



# Better Off Without Us?

*A symposium on Adam Kirsch's 'The Revolt Against Humanity'*

**Gilbert Meilaender, John F. Haught, Nolen Gertz, and Frank Pasquale**

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Antihumanism welcomes the extinction of humanity in order to better preserve other life on earth. Transhumanism seeks to replace the human species through technology. To what extent are these ideologies disavowals of responsibility, as Nolen Gertz suggests? What is most tempting about these ways of thinking?

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2. Meilaender puts forward his version of humanism as such: "Memory and anticipation—as well as the virtue of hope—are built into lives that take the risk of birth. Appreciating and embracing those risks and limits lies at the heart of a true humanism. We can and should set it over against the transhumanist desire to overcome human nature rather than honor it." Do you agree with his conception of humanism? How does it stand in relation to antihumanism and its view of human nature? What is the role of cultural texts like Madeleine L'Engle's poem in defining humanism in the twenty-first century?

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3. Antihumanism and transhumanism share an eschatological quality—the former argues that human culpability in ecological destruction condemns us to an apocalyptic death, and the latter promises a kind of afterlife free of certain mortal constraints. How do antihumanism and transhumanism resemble religious thinking, eschatologically or otherwise? How do these ideologies emerge from feelings of hope or despair? What could religion offer to counterbalance or even supplant their influence?

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4. Haught identifies a sense of alienation as the source of antihumanism, which he describes as "our species's cosmic homelessness." He argues that "if anything has proved to be ecologically noxious it is not our presence here, but the sense that we humans—beings with minds—do not belong to nature in the first place." Do you agree that antihumanism stems from a metaphysical sense of alienation? What makes us feel separate from nature? What makes us belong to it? Could there be a transhuman future embedded in nature?

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5. Pasquale notes that transhumanism upends the preceding hierarchy of humanism by placing technology above humans, but still has a long way to go before "merging" with humanity. How plausible do you think transhumanism really is? What parts of our lives are already transhuman? Medical technologies—prosthetics, implants, pacemakers—are integrated into human bodies on a daily basis. At what point is someone transhuman? What of our reliance on smartphones and conditioning by algorithms, which shape our psychology? Could figures and industries promoting transhumanism funnel their resources toward technology that works for the common good?

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6. Transhumanism offers to alleviate certain fears and insecurities surrounding death, old age, and human expression—issues which have been deliberated upon by thinkers and artists for thousands of years. Pasquale, though, sees the solution to fighting transhumanism's influence not in "re-inflating the human" but in "deflating the promise of the transhuman." Why is reviving humanism a dead end for Pasquale? Why might transhumanists or anyone in today's world doubt humanity's ability to address these fears through our inherent abilities?

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Eugene McCarragher, "The Storm Cloud of the Twenty-First Century," October 2022:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/climate-ecology-pope-francis-ruskin-laudato-si>

Jennifer Banks, "Reckoning With Birth," May 2023: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/natalty-mortality-banks-arendt-children-india-feminism>

Max Foley-Keene, "Beyond Growth," November 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/beyond-growth>

Lawrence Joseph, "What Robots Can't Do," October 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/what-robots-cant-do>

Nolen Gertz, "More than Machines?," September 2023: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/jacques-ellul-gertz-artificial-intelligence-AI-WGA-technology>