



Technological Metamorphosis: A Transhumanist Analysis of Daniel H. Wilson's Amped

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Abstract: *In the modern era, rapid advancements in technology have profound implications for humanity, presenting potential perils and challenges. Despite the complexities and hazards involved, individuals are drawn to these advancements by the allure of an enhanced existence, free from limitations and enriched with extraordinary experiences. This has led to the emergence of transhumanism, a movement seeking to revolutionize human existence through scientific and technological progress. Transhumanists believe in the limitless potential of technology, aiming to transcend the current conception of humanity. The boundary between the human body and technology is becoming increasingly blurred, and this study explores this phenomenon from a transhumanist perspective. Focusing on Daniel H. Wilson's novel Amped, the research analyzes how breakthroughs in biotechnology, such as prosthetics, medical implants, and bionic surgeries, enable humans to overcome biological limitations. Additionally, it investigates the process of prosthetization and the subsequent technologization of the human body, pushing the boundaries between humans and transhumans.*

Key Words: *technology, metamorphosis, transhumanism, techno-sapiens, prosthesis.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Throughout the course of human history, technology has played a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life and overcoming physical limitations. For instance, the invention of spectacles enabled individuals to improve their vision. As time has progressed, technology has reached a point where it has become an integral part of daily human existence, exerting a profound influence. Notably, the development of hearing aids, prosthetic limbs, and silicone chips has ushered in a new era known as transhumanism, or evolutionary humanism, a term first introduced by Julian Huxley in 1957. He describes the impact of technology on humans as follows:

The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself--not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature. [...] The human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence, as different from ours as ours is from that of Peking man. It will at last be consciously fulfilling its real destiny. (76)

Technological progress offers a promising outlook for human advancement, yet simultaneously reveals a concerning aspect of human degradation resulting from excessive reliance on technology. In his novel "Amped," Daniel H. Wilson delves into the intricate relationship between the natural and the artificial, positing that while transhuman modifications may bring benefits, they also carry potential hazards. The central theme of the novel revolves around a brain implant known as Neural Autofocus, which rests on the brain's surface and monitors the electrical activity between neurons. It possesses the capability to control the brain through its own electric stimulation if necessary. Neural implants have shown promise in restoring sight to the blind, treating Parkinson's disease, detecting and preventing epileptic seizures, facilitating mind-controlled prosthetics, enabling mobility for the partially paralyzed, and even empowering individuals to complete marathons.

Traditionally, the goal of medical technology was to assist individuals with disabilities in attaining a level of functioning akin to that of non-disabled individuals. However, recent advancements in science have led to the equipping of people with disabilities with extraordinary abilities. Humans have co-evolved with technology for over a century, reaching a juncture where the tools they create are becoming integral parts of their existence. Undoubtedly, this will reshape the world, prompting important questions regarding its potential benefits and the unanticipated consequences



and societal challenges that may arise from the emergence of a new class of exceptionally capable individuals. Wilson's novel "Amped" addresses this concern, portraying a society divided into two classes: the "regular" individuals and the "enhanced" individuals resulting from the advent of neural implant technology. The narrative paints a near-future scenario in which humanity has taken a substantial technological leap, and the citizens of the United States grapple with discrimination and social upheaval triggered by this technology. Consequently, violence erupts between those who have embraced technological augmentation and those who remain unenhanced. In this novel, Wilson skillfully illustrates the societal discord arising from the introduction of neural implant technology, ultimately depicting the amplified individuals as disruptive terrorists who threaten social order. The "amp," a minuscule device implanted in the prefrontal cortex, utilizes electrical impulses to stimulate specific regions of the brain, enabling the elimination of mental and physical disabilities. Remarkably, it enhances cognitive abilities and synchronizes with prosthetic limbs, allowing individuals with below-average intellects to perform rapid computations akin to machines. The amplification of brain function benefits various groups, including the elderly, infirm, individuals with severe mental illnesses, and victims of accidents.

Within the novel's narrative, the proliferation of neural implants has inevitably precipitated a schism between the implanted and non-implanted individuals. This schism leads to societal upheaval within American society, as it explores the reactions of ordinary people towards the emergence of intellectually superior and faster individuals. The advanced technology embodied by these implants instills feelings of insecurity within the non-amplified populace, who fear the superhuman strength and intelligence exhibited by the amplified. Consequently, a significant division arises within society, with "normal" individuals harboring apprehensions regarding a future wherein they will be left behind, unable to compete due to the unfair advantage enjoyed by the amplified population. E.P. Zehr also feels that the "... the main issue is not the range of human ability, but rather the range of acceptable human ability." She further adds, "The question is, at what point does the amplification take us beyond the accepted range of natural human ability? Do we actually have an adequate definition for what is the accepted range of normal human ability?" ("The Potential Transformation of Our Species by Neural Enhancement" 75-76) The emergence of such inquiries is likely to evoke a profound state of unease among individuals. Within the context of the literary work, this sense of insecurity is exacerbated by the presence of a quasi-religious faction known as the Pure Human Citizen's Council, commonly referred to as Pure Pride, led by the charismatic senator Vaughn. Vaughn adeptly exploits the underlying fears prevalent among the general populace, strategically manipulating them against the amps who are perceived as posing a significant peril to the human race. The members of the Pure Pride "pressured schools across the country into barring implanted kids. They said the few modified kids were taking precious resources away from the vast majority of human kid" (*Amped* 10). The persistent vocalizations of Senator Vaughn and his organization, the Pure Human Citizen's Council, advocating for the social exclusion of individuals with neural enhancements, engenders escalating tensions between these two factions, approaching a state akin to civil unrest. Senator Vaughn staunchly opposes the proliferation of this emerging technology, going to the extent of establishing a council dedicated to countering its influence. However, a deeper motivation underlies the council's formation: seeking retribution for the tragic loss of his daughter, six-year-old Emma, whose untimely demise was attributed to complications arising from a neural implant. He says, "We had the implantation done privately. It was all my idea. My wife said wait. Said we should let the technology mature. But the doctors told me Emma was going to learn slow and that didn't fit into my program. I had the access and the money and I thought I had the answer" (*Amped*, 256).

Vaughn's decision to provide his daughter with a neural implant, driven by his refusal to accept her slower learning pace, unveils a grim reality in which cognitive disability-curing technologies remain accessible only to the affluent and powerful. Initially enticed by the prospects of neural implants, Vaughn's perspective takes a turn when the technology fails to favor him. Throughout the novel, he vehemently criticizes amplified individuals, denouncing neural autofocus as a crime against humanity that gravely infringes upon human dignity and eradicates the essence of humanity. Tragically, it is only after the death of his daughter that Vaughn resolves to dismantle the dominance of this technology. Consequently, he instills fear in the minds of non-amplified individuals who are already apprehensive about their place in a technologically mediated future. Following a Supreme Court ruling that strips amplified individuals of their legal protections, including rights, businesses, properties, and contracts, Vaughn and Pure Pride continue to incite ordinary people against the amps, accusing them of undermining human civilization.

In a world driven by technology, the environment bears a profound impact, and humans are increasingly reliant on technology to adapt to rapid changes. Implants, cosmetic surgeries, and mechanical prosthetics modify human bodies, enabling users to transcend biological limitations and redefine the human form. However, while these technologies fulfill the desires of a privileged few, they also raise fundamental questions about the nature of humanness. Such inquiries prompt reflection on the far-reaching consequences of advancing technology for the future of human life.



Through the compelling speeches of Senator Joseph Vaughn, a representative of the Pure Human Citizen's Council, author Daniel H. Wilson skillfully portrays the outrage, anger, fury, distrust, and hostility harbored by non-implanted individuals towards the amps, who embody faster, smarter, better, and enhanced versions of the human race. The novel vividly depicts how this clash between technology and humanity can devolve into animosity and hatred, particularly when nefarious political motives become intertwined. Vaughn successfully stokes resentment between amplified and non-amplified people by employing a divide-and-conquer strategy, ultimately emerging as a symbol of revolution. However, it becomes evident that his actions are driven solely by self-interest, highlighting the transformative influence of politics on any given matter.

The similar notion is expressed by Francis Fukuyama, in his book *Our Posthuman Future*, when he says, "government regulators develop a self-interest in promoting their own power and position, even as they make claims to speak in the public interest (184-185). The advancement of cutting-edge technology has undeniably brought renewed hope to individuals grappling with disabilities or illnesses. However, it also carries potential ramifications that warrant serious consideration. Within the novel, a protagonist named Owen undergoes an implantation procedure, orchestrated by his father, with the aim of curing his condition. Regrettably, this implant ultimately leads to his ostracism, resulting in his expulsion from both his home and workplace. The text explores an interdisciplinary realm, interweaving literature and technology within the framework of transhumanism. It portrays a futuristic society wherein individuals are transformed into technological entities through neural implants, thus becoming postbiological or posthuman beings. These implanted individuals shed their disabilities, limitations, and vulnerabilities, only to find themselves relegated to a marginalized existence. In a sudden turn of events, Owen is thrust into the forefront of a callous class conflict that emerges between ordinary and enhanced humans. Left with no alternative, he embarks on a daunting journey to an unfamiliar community in Oklahoma, driven by a desire to uncover the truth behind his implant. The novel envisions a world where technology empowers humans to overcome cognitive limitations, enabling them to confront a broader and deeper range of experiential opportunities. However, it is also a world marked by unwarranted exploitation, unfathomable violence, and insatiable predation. While the implant aids Owen's survival, it also bestows upon him exceptional capabilities that are met with societal resistance. This simultaneous portrayal of a utopian and dystopian world encapsulates the speculative tension between contemporary cybernetic theories and traditional ethical, political, and moral convictions. Ultimately, the revelation of a prototype known as "zenith" concealed within Owen's mind serves as a catalyst for his realization of society's apprehensions regarding technology. This fear about human beings losing the essence of their presence is expressed by Fukuyama as:

While it is legitimate to worry about unintended consequences and unforeseen costs, the deepest fear that people express about technology ... [is] that, in the end, biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity—that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we are and where we are going, de-spote all of the evident changes that have taken place in the human condition through the course of history. (101)

As Ted Peters states, "The future will differ from the past. Whereas in the past we have been prisoners of our biology, in the future we will become liberated. Our liberation will come from increased intelligence, intelligence that itself will find a way to remove itself from our deteriorating bodies and establish a much more secure substrate for endurance" ("Transhumanism and the Posthuman Future, 158). This is why Vaughn persistently persuades individuals that the pursuit of augmented intelligence and prolonged lifespan poses a threat to the fundamental concepts of limited existence and mortality, which have traditionally constituted the essence of human life, serving as the foundation for human values, morals, and virtues. It is only by accepting the finite boundaries and inherent adversities intrinsic to these limitations that humanity displays magnanimity of spirit and maintains its status as the superior species. Thus, in order to preserve our humanity, it is imperative to firmly embrace our inherent finitude. Simultaneously, while Vaughn and the Pure Pride continue to delve into the amplification technologies, an alternative faction known as The Free Body Liberty Group emerges, advocating for the rights and equal standing of amplified individuals within society. Jared Kohen, the head of the Free Body Liberty Group delivers a speech in which he states, "America is built on a foundation of freedom, and that includes the freedom to choose what technology we put into our bodies," (*Amped*, 130) to which Vaughn replies that the Free Body Liberty Group has left it unchecked that the implantable technology is capable of destroying the real fabric of the society and, "they are calling for a war on humanity. And this is a battle that we must win, if not for ourselves then for our children and our children's children" (*Amped*, 130). The conflict depicted in the novel can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the contrasting viewpoints held by transhumanists and bio-conservatives. Transhumanists advocate and champion the utilization of technology, while bio-conservatives oppose excessive reliance on technology and view its intervention in all aspects of life as contrary to human values. This thematic exploration captures the ongoing debate surrounding the ethical implications of technological advancements and their impact on the human condition. Nick Bostrom in his article, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity", sheds light



upon the different views held by these two groups. While mentioning about bio-conservatives, he states, “One of the central concerns of the bioconservatives is that human enhancement technologies might be ‘dehumanizing’” (203). While in the regard of transhumanists, Bostrom states that, “By defending post-human dignity we promote a more inclusive and humane ethics, one that will embrace future technologically modified people as well as humans of the contemporary kind” (213).

The dual nature of technology becomes apparent when considering its potential to be both beneficial and harmful to society. Progress is an inevitable aspect of any society, but its implications are determined by the choices and actions of its users. Thus, it is evident that technology itself is not inherently good or evil; rather, its ultimate impact depends on its application. This notion is exemplified in the novel through the characters Owen and Lyle, who possess identical implants and abilities. However, Lyle heedlessly employs his powers to incite civil war, while Owen exercises caution and uses them responsibly. Wilson emphasizes the progressive possibilities that the integration of technology and the human body can offer humanity.

Characters like Owen Gray retain remnants of their humanity, which leads to emotional complexities and conflicts that place their minds in an incongruous and unpredictable state. Despite this, Owen strives to hold onto his humanity. In contrast, Lyle’s superhuman desires hint at the alarming dangers society faces due to its relentless pursuit of advancement. Towards the novel’s conclusion, Lyle is killed in a confrontation, and Vaughn confesses his crimes to Owen. In response, Owen removes his retinal implant, which contains a video of Vaughn’s recent confession regarding his malicious intentions behind creating the Pure Pride. Through police surveillance, Vaughn is arrested for leading a domestic terrorist organization. Owen returns to Eden and establishes a school at his home for children with implants. This portrayal of the fusion between flesh and metal, human and machine, aligns with Haraway’s theory of the cyborg and the posthuman, highlighting the concepts of potent fusion, blurred boundaries, and perilous possibilities. The idea of the cyborg disrupts the conventional understanding of humans as purely organic entities, as humans and technology are co-evolving in increasingly intimate and rapid ways. Humans are on the path of transformation from ordinary beings to upgraded posthumans. Some individuals become cyborgs by embracing medical technologies such as pacemakers, hearing aids, or other implants, while others are born as cyborgs through procedures like in vitro fertilization.

In contemporary society, humans are undergoing a process of technological integration, resulting in a state of cyborgization. Notably, the field of advanced healthcare has introduced a novel tool called prosthesis, which holds significant potential. This tool encompasses fabricated heart valves, blood vessels, hip joints, and cochlear implants, among others. Ongoing experimentation indicates promising outcomes, such as the potential for artificial retinas to cure blindness and neural implants to treat paralysis. Additionally, neural implants show promise in enhancing human memory and cognitive abilities by establishing direct connections with external computer networks. The advancements in biotechnology and nanotechnology have played a pivotal role in the development of more efficient prosthetic devices. Furthermore, these advancements suggest the possibility of consistent diagnostic monitoring, augmentation of the immune system, and non-intrusive rectification of tissues and organs. Consequently, a profound integration of prosthetic devices with the human body not only reshapes the concept of identity but also positions humans as exceptionally adept information processors. With the continued progression of this prostheticization, human consciousness and sense of self will transcend conventional boundaries. The eventual merging of humans with machines will liberate humankind from the limitations of mortal bodies, allowing them to redefine the notions of life and death. As a result, the dominant technologies driving the enhancement and mechanization of human bodies will propel humanity further into the realm of posthumanism, reshaping our understanding of the human experience.

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