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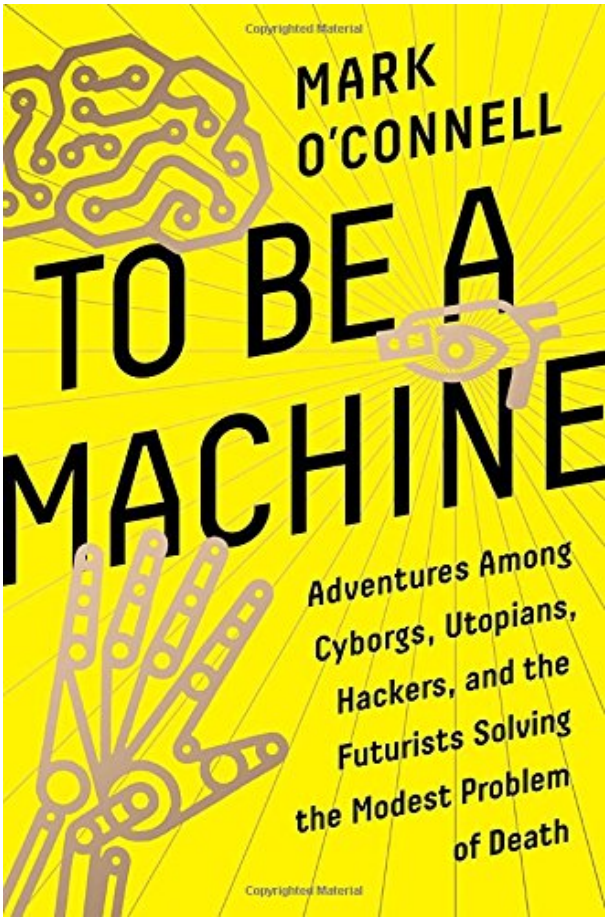

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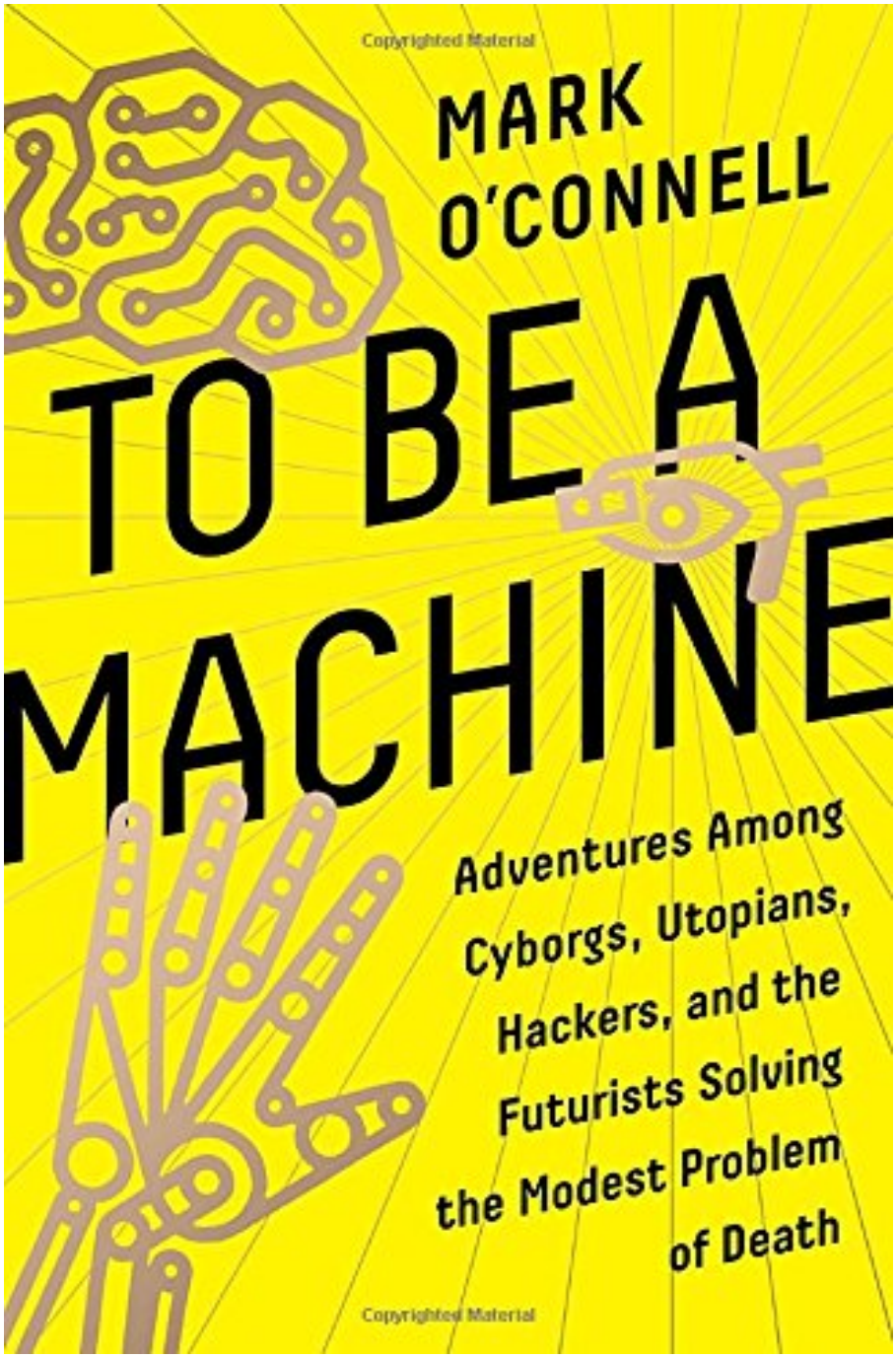

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Review

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“By exposing the ludicrous yet terrifyingly serious ideologies behind transhumanism, To Be a Machine is an important book, as well as a seriously funny one.”
—Sunday Times (UK)

“O’Connell invokes the twin spectres of death and child-bearing in an attempt to make sense of his subject—but he also manages to be staggeringly funny.”

—New Scientist (UK)

"[A] Homer’s Odyssey for the digital age.... A gentle, humorous and lovingly written book."
—The Times (UK)

About the Author
MARK O'CONNELL is Slate's books columnist, a staff writer at The Millions, and a regular contributor to The New Yorker's "Page-Turner" blog; his work has been published in The New York Times Magazine, The New York Times Book Review, The Observer, and The Independent.

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System Crash

All stories begin in our endings: we invent them because we die. As long as we have been telling stories, we have been telling them about the desire to escape our human bodies, to become something other than the animals we are. In our oldest written narrative, we find the Sumerian king Gilgamesh, who, distraught by the death of a friend and unwilling to accept that the same fate lies in store for him, travels to the far edge of the world in search of a cure for mortality. Long story short: no dice. Later, we find Achilles’ mother dipping him in the Styx in an effort to render him invulnerable. This, too, famously, does not pan out.

See also: Daedalus, improvised wings.

See also: Prometheus, stolen divine fire.

We exist, we humans, in the wreckage of an imagined splendor. It was not supposed to be this way: we weren’t supposed to be weak, to be ashamed, to suffer, to die. We have always had higher notions of ourselves. The whole setup—garden, serpent, fruit, banishment—was a fatal error, a system crash. We came to be what we are by way of a Fall, a retribution. This, at least, is one version of the story: the Christian story, the Western story. The point of which, on some level, is to explain ourselves to ourselves, to account for why it’s such a raw deal, this unnatural nature of ours.

“A man,” wrote Emerson, “is a god in ruins.”

Religion, more or less, arises out of this divine wreckage. And science, too—religion’s estranged half sibling—addresses itself to such animal dissatisfactions. In The Human Condition, writing in the wake of the Soviet launch of the first space satellite, Hannah Arendt reflected on the resulting sense of euphoria about escaping what one newspaper report called “men’s imprisonment to the earth.” This same yearning for escape, she wrote, manifested itself in the attempt to create superior humans from laboratory manipulations of germ plasm, to extend natural life spans far beyond their current limits. “This future man,” she wrote, “whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself.”

A rebellion against human existence as it has been given: this is as good a way as any of attempting to encapsulate what follows, to characterize what motivates the people I came to know in the writing of this book. These people, by and large, identify with a movement known as transhumanism, a movement predicated on the conviction that we can and should use technology to control the future evolution of our species. It is their belief that we can and should eradicate aging as a cause of death; that we can and should use technology to augment our bodies and our minds; that we can and should merge with machines, remaking ourselves, finally, in the image of our own higher ideals. They wish to exchange the gift, these

people, for something better, something man-made. Will it pan out? That remains to be seen.

I am not a transhumanist. That much is probably apparent, even at this early stage of the proceedings. But my fascination with the movement, with its ideas and its aims, arises out of a basic sympathy with its premise: that human existence, as it has been given, is a suboptimal system.

In an abstract sort of way, this is something I had always believed to be the case, but in the immediate aftermath of the birth of my son, I came to feel it on a visceral level. The first time I held him, three years ago now, I was overcome by a sense of the fragility of his little body—a body that had just emerged, howling and trembling and darkly smeared with blood, out of the trembling body of his mother, from whom many hours of fanatical suffering and exertion had been required to deliver him into the world. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. I couldn't help but think that there ought to be a better system. I couldn't help but think that, at this late stage, we should be beyond all this.

Here's a thing you should not do as a new father, as you perch uneasily on a leatherette maternity ward chair beside your sleeping infant and his sleeping mother: you should not read a newspaper. I did this, and I regretted it. I sat in the postnatal ward of the National Maternity Hospital in Dublin, turning the pages of The Irish Times in gradually mounting horror, browsing through a catalog of human perversity—of massacres and rapes, of cruelties casual and systemic: splintered dispatches from a fallen world—and wondered about the wisdom of bringing a child into this mess, this species. (I seem to remember having a mild head cold at the time; this would not have helped matters.)

Among its many other effects, becoming a parent forces you to think about the nature of the problem—which is, in a lot of ways, the problem of nature. Along with all the other horrors and perversities of the broader human context, the realities of aging and sickness and mortality become suddenly inescapable. Or they did for me, at any rate. And for my wife, too, whose existence was so much more entangled with our son's in those early months, and who said something during that time that I will never forget. "If I had known how much I was going to love him," she said, "I'm not sure I would have had him." The frailty is the thing, the vulnerability. This infirmity, this doubtful convalescence we refer to, for want of a better term, as the human condition. Condition: an illness or other medical problem.

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

In hindsight, it seems like more than mere coincidence that this was the period during which I became obsessed with an idea I'd first encountered close to a decade previously, and which was now beginning to consume my thoughts—the idea that this condition might not be our ineluctable fate. That like nearsightedness or smallpox, it might be set to rights by the intervention of human ingenuity. I was obsessed, that is, for the same reason as I had always been obsessed by the story of the Fall, and the notion of original sin: because it expressed something profoundly true about the deepest strangeness of being human, our inability to accept ourselves, our capacity to believe we might be redeemed of our nature.

Early on in the pursuit of this obsession—a pursuit that had, at that point, yet to lead beyond the Internet into what is fondly referred to as the "real world"—I came upon a strange and provocative text entitled "A Letter to Mother Nature." It was, as its name suggested, a kind of epistolary manifesto addressed to the anthropomorphic figure to whom, for the sake of clarity, the creation and husbandry of the natural world is often attributed. The text, in an initial tone of mild passive aggression, began by thanking Mother Nature for her mostly solid work on the project of humanity thus far, for raising us from simple self-replicating chemicals to trillion-celled mammals with the capacity for self-understanding and empathy. The letter then smoothly transitioned into full J'accuse mode, briefly outlining some of the more shoddy workmanship

evident in the functioning of Homo sapiens: the vulnerability to disease and injury and death, for instance, the ability to function only in highly circumscribed environmental conditions, the limited memory, the notoriously poor impulse control.

The author—addressing Mother Nature as the collective voice of her "ambitious human offspring"—then proposed a total of seven amendments to "the human constitution." We would no longer consent to live under the tyranny of aging and death, but would use the tools of biotechnology to "endow ourselves with enduring vitality and remove our expiration date." We would augment our powers of perception and cognition through technological enhancements of our sense organs and our neural capacities. We would no longer submit to being the products of blind evolution, but would rather "seek complete choice of bodily form and function, refining and augmenting our physical and intellectual abilities beyond those of any human in history." And we would no longer be content to limit our physical, intellectual, and emotional capacities by remaining confined to carbon-based biological forms.

This "Letter to Mother Nature" was the clearest and most provocative statement of transhumanist principles I had encountered, and its epistolary conceit captured something crucial about what made the movement so strange and compelling to me—it was direct, and audacious, and it pushed the project of Enlightenment humanism to such radical extremes that it threatened to obliterate it entirely. There was, I felt, a whiff of madness about the whole enterprise, but it was a madness that revealed something fundamental about what we thought of as reason. The letter was, I learned, the work of a man who went by the thematically consistent name Max More—an Oxford-educated philosopher who turned out to be one of the central figures in the transhumanist movement.

There was, I came to see, no one accepted or canonical version of this movement; but the more I read about it, and the more I came to understand the views of its adherents, the more I understood it as resting on a mechanistic view of human life—a view that human beings were devices, and that it was our duty and our destiny to become better versions of the devices that we were: more efficient, more powerful, more useful.

I wanted to know what it meant to think of yourself, and more broadly your species, in such instrumentalist terms. And I wanted to know more specific things: I wanted to know, for instance, how you might go about becoming a cyborg. I wanted to know how you might upload your mind into a computer or some other hardware, with the aim of existing eternally as code. I wanted to know what it would mean to think of yourself as no more or less than a complex pattern of information, as no more or less than code. I wanted to learn what robots might disclose about our understanding of ourselves and our bodies. I wanted to know how likely artificial intelligence was to redeem or annihilate our species. I wanted to know what it might be like to have faith in technology sufficient to allow a belief in the prospect of your own immortality. I wanted to learn what it meant to be a machine, or to think of yourself as such.

And I did, I assure you, arrive at some answers to these questions along the way; but in investigating what it meant to be a machine, I must tell you that I also wound up substantially more confused than I already was about what it meant to be a human being. More goal-oriented readers should be advised, therefore, that this book is as much an investigation of that confusion as it is an analysis of those learnings.

A broad definition: transhumanism is a liberation movement advocating nothing less than a total emancipation from biology itself. There is another way of seeing this, an equal and opposite interpretation, which is that this apparent liberation would in reality be nothing less than a final and total enslavement to technology. We will be bearing both sides of this dichotomy in mind as we proceed.

For all the extremity of transhumanism's aims—the convergence of technology and flesh, for instance, or the

uploading of minds into machines—the above dichotomy seemed to me to express something fundamental about the particular time in which we find ourselves, in which we are regularly called upon to consider how technology is changing everything for the better, to acknowledge the extent to which a particular app or platform or device is making the world a better place. If we have hope for the future—if we think of ourselves as having such a thing as a future—it is predicated in large part on what we might accomplish through our machines. In this sense, transhumanism is an intensification of a tendency already inherent in much of what we think of as mainstream culture, in what we may as well go ahead and call capitalism.

And yet the inescapable fact of this aforementioned moment in history is that we, and these machines of ours, are presiding over a vast project of annihilation, an unprecedented destruction of the world we have come to think of as ours. The planet is, we are told, entering a sixth mass extinction: another Fall, another expulsion. It seems very late in the day, in this dismembered world, to be talking about a future.

One of the things that drew me to this movement, therefore, was the paradoxical force of its anachronism. For all that transhumanism presented itself as resolutely oriented toward a vision of a world to come, it felt to me almost nostalgically evocative of a human past in which radical optimism seemed a viable position to take with respect to the future. In the way it looked forward, transhumanism seemed, somehow, always to be facing backward.

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“This gonzo-journalistic exploration of the Silicon Valley techno-utopians’ pursuit of escaping mortality is a breezy romp full of colorful characters.” —New York Times Book Review (Editor's Choice)

Transhumanism is a movement pushing the limits of our bodies—our capabilities, intelligence, and lifespans—in the hopes that, through technology, we can become something better than ourselves. It has found support among Silicon Valley billionaires and some of the world’s biggest businesses.

In To Be a Machine, journalist Mark O'Connell explores the staggering possibilities and moral quandaries that present themselves when you of think of your body as a device. He visits the world's foremost cryonics facility to witness how some have chosen to forestall death. He discovers an underground collective of biohackers, implanting electronics under their skin to enhance their senses. He meets a team of scientists urgently investigating how to protect mankind from artificial superintelligence.

Where is our obsession with technology leading us? What does the rise of AI mean not just for our offices and homes, but for our humanity? Could the technologies we create to help us eventually bring us to harm? Addressing these questions, O'Connell presents a profound, provocative, often laugh-out-loud-funny look at an influential movement. In investigating what it means to be a machine, he offers a surprising meditation on what it means to be human.

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Features

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About the Author
MARK O'CONNELL is Slate's books columnist, a staff writer at The Millions, and a regular contributor to The New Yorker's "Page-Turner" blog; his work has been published in The New York Times Magazine, The New York Times Book Review, The Observer, and The Independent.

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System Crash

All stories begin in our endings: we invent them because we die. As long as we have been telling stories, we have been telling them about the desire to escape our human bodies, to become something other than the animals we are. In our oldest written narrative, we find the Sumerian king Gilgamesh, who, distraught by the death of a friend and unwilling to accept that the same fate lies in store for him, travels to the far edge of the world in search of a cure for mortality. Long story short: no dice. Later, we find Achilles’ mother dipping him in the Styx in an effort to render him invulnerable. This, too, famously, does not pan out.

See also: Daedalus, improvised wings.

See also: Prometheus, stolen divine fire.

We exist, we humans, in the wreckage of an imagined splendor. It was not supposed to be this way: we weren’t supposed to be weak, to be ashamed, to suffer, to die. We have always had higher notions of ourselves. The whole setup—garden, serpent, fruit, banishment—was a fatal error, a system crash. We came to be what we are by way of a Fall, a retribution. This, at least, is one version of the story: the Christian story, the Western story. The point of which, on some level, is to explain ourselves to ourselves, to account for why it’s such a raw deal, this unnatural nature of ours.

“A man,” wrote Emerson, “is a god in ruins.”

Religion, more or less, arises out of this divine wreckage. And science, too—religion's estranged half sibling—addresses itself to such animal dissatisfactions. In The Human Condition, writing in the wake of the Soviet launch of the first space satellite, Hannah Arendt reflected on the resulting sense of euphoria about escaping what one newspaper report called "men's imprisonment to the earth." This same yearning for escape, she wrote, manifested itself in the attempt to create superior humans from laboratory manipulations of germ plasm, to extend natural life spans far beyond their current limits. "This future man," she wrote, "whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself."

A rebellion against human existence as it has been given: this is as good a way as any of attempting to encapsulate what follows, to characterize what motivates the people I came to know in the writing of this book. These people, by and large, identify with a movement known as transhumanism, a movement predicated on the conviction that we can and should use technology to control the future evolution of our species. It is their belief that we can and should eradicate aging as a cause of death; that we can and should use technology to augment our bodies and our minds; that we can and should merge with machines, remaking ourselves, finally, in the image of our own higher ideals. They wish to exchange the gift, these people, for something better, something man-made. Will it pan out? That remains to be seen.

I am not a transhumanist. That much is probably apparent, even at this early stage of the proceedings. But my fascination with the movement, with its ideas and its aims, arises out of a basic sympathy with its premise: that human existence, as it has been given, is a suboptimal system.

In an abstract sort of way, this is something I had always believed to be the case, but in the immediate aftermath of the birth of my son, I came to feel it on a visceral level. The first time I held him, three years ago now, I was overcome by a sense of the fragility of his little body—a body that had just emerged, howling and trembling and darkly smeared with blood, out of the trembling body of his mother, from whom many hours of fanatical suffering and exertion had been required to deliver him into the world. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. I couldn't help but think that there ought to be a better system. I couldn't help but think that, at this late stage, we should be beyond all this.

Here's a thing you should not do as a new father, as you perch uneasily on a leatherette maternity ward chair beside your sleeping infant and his sleeping mother: you should not read a newspaper. I did this, and I regretted it. I sat in the postnatal ward of the National Maternity Hospital in Dublin, turning the pages of The Irish Times in gradually mounting horror, browsing through a catalog of human perversity—of massacres and rapes, of cruelties casual and systemic: splintered dispatches from a fallen world—and wondered about the wisdom of bringing a child into this mess, this species. (I seem to remember having a mild head cold at the time; this would not have helped matters.)

Among its many other effects, becoming a parent forces you to think about the nature of the problem—which is, in a lot of ways, the problem of nature. Along with all the other horrors and perversities of the broader human context, the realities of aging and sickness and mortality become suddenly inescapable. Or they did for me, at any rate. And for my wife, too, whose existence was so much more entangled with our son's in those early months, and who said something during that time that I will never forget. "If I had known how much I was going to love him," she said, "I'm not sure I would have had him." The frailty is the thing, the vulnerability. This infirmity, this doubtful convalescence we refer to, for want of a better term, as the human condition. Condition: an illness or other medical problem.

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

In hindsight, it seems like more than mere coincidence that this was the period during which I became obsessed with an idea I'd first encountered close to a decade previously, and which was now beginning to consume my thoughts—the idea that this condition might not be our ineluctable fate. That like nearsightedness or smallpox, it might be set to rights by the intervention of human ingenuity. I was obsessed, that is, for the same reason as I had always been obsessed by the story of the Fall, and the notion of original sin: because it expressed something profoundly true about the deepest strangeness of being human, our inability to accept ourselves, our capacity to believe we might be redeemed of our nature.

Early on in the pursuit of this obsession—a pursuit that had, at that point, yet to lead beyond the Internet into what is fondly referred to as the "real world"—I came upon a strange and provocative text entitled "A Letter to Mother Nature." It was, as its name suggested, a kind of epistolary manifesto addressed to the anthropomorphic figure to whom, for the sake of clarity, the creation and husbandry of the natural world is often attributed. The text, in an initial tone of mild passive aggression, began by thanking Mother Nature for her mostly solid work on the project of humanity thus far, for raising us from simple self-replicating chemicals to trillion-celled mammals with the capacity for self-understanding and empathy. The letter then smoothly transitioned into full J'accuse mode, briefly outlining some of the more shoddy workmanship evident in the functioning of Homo sapiens: the vulnerability to disease and injury and death, for instance, the ability to function only in highly circumscribed environmental conditions, the limited memory, the notoriously poor impulse control.

The author—addressing Mother Nature as the collective voice of her "ambitious human offspring"—then proposed a total of seven amendments to "the human constitution." We would no longer consent to live under the tyranny of aging and death, but would use the tools of biotechnology to "endow ourselves with enduring vitality and remove our expiration date." We would augment our powers of perception and cognition through technological enhancements of our sense organs and our neural capacities. We would no longer submit to being the products of blind evolution, but would rather "seek complete choice of bodily form and function, refining and augmenting our physical and intellectual abilities beyond those of any human in history." And we would no longer be content to limit our physical, intellectual, and emotional capacities by remaining confined to carbon-based biological forms.

This "Letter to Mother Nature" was the clearest and most provocative statement of transhumanist principles I had encountered, and its epistolary conceit captured something crucial about what made the movement so strange and compelling to me—it was direct, and audacious, and it pushed the project of Enlightenment humanism to such radical extremes that it threatened to obliterate it entirely. There was, I felt, a whiff of madness about the whole enterprise, but it was a madness that revealed something fundamental about what we thought of as reason. The letter was, I learned, the work of a man who went by the thematically consistent name Max More—an Oxford-educated philosopher who turned out to be one of the central figures in the transhumanist movement.

There was, I came to see, no one accepted or canonical version of this movement; but the more I read about it, and the more I came to understand the views of its adherents, the more I understood it as resting on a mechanistic view of human life—a view that human beings were devices, and that it was our duty and our destiny to become better versions of the devices that we were: more efficient, more powerful, more useful.

I wanted to know what it meant to think of yourself, and more broadly your species, in such instrumentalist terms. And I wanted to know more specific things: I wanted to know, for instance, how you might go about becoming a cyborg. I wanted to know how you might upload your mind into a computer or some other hardware, with the aim of existing eternally as code. I wanted to know what it would mean to think of yourself as no more or less than a complex pattern of information, as no more or less than code. I wanted to

learn what robots might disclose about our understanding of ourselves and our bodies. I wanted to know how likely artificial intelligence was to redeem or annihilate our species. I wanted to know what it might be like to have faith in technology sufficient to allow a belief in the prospect of your own immortality. I wanted to learn what it meant to be a machine, or to think of yourself as such.

And I did, I assure you, arrive at some answers to these questions along the way; but in investigating what it meant to be a machine, I must tell you that I also wound up substantially more confused than I already was about what it meant to be a human being. More goal-oriented readers should be advised, therefore, that this book is as much an investigation of that confusion as it is an analysis of those learnings.

A broad definition: transhumanism is a liberation movement advocating nothing less than a total emancipation from biology itself. There is another way of seeing this, an equal and opposite interpretation, which is that this apparent liberation would in reality be nothing less than a final and total enslavement to technology. We will be bearing both sides of this dichotomy in mind as we proceed.

For all the extremity of transhumanism's aims—the convergence of technology and flesh, for instance, or the uploading of minds into machines—the above dichotomy seemed to me to express something fundamental about the particular time in which we find ourselves, in which we are regularly called upon to consider how technology is changing everything for the better, to acknowledge the extent to which a particular app or platform or device is making the world a better place. If we have hope for the future—if we think of ourselves as having such a thing as a future—it is predicated in large part on what we might accomplish through our machines. In this sense, transhumanism is an intensification of a tendency already inherent in much of what we think of as mainstream culture, in what we may as well go ahead and call capitalism.

And yet the inescapable fact of this aforementioned moment in history is that we, and these machines of ours, are presiding over a vast project of annihilation, an unprecedented destruction of the world we have come to think of as ours. The planet is, we are told, entering a sixth mass extinction: another Fall, another expulsion. It seems very late in the day, in this dismembered world, to be talking about a future.

One of the things that drew me to this movement, therefore, was the paradoxical force of its anachronism. For all that transhumanism presented itself as resolutely oriented toward a vision of a world to come, it felt to me almost nostalgically evocative of a human past in which radical optimism seemed a viable position to take with respect to the future. In the way it looked forward, transhumanism seemed, somehow, always to be facing backward.

Most helpful customer reviews

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.
This is easily the best, most comprehensive book on modern transhumanism that is out
By Zoltan Istvan
This is easily the best, most comprehensive book on modern transhumanism that is currently out. I don't write that just because I'm a part of the last chapter, but because I'm unware of any other prominent writer having done so much research on the movement itself that was not a transhumanist. This is a deep dive into the modern movement, with all its twists and curves and surprises. Highly enjoyable.

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Smart, Accessible, Philosophical Exploration of Transhumanism
By Amazon Customer
Really interesting and well-written exploration of transhumanism. Perfect for lay people and readers looking to understand more about the field.

4 of 6 people found the following review helpful.
amusing, often inaccurate
By Hank Pellissier
Humorous reportage on transhumanism by someone who isn't transhumanist. It has many careless factual errors (my age is listed as "late-forties" - I'm 64 - quite flattering) but... it is generally quite fun, with interesting personal refections - many chapters are excellent - I particularly liked his encounters with Anders Sandberg, MIRI, and Tim Cannon.

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TO BE A MACHINE: ADVENTURES AMONG CYBORGS, UTOPIANS, HACKERS, AND THE FUTURISTS SOLVING THE MODEST PROBLEM OF DEATH BY MARK O'CONNELL PDF

By downloading this soft data publication **To Be A Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, And The Futurists Solving The Modest Problem Of Death By Mark O'Connell** in the on the internet link download, you are in the 1st step right to do. This website really supplies you convenience of how to obtain the very best e-book, from best seller to the new released book. You could find a lot more books in this website by checking out every web link that we provide. One of the collections, To Be A Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, And The Futurists Solving The Modest Problem Of Death By Mark O'Connell is one of the best collections to offer. So, the very first you get it, the initial you will get all positive about this e-book To Be A Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, And The Futurists Solving The Modest Problem Of Death By Mark O'Connell

Review
“O’Connell… dissects the practices and beliefs of trans-humanism with extraordinary exuberance and wit… To Be a Machine is sometimes hilarious (triggering several bursts of uncontrollable giggles while I read it on the Tube) but even as O’Connell mocks the more absurd manifestations of trans-humanism he shows sympathy and understanding for its adherents.”
—Financial Times

“Wryly humorous, cogently insightful…. To Be a Machine is a lucid, soulful pilgrimage into the heart of what humanity means to us now—and how science may redefine it tomorrow, for better and for worse.”
—NPR.org

“O'Connell unleashes his prodigious researching and writing skills on what could be your future.”
—Philadelphia Inquirer

“O’Connell is a writer of elegant precision and winning facetiousness… His ear and eye for detail are prodigious… O’Connell’s writing—full of high-low swerves and personal asides—is a constant reminder of the bathetic reality of being human.”
—4Columns

“[O’Connell] reveals a bounty of beguiling ingenuity and genuine absurdity, eliciting laughs and empathy, because we are our most human while trying to become something more than human.”
—Playboy

"O'Connell, a columnist for Slate, is a charming, funny tour guide. Writing on transhumanism often gets swept away by the inherent drama of its adherents' promises, but O'Connell's eye for small human details…keeps the narrative grounded in a way that rigorous scientific debunking wouldn't.”
—Vice

"The game-changing technology being developed in Silicon Valley is often hard to wrap one's head around, and Mark O'Connell takes readers on a wild ride through this world in a way that makes one feel that

anything is possible and everything is happening right now."
—Newsweek

"In this thoughtful and readable book, [O'Connell] aims to understand the motivations of those who are guided by the belief that technology will enable humans to transcend the human condition. In an attempt to explore what it means to think of ourselves as machines, O'Connell takes readers on an all-encompassing tour…He writes in an agreeable, conversational tone, offering his opinions, doubts, and fears along the way."
—Undark

"O'Connell decides to dive into the transhumanist culture in the best way possible: by traveling the world in search of key figures in the movement… The result is a fast-paced travel-log-cum-existential inquiry into the science and the religious significance of this age-old human desire to live forever: To become, in effect, a god."
—NPR's 13.7 blog

"O'Connell, a journalist, makes his own prejudices clear: 'I am not now, nor have I ever been, a transhumanist,' he writes. However, this does not stop him from thoughtfully surveying the movement."
—Science

"O'Connell's book is skeptical but not cynical, and it functions as a witty overview of transhumanism."
—The Ringer

"O'Connell's sensibility—his humanity, if you will—and his subject matter are a match made in heaven. It's an absolutely wonderful book."
—The Millions

"Comedic, unsettling, ambivalent, and intriguing…O'Connell's book is a worthwhile read for all audiences."
—LitHub

"To Be a Machine is flat-out fascinating. O'Connell's journey is a layman's adventure through the technological looking glass, an opportunity to meet with a subculture existing on the fringes of the tech scene and a compelling peek at one possible future. Sharply-written and thought-provoking, To Be a Machine is a book that will undoubtedly set your mind to racing and your gears to turning."
—The Maine Edge

"O'Connell writes with an intellectual curiosity that makes his esoteric subject matter accessible to lay readers…a stimulating overview of modern scientific realities once thought to be the exclusive purview of science fiction."
—Publishers Weekly

"An enlightening tour of transhumanism… packed with eccentric characters…An unsettling but informative and sometimes-optimistic view of mostly legitimate efforts at life extension."
—Kirkus Reviews

"Readers will appreciate O'Connell's sense of humor and his fast-paced writing, and will at times feel like they're having a dialogue with the author as he ponders the ethics, consequences, and dilemmas of these transhumanist activities embedded in society today. Those who are interested in artificial intelligence, bioengineering, technology, and human development will find this book to be deeply engrossing and informative on the topic of transhumanism and what it means to be a human today and in the future."

—Booklist

"A voyage into the dark heart of transhumanism, where dwell many hopeful mind-uploaders, robo-warfighters, subdermal implanters, doomed immortalists, and sundry aging Singularitarians. A funny, wise, and oddly moving book."
—Nicholson Baker, author of House of Holes and Human Smoke

“Hilarious and moving…. To Be a Machine is super-detailed and cosmic and minute and high-stakes and funny and sad, all at the same time.”
—Elif Batuman, author of The Possessed

“O'Connell, like some dream combination of Jon Ronson and Don Delillo, switches effortlessly from profound to poignant to laugh-out-loud funny. A brilliant illumination of the techno-future, To Be A Machine is also, and more importantly, a joyful summation of what it is to be human.”
—Paul Murray, author of Skippy Dies and The Mark and the Void

“O'Connell's forensic investigation of the unnervingly fluid border between the human and the machine is elegant and gripping: at once a hilarious anthropological survey of the people who believe technology will give us eternal life and a terrifying account of how technology is changing the cardinal features of human existence.”
—Olivia Laing, author of The Lonely City and The Trip to Echo Spring

“Provocative, funny and not a little gonzo, it’s a great one to recommend to devotees of Jon Ronson”
—Bookseller (UK)

"Mark O'Connell, in funny, reflective prose, finds in the transhumanists a desire to exceed these very limits – of the capacity for thought, of death, of the body."
—Globe and Mail (Canada)

“[A] beautifully written book… Ultimately, To Be A Machine is both an insight into transhumanist thought and O’Connell’s very relatable fears and anxieties about morality and the future.”
—Irish Times

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"A man," wrote Emerson, "is a god in ruins."

Religion, more or less, arises out of this divine wreckage. And science, too—religion's estranged half sibling—addresses itself to such animal dissatisfactions. In The Human Condition, writing in the wake of the Soviet launch of the first space satellite, Hannah Arendt reflected on the resulting sense of euphoria about escaping what one newspaper report called "men's imprisonment to the earth." This same yearning for escape, she wrote, manifested itself in the attempt to create superior humans from laboratory manipulations of germ plasm, to extend natural life spans far beyond their current limits. "This future man," she wrote, "whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself."

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ourselves as having such a thing as a future—it is predicated in large part on what we might accomplish through our machines. In this sense, transhumanism is an intensification of a tendency already inherent in much of what we think of as mainstream culture, in what we may as well go ahead and call capitalism.

And yet the inescapable fact of this aforementioned moment in history is that we, and these machines of ours, are presiding over a vast project of annihilation, an unprecedented destruction of the world we have come to think of as ours. The planet is, we are told, entering a sixth mass extinction: another Fall, another expulsion. It seems very late in the day, in this dismembered world, to be talking about a future.

One of the things that drew me to this movement, therefore, was the paradoxical force of its anachronism. For all that transhumanism presented itself as resolutely oriented toward a vision of a world to come, it felt to me almost nostalgically evocative of a human past in which radical optimism seemed a viable position to take with respect to the future. In the way it looked forward, transhumanism seemed, somehow, always to be facing backward.

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