Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska

The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism

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Fuller and Lipinska wish to persuade their readers that we should no longer let our policies and legislation on scientific research and technology development be guided by the *precautionary principle*. Instead, we should adopt the *proactionary principle*. While the precautionary principle demands that we refrain from conducting risky scientific or social experiments that we cannot be reasonably sure will not endanger human lives or well-being, the proactionary principle encourages us to take even considerable risks if the potential benefits appear sufficiently great. The authors believe that the precautionary principle should be discarded because it decelerates scientific and technological progress, which they think is bad *not* because, as others have argued, we need to have that progress to enable us to successfully deal with the problems that we face today (such as global warming) or because without it we are stuck with all sorts of deficiencies and evils (such as the inevitability of ageing and death). Rather, throwing obstacles in the way of progress is bad simply because it *goes against our human destiny*. Humans, we learn, are meant to be more than just clever animals, because in contrast to all other living beings we are “touched by the divine”, have “a ‘god-like’ character” (1) and are ‘central to the cosmos’ (8). Being human is all about self-transcendence, about gradually turning ourselves into the gods that we potentially are and that we have always been meant to be. Since the precautionary principle makes it difficult to realize our divine potential, it needs to go.

Although the book is full of references to the classics of our intellectual history, so that one would be hard-pressed to name a single prominent theorist that is not being mentioned at least once, its scholarly packaging cannot hide the fact that the only argument we are being offered in support of the recommended 180 degree turn in public policy is based on nothing more than a religious conviction. Thus the “foundation for transhumanism” that Fuller and Lipinska promise to give us is the completely unfounded proposition that moving ever forward and becoming the masters of the universe is, well, what we are really here for. In their view, self-transcendence is more than just an entitlement: it is a sacred duty. All the other, rather unorthodox policy propositions follow from this one article of faith: that we should introduce “legal arrangements that would encourage people to invest themselves or their capital in risky scientific experiments” (4), not worry about “the freedom of future generations” (9) or overpopulation (43), “conceptualize our genetic material as property that one is entitled, and perhaps even obliged, to dispose of as inherited capital” (33), curtail the civic rights of anyone who refuses to participate in (potentially dangerous) scientific research (38), welcome the “species culls and large-scale environmental restructurings” we have brought about in the past (82), endorse “mass surveillance and experimentation, with the understanding that many in retrospect may turn out to have been used or sacrificed for science” (63), and “remove criminal sanctions from the conduct of risky experiments” (111).

It is of course to be expected that casting all caution to the wind will cost us. Lots of innocent people are likely to be harmed. Many will die. But that is fine, the authors inform us, because that is a price we must pay - and each of us should be more than

happy to pay - for the advancement of humanity. We need more “experiments in living, regardless of outcomes.” (43) We should of course compensate the victims, but how exactly remains unclear. Perhaps we can be re-educated in such a way that we will all feel already sufficiently compensated by being honoured as heroes, the martyrs of scientific progress. However, the authors make it clear that compensation is not really necessary because we actually *owe* it to society (and humanity) to risk our lives for scientific progress. We have, after all, been “allowed to live” (107), and now it’s pay-back time. In addition, by willingly turning ourselves into means to a higher end, we give a meaning to our lives that they would otherwise lack (99).

Strangely, for Fuller and Lipinska the greatest danger that we face today is not that, because we are too eager to test “the limits of what is possible” (26), we may inadvertently destroy the very grounds of our existence or a life still worth living, but that we may “sleepwalk into a suboptimal future” (36). To avoid being suboptimal we are being encouraged to risk everything. Is that really enough to make us turn our backs on the precautionary principle? That one can only support the precautionary principle if one presumes “that ‘Nature’ sets a non-negotiable norm to which we and other living beings must ultimately conform” (37) is of course nonsense. One does not have to presume any such thing. What one *does* have to presume is merely that the life and well-being of the individual matters, and that no religious or crypto-religious belief in humanity’s ultimate destination should prompt us to disregard them. In contrast to what the authors would have us believe, the end does *not* justify the means and we are *not* “entitled to adopt ... God’s point of view” (132). What the authors embrace, and ask their readers to embrace, is the kind of ruthless optimism that Schopenhauer once accused Leibniz of: one that is not worried by any evil that might result from our actions because of the firm conviction that everything is for the best and cannot but turn out just fine. If you do not share that religiously motivated conviction, then the proactionary principle has little to recommend it. And if Fuller and Lipinska are right that the transhumanist movement rests on the plausibility of the proactionary principle, then we can safely conclude that the whole philosophy of transhumanism lacks a coherent foundation. “But what else could possibly justify transhumanism other than the literal belief in our own capacities for apotheosis?” (45) What indeed!