

Touring transhumanism

Simon Ings meets Mark O'Connell, winner of this year's Wellcome book prize

- 1 **Your winning book, *To Be a Machine*, describes your bizarre encounters with transhumanists – researchers and thinkers who want to enhance humans and escape death by turning us all into machines. What do you think of these ideas?**



Transhumanism's critique of the human condition, its anxiety around having to die, is something I have some sympathy with, and that's where the book began. The idea was for the door to some kind of conversion to be always open. But I was never really convinced that the big ideas in transhumanism, like mind-uploading and so on, were really plausible. The most interesting question for me was: why would anyone want this?

- 2 **Transhumanists think a lot about evading death. Do the ones you meet get much out of life?**

I think if you are so devoted to the idea that we can outrun death, and that death makes life utterly meaningless, then you are avoiding the true animal nature of what it means to be human. But I find myself moving back and forth between that position and one that says, you know what, these people are driven by a deep, Promethean project. I don't have the deep desire to shake the world to its core that these people have. In that sense, they are living life to its absolute fullest.

- 3 **What most sticks in your mind from your research for the book?**

In terms of just the visuals, Alcor's cryogenic life extension facility is bizarre. You are walking around what's known as a patient care bay, among these gigantic stainless steel cylinders filled with corpses and severed heads that they are going to unfreeze once a cure for death is found. The thing that really grabbed me was the juxtaposition between the sci-fi level of the thing and the fact that it was situated in a business park on the outskirts of Phoenix, next to Big D's Floor Covering Supplies and a tile showroom.

4 **Well, they say the future arrives unevenly...**

I think we are at a very particular cultural point in terms of our relationship to "the future". We aren't really thinking of science as this boundless field of possibility any more, and so it seems like a bit of a throwback, like something from an Arthur C. Clarke story. It's like the thing with billionaire Elon Musk. The global problems he identifies — rogue AI, finding a new planet that we can live on to perpetuate the species — seem so removed from problems people are facing that they are absurd. 35-1 They aren't serious, on some basic level.

5 **Who most impressed you?**

The one person I really found myself grappling with, in the most profound and unsettling way, was Randal Koene. It's his idea of uploading the human mind to a computer that I find most deeply troubling and offensive, and kind of absurd. As a person and a communicator, though, he was very powerful. 35-2 Koene was the opposite. He was very quietly spoken, humble, very much the scientist. There were moments he really pushed me out of my scepticism — and I liked him.

6 **Do you think transhumanism is a product of a Silicon Valley mentality?**

The big cultural influence over transhumanism seems to have been the development of the internet. 35-3 Most transhumanists tended to end up in the US, specifically in Silicon Valley. I suppose that's because you don't get people laughing when you mention you want to live forever.

7 **Is transhumanism science or religion?**

There is a serious religious subtext. At the same time, transhumanists reject that because it tends to undermine their perception of themselves as rationalists and deeply sciency. 35-4

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