doing that, its foremost conduct is to make people's lives easier and provide better life conditions through inventions. So, it can be concisely defined as -making life simpler-. Hence, from the most rudimentary binoculars to the most complex 3D-printed organs, anything that enhances human life conditions can be classified as transhumanist. The roots of transhumanism can be traced back to ancient times and it never ceased its existence. Scholars such as Brassier leans transhumanism on Prometheanism, which, in Cambridge Dictionary, is defined as “[the] willing to take risks in order to create new things or do things in new ways, like Prometheus, the ancient Greek demigod (= part human and part god) who stole fire from Mount Olympus” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/promethean>).

In this paper however, we define our starting point as the Age of Enlightenment, during which technological advancements and human life conditions had enhanced at an unprecedented level. Here, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* stands as a forerunner not only in Romantic literature but also in transhumanist science-fiction. Victor Frankenstein's creature is an example of reviving a dead body, which is one of the main concerns of transhumanist conduct. At first glance, any attempt to revive the deceased or attain an endless life may seem innocent and even benevolent. However, one should remember that technology, even though being an effective tool for reaching aimed goals, is a deadly weapon in wrong hands. Because, in literature, from Icarus to Faustus, or Frankenstein to Leon (the protagonist of the work we are going to examine in this paper) hubris posed as the greatest reason for the downfall for a person who is blessed with something that an ordinary human lacks.

Undoubtedly, the real-life reflection of such a flaw is shown through the deadly experiments performed by Nazi scientists in the field of eugenics. According to *Britannica*, eugenics is “the selection of desired heritable characteristics in order to improve future generations, typically in reference to humans” (<https://www.britannica.com/science/eugenics-genetics>). J.B.S Haldane, along with Julian Huxley, the eponym of the term transhumanism, saw eugenics as the perfect tool to reach the post-human form. In today's world there are children born with H.I.V resistance thanks to the usage of eugenics. However, back in the day, Nazis desired to create a biologically superior Aryan or Germanic master race. To overcome this challenging task, they attached children to one another or injected colour pigments into their eyes and conducted much worse experiments. Of course, they failed morally just like Victor Frankenstein did. Taking a bio-conservative stance, one may look at this kind of incidents in history and stand against transhumanism.

On the other hand, the moral ideals of transhumanism and its perception of nature should not be neglected. Transhumanists claim that there is a continuous evolution in human nature and this progress will never end. According to Benjamin Ross ‘to be transhuman is to be in transition to the next evolutionary phase of what counts as human – a phase defined by radical technological alterations to the body’ (2020, p. 1). Therefore, either this or that way, we will become post-humans. So, rather than overlooking to what humans are becoming, transhumanists try to make everyone aware of this fact and make transhumanist conduct universal. Their opinion on moral values is put forward in the sixth article of the *Transhumanist Declaration*:

“Policymaking ought to be guided by responsible and inclusive moral vision, taking seriously both opportunities and risks, respecting autonomy and individual rights, and showing solidarity with and concern for the interests and dignity of all people around the globe. We must also consider our moral responsibilities toward generations that will exist in the future.”
(<https://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-declaration/>).

When it becomes universal, anyone who willingly becomes immortal will do his best to attain a sustainable environment. Transhumanism fiercely advocates that humans are mistreating the world's sources because of the belief in the other world, or simply the anticipation of imminent death. Becoming immortal would end this because there is no other place to go and live. ‘The philosophy of transhumanism offers just such a transformation. The name of this philosophy literally means to go

beyond the human—in the sense of overcoming today’s fundamental constraints on the human condition: the constraints of material scarcity, disease, decay, death, and zero-sum conflict’ (Stolyarov, 2019, p. 90).

Also, according to their claim, if the advancements in transhumanism are embraced and perceived by majority, it would pose no harm to anyone. Yet, if a minority possess such a privilege, then the example of Nazis will be valid for also today’s world. Through the example of Leon, the protagonist of “Understand” by Ted Chiang, this study shows that when given to wrong hands, such a privilege may bring the demise of its holder.

Transhumanist Elements in ‘Understand’

Ted Chiang is an American science fiction writer. He is best known for his short stories, which have received critical acclaim for their thought-provoking concepts, literary quality, and exploration of philosophical and ethical themes. He has won numerous awards for his work, including the Nebula, Hugo and Locus awards.

Among some of his notable works are *The Story of Your Life*, which was adapted into the film *Arrival* in 2016, and *Exhalation*, a collection of short stories that explore various speculative and science fiction concepts. Ted Chiang's writings are often characterized by their intellectual depth and engagement with complex ideas.

‘Understand’ is one of Ted Chiang's short stories. It was first published in 1991 and later included in his collection *Stories of Your Life and Others*. The story centres on the extraordinary events that took place in Leon’s life after he was injected with hormone K as a treatment believed to revive him from a coma. After the first shot of hormone K, he realizes that this treatment not only cures him but also grants him unique cognitive and physical abilities: ‘Suddenly it occurs to me what’s just happened. I’ve never been able to do any serious editing while talking on the phone. But this time I had no trouble keeping my mind on both things at once’ (Chiang, 2016, p. 35).

Enhancing the physical and psychological capacities of people through medication was not new when this short story was written. In 1937, Fritz Hauschild developed and patented the drug called Pervitin in Germany to enhance soldiers’ combat skills. This drug, made of methamphetamine, not only produced higher energy but also reduced the need of sleep and hunger along with affecting one’s amygdala to make him feel insensitive towards the emotion of fear. This drug helped Nazis to create super soldiers. However, every action comes with a reaction. It was reported that after a certain amount of pervitin usage, a good deal of soldiers at trenches were diagnosed with psychological disorders such as insomnia, confusion, hallucinations, anxiety, and paranoia (Elrick, 2019).

This was around eighty years ago. Today, regenerative medical research tries to produce anti-aging medicines with no or little side effects. On the other hand, Freitas suggests nanomedicine in which injected nanobots in one’s body find the diseased cells and repair them (quoted in Sandberg, 2013, p. 132). We are still far from such an application but in the story, we are dealing with, the possible outcomes of finding such a cure are revealed.

It is important to note that the hormone K therapy is only effective with the individuals who experienced severe damage to their brains. Healthy individuals see no benefit from the treatment. This is the treatment that wakens Leon up from his coma. Realising how his brain capacity enhanced, he feels curious and wants to test his limits. Ultimately, he realizes that he can remember anything he saw just for once or he can play any instruments after a short period of training. Any theory becomes too easy to solve or refute for him. His transformation from an ordinary human to transhuman is narrated as follows:

“I don't have to consciously memorize rules, and then apply them mechanically. I just perceive how the system behaves as a whole, as an entity. Of course, I'm aware of all the details and individual steps, but they require so little concentration that they almost feel intuitive.” (Chiang, 2016, p. 39)

What he experiences seems desirable. But, one should not forget that the whole world around us is set upon the ideals, calculations or morals determined by ordinary humans. Therefore, Leon finds no one to teach and guide him in what ways his abilities should be used. Instead, he gradually sees the humans around him as inferior species. Advocators of transhumanism strongly opposes giving privileges to a minority because of the misuse just like Leon resorts to. Bostrom suggests that wide access of transhumanist privileges would reduce inequality and express solidarity (2005). Only then we will be able to solve the current moral problems and be ready to face the ones that will come with transhumanism. Even though he goes beyond human limits, Leon clearly is morally corrupt. What is worse is that he is aware of his superiority complex which he sees as his right.

It is noticeable that the aspirations and hubris of modern transhumanism reflect the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus.

Whereas Prometheus is generally depicted as a heroic figure, his defiance of the gods should indicate his darker side, that is his hubris. Prometheus gifted fire to humans. However, it is usually neglected that his act of stealing it from the gods is usurping power. Therefore, he disrupts natural order. He tries to make humanity a superior race so he can challenge the established hierarchy. Nevertheless, his aim is never to share his power but rather to take humans into his rule. This claim is supported by the fact that he does not share other knowledge stolen from the gods.

In Leon's character, this same tyrannical potential of Prometheus is reflected. Fuelled by transhumanist ideals, Leon symbolizes a radical transformation of humanity. At first, he seems as if he is offering a path to a utopian future – a world without poverty, disease and even death. Nonetheless, this utopia comes at a price. Leon seeks to control the means of enhancement, creating a stratified society where the augmented elite lord over the unenhanced masses. In this way, Leon is similar to Prometheus who hoarded fire for his own interest.

It is not only the moral issues that are going to change with transhumanism, science as we know it today will also go under a dramatic modification phase. Transhumanists defend that all knowledge should be shared and must be open to access. Therefore, the cumulative information will accelerate the development of science. With a mind beyond human limitations Leon explains this theory as follows:

"The natural sciences have the clearest patterns. Physics admits of a lovely unification, not just at the level of fundamental forces, but when considering its extent and implications. Classifications like "optics" or "thermodynamics" are just straitjackets, preventing physicists from seeing countless intersections. Even putting aside aesthetics, the practical applications that have been overlooked are legion; years ago engineers could have been artificially generating spherically symmetric gravity fields." (Chiang, 2016, p. 48)

Furthermore, Leon does not want to use this knowledge in favour of humans because he simply thinks that it would give him no satisfaction. Rather, he tries to find people like himself and be ready when the day comes. Meanwhile, his brain works so actively that ordinary languages do not express his thoughts. Therefore, he feels the urge to find a language which would "support a dialect co-expressive with all of mathematics, so that any equation he writes would have a linguistic equivalent" (Chiang, 2016, p. 51).

In the evolutionary process, human beings learned to acquire and use languages. According to Derrida, there is no language without thought and a complex thought requires a complex language (quoted in Lindberg & Jorion, 2022). Therefore, as long as evolution progresses, so will the languages, and the current ones will be unsatisfactory to articulate the thoughts of transhumans. Transhumanism further advocates that eventually there will be no need for a spoken or written language. Rather, all sentients would be connected to a system which would regulate communication through telepathy (Bostrom, 2005, p. 5). In 'Understand', Chiang reflects the unnecessary of language in the telepathic 'dialogues' between Leon and Reynolds, who is also a subject of hormone K therapy. In the search for people like himself, when Leon encounters Reynolds, he is aware that both know each other by heart. Their communication through thoughts only lasts for milliseconds, which is enough for Leon's demise.

Leon, unlike Reynolds, considers the world as a tool to achieve his own goals. Therefore, he turns his back to the ordinary world:

"I've shown no interest in the affairs of the external world, and made no investigations for aiding the normals. Neither of us will be able to convert the other. I view the world as incidental to my aims, while he [Reynolds] cannot allow someone with enhanced intelligence to work purely in self-interest. My plans for mind-computer links will have enormous repercussions for the world, provoking government or popular reactions that would interfere with his plans. As I am proverbially not part of the solution, I am part of the problem." (Chiang, 2016, p. 62)

Clearly, one's benefitting from the extra-ordinary powers for his own interest is what the critics of transhumanism are afraid of, and what its advocates try to evade. By stating that Leon himself is part of the problem, he means the minority will bring the end of the world through the exploitative use of technology. However, while Leon poses the picture of anti-transhumanist concerns, Chiang manages to imply the transhumanist solution through such a kind of threat in the form of Reynolds.

Transhumanists advocate a unified cyberspace in which all sentients would share their knowledge. That is how a superior community will be created and our minds will be uploaded into cyberspace. In that way, they believe "we will enjoy a communal network of shared intelligence" (Peters, 2011, p. 152). In the story, this is all that Reynolds is trying to achieve. His

ultimate goal is to save humanity and he thinks that sharing what he knows with ordinary people would eventually cause him to learn more from them. That is how he managed to become much stronger than Leon in terms of intellect. Unfortunately, what Leon pursues is Renaissance ideals combined with the endless curiosity that emerged during the Enlightenment. What he asked for had been asked several times before him. What caused Icarus to burn was his eagerness to fly above his limits. He was warned by his father not to do so. Or, it was the limitless knowledge that Faustus exchanged his life for. Even though he was told that after 24 years, he would have to give up on his own life. The same mistake was repeated by Victor Frankenstein to go beyond human limitations and play a god-like role by creating his monster. Now Leon, in a transhumanist era, which is also seen as a continuum of Enlightenment humanism, reminds the hubris that the previous examples fell for: "He [Reynolds] considers intelligence to be a means, while I [Leon] view it as an end in itself" (Chiang, 2016, p. 64). However, the flower does not bear fruit before the time ripens. In their telepathic battle, Reynolds manages to kill Leon by encrypting a word with every single thought and word on the globe. When articulated, this word initiates an overload in Leon's mind. His brain starts a stream in his consciousness which is so rapid and intense that he cannot bear it, and as a defence mechanism his body shuts it off. The word Reynolds uttered was "UNDERSTAND".

Conclusion

For many, transhumanism is not a new concept in the twenty-first century. Its aim to enhance human life-span and conditions through the use of science and technology was an outgrowing of Enlightenment ideals. Yet, what brought the end of the Enlightenment Era was the distortion of moral values. Rational thinking along with science in the search for an endless life remained dull without emotions and a universal acceptance. Today, transhumanists are much closer to achieve Enlightenment's aims because of the developments performed in NBIC - nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive science. However, they are also faced with moral concerns. Most uttered of which is the question of whether this seek will bring our own demise or not.

Undoubtedly, literature is the best means to reflect the current or future situations. It tells about not only the conditions of the society in which it is written, but also prophesy about what is coming. Naturally, while anti-transhumanist writers show their concerns about a transhumanist future, transhumanist writers try to find solutions to those concerns. Some has written about cruel cyborgs, and some showed a utopian next generation. Among them, Ted Chiang is a computational science graduate. Therefore, he is well-aware of the capabilities of technology and showed them in his short story called "Understand". Even though he seems as if he is taking a partial stance against transhumanism, he is in favour of a transhumanist future. Through the character development of Leon, he shows us what may happen if a single individual is granted so much power without any responsibility. Throughout the story, we read about an ordinary light-hearted man who turns into an arrogant and selfish transhuman. It may seem as if Chiang attacks all the transhumanist ideals through the figure of Leon along with his hubris, but he also places Leon's binary opposition into the story. Reynolds, disparate from Leon, has all the positive characteristics of transhumanist values. He is sharing, caring, and concerned with the benefits of humanity.

The hubris of both Prometheus and Leon stem from their belief that they determine the fate of humanity. They cannot see the ethical ramifications of their actions. According to them their ends justify their means. Prometheus's punishment, chained to a rock with his liver eternally devoured by an eagle, serves as a severe warning. His defiance, fuelled by hubris, leads not to progress but to suffering. Similarly, Leon's overreach would lead not to utopia but to his own demise.

In short, while Chiang lays on the possible disasters that may come with transhumanism if it is confined to a minority, he also tries to emphasize one of the core values that transhumanists always utter. It is the wide accessibility of knowledge and power that would save humanity rather than bring its demise. Chiang also puts an end to the discussions between transhumanists and anti-transhumanists in his work. By killing Leon, he implies that any selfish person who uses the powers that come with transhumanism in his own interest would eventually fall against people with similar powers who follow moral values and unite in moral aims.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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