

# What does it mean to be human or transhuman?

Jason Rodgers

2018

a review of

*The Transhuman Future: Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* by Cory Doctorow. Tor Books, 2003

Cory Doctorow has a clear vision of the future. In a way, I hate him for that, because it is not a future in which I want to live. But he is probably right.

He extrapolates current situations and trends to create a realistic vision of the future. Often these include business trends, making them even more fleshed out visions. However, he is not a world builder. He writes humanistic stories, but about transhumanism, the idea that people can evolve beyond our current physical and mental limitations, especially by means of science and technology.

In a way, Doctorow, author of numerous science fiction novels, has the same storytelling skills as fellow sci fi writer and cyber punk creator, Bruce Sterling. But whereas Sterling was somewhat of an anarchist, Doctorow is a technocrat and transhumanist. This might make his vision even more important.

The novel tells the story of a transhuman movement that achieves immortality. But not through nanomachines that fix every ailment. That would never work, because humans are too injury-prone and tend to die by accident. Instead, cloned bodies and digital backups of consciousness are utilized.

This changes many aspects of life. Behavior dramatically changes because there is a suspension of consequences. Along with this is the ability to eliminate parts of reality that are unpleasant, or more accurately, eliminate awareness of them.

In *Down and Out* there is a sequence in which the narrator remembers a brief marriage he had in which his wife has a psychotic break. She is restored from a previous backup. She then decides to go back to an even older backup, "back to who I was, before I met you." The painful relationship is not merely ended, it's eliminated altogether from consciousness.

Painful portions of consciousness could be erased, but the process of backing up consciousness would probably flatten it out. Consciousness does not seem transferable to a digital form. It is not merely the sum of memories and thoughts. There is more complexity. This is why artificial intelligence is notoriously hard to create. The best that can be done is using predictive algorithms to create an illusion of intelligence. But this is a significantly more stunted definition than the actual functioning of a mammalian mind.

Amusingly, the narrator is highly critical of moving further into the transhuman realm. He is part of an ad hoc committee that runs the Magic Kingdom amusement park. A rival group suggests transitioning from rides to a virtual reality implanted into the brain. "You don't want to be a post-person. You want to stay human. The rides are human," he says.

And, later, "What Debra's people are building, it's hive-mind shit. Directly implanting thoughts!" Like many people, he is only critical of one aspect, not the total situation.

Doctorow makes a fine point for how these developments occur. You can't just take part; the whole paradigm soon follows. He writes:

“Once you took backup-and-restore, the rest of Bitchunry just followed, a value-system settling over you. Those who didn’t take backup-and-restore may have objected, but hey, they all died.”

This shows two important points. First, it is not possible to passively resist. Second, in order to resist, a view of totality as enemy is necessary. This is certainly not Doctorow’s point, but it’s mine from his novel.

Jason Rodgers’ recently published zine, “Transgression or Affirmation,” is available from him at POB 10894, Albany NY 12201

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