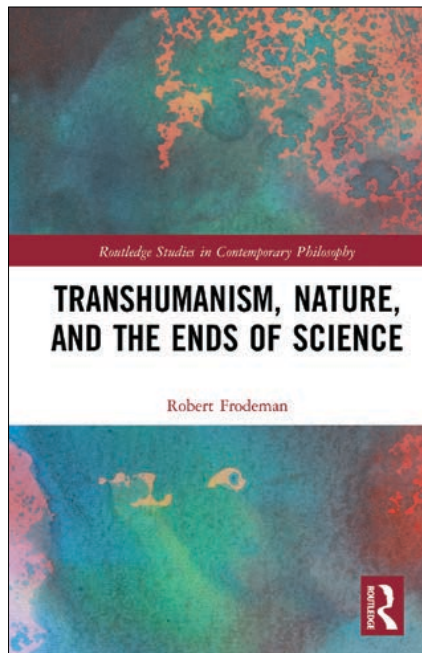


## A Scathing but Empty Critique

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The philosopher Robert Frodeman is not happy with the state of late modernity, the current era that some sociologists see as characterized by unregulated market capitalism, disruptive technoscientific advances, and unstable personal identities. He finds that something is terribly amiss. As individuals living through this condition, late moderns have become little more than thoughtless consumers of the latest glittering technology promising to somehow improve their lives. Instead, these unending streams of gadgets and software simply alleviate the insatiable but vacuous appetite of greedy consumers. Humans are on the threshold of surrendering their humanity in exchange for an easier, more comfortable, and more self-fulfilling destiny. The late modern era, in Frodeman's account, is rushing toward its perilous end.

It is difficult, however, to assess an era in a book as short as *Transhumanism, Nature, and the Ends of Science*. Instead, Frodeman uses transhumanism, a relatively recent philosophical movement that he defines as the belief that “humanity can reach a new existential state—smarter, stronger, longer-living, perhaps to the point of god-like powers—by means of science and technology,” as a focal point to reveal late modernity's perilous circumstances. Although it's tempting to dismiss transhumanism as the collective fantasies of a few daft writers, Frodeman insists that the “entire architecture of modern culture is implicitly transhumanist in orientation.” It represents the logical outcome of the Enlightenment project: a three-centuries-long, ongoing enterprise to use human reason—as embodied in science and technology—to achieve control over nature and



**Transhumanism, Nature, and the Ends of Science**  
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realize human-oriented goals. The book, then, is simultaneously a political and metaphysical critique of transhumanism, and more broadly late modernity. The principal problem posed by transhumanism is what Frodeman calls its “defective” understanding of human society and culture, and he offers an alternative philosophy of life “based in the rhythms and cadences of life, rooted in our geologic history.”

Still, this is a lot to take on in a little more than 150 pages; but Frodeman believes he is up to the challenge. His condemnations of transhumanism occur in a series of concise, and at times incisive, criticisms scattered throughout the text. As is customary in academic critiques of transhumanism, the usual band of proponents and their most prominent antagonists are rounded up to summarize their texts and make short work of their facile philosophical and moral assertions. What make Frodeman's pithy sorties engaging are the examples drawn from

everyday life, such as entertainment and electronic media, to disclose transhumanism as a concrete menace. The lengthy description of the author's misadventures with dentistry is especially memorable.

Two examples may suffice to illustrate these criticisms. The first entails the mastery of nature. Human flourishing requires, at least according to the dictates of the Enlightenment, subjecting natural vagaries to willful human control. This objective is accomplished primarily by deploying technologies that effectively assert the dominance of the human will. For example, geographic locales are no longer determining factors shaping human identities, values, or behavior. Through their use of transportation and communication technologies, late moderns may virtually be anywhere at any time, or no place in particular. The scope of freedom offered by greater physical and imaginative mobility is presumably enhanced; physical place is an impediment to be overcome with the aid of technological development.

In this respect, the transhumanist disdain for physical places goes beyond the modern quest of “mastering nature,” as recognized by such critics as the French philosopher Jacques Ellul and the Canadian thinker George Grant. Rather, what transhumanists envision is not reordering nature, but a far more expansive program entailing nature's radical reconstruction or even abolition. Constructed or virtual reality should supplant an indifferent nature as the principal context in which humans live and have their being. In the imagined posthuman future, the extent to which nature can be said to survive, it will do so as an artifact of the (post)human will.

The second example involves the transhumanist repudiation of embodiment. Transhumanists are not at all pleased that they are embodied creatures. Their displeasure goes well beyond the commonplace observation that bodies impose natural constraints on the will. Rather, the body is the source of suffering, pain, and death—

in short, the wellspring of misery in human affairs. To be embodied is to be effectively enslaved to nature. The solution proposed by transhumanists, again, is to turn to technology in fashioning human emancipation. Initially this requires innovations and breakthroughs in health care, biotechnology, and an array of other technologies that collectively enhance physical and mental performance and even extend longevity. The eventual goal, however, is to eliminate, as much as possible, the necessity of bodies bequeathed by nature. Presumably humans will flourish by transforming themselves into a new species of their own making. And presumably, by overcoming the body's natural limitations, this is part of the outcome of the Enlightenment project the author decries.

Frodeman claims this future can be avoided by ordering human life in accordance with an alternative, superior approach to human society, one rooted in physical locales and natural rhythms, and, most importantly, one that acknowledges the need for limits. This claim is promising, but Frodeman never quite delivers. Rather than penning a demonstrable and appealing argument, Frodeman provides an eclectic collection of assertions and diatribes regarding the evils of right-wing American politicians, snarky condemnations of mindless consumers, digressions into the thinking of favored philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, and personal anecdotes involving the virtues of Wyoming wilderness and vices of contemporary philosophical pedagogy. And as a bonus, all these adventures are heavily laced with rhetoric distilled from the latest, trendiest batches of academic jargon.

Why the failure to deliver on this promising mode of inquiry? There are, perhaps, two reasons. First, proposing a superior anthropology (as Frodeman calls his approach), even in rudimentary outline, would require formulating a normative argument, identifying the ideal ends toward which human

action should be directed. This the author cannot or will not do. At times he demonstrates an appreciation of, even fondness for, Plato and Aristotle, but as a late modern progressive he cannot entertain the possibility of the good, true, and beautiful as given and universal ideals to be emulated. To do so would require rejecting his progressive credentials that he burnishes throughout the text, often with snide remarks that presumably are meant to be humorous.

But by the time all the progressive voices are included, the ensuing cacophony of contradictory causes—honoring free speech, for instance, but also being open to censoring odious speech on the internet—has little to do with physical locales, natural rhythms, or limits because no foundational or compelling reason can be offered that these are perquisites for human flourishing. Consequently, Frodeman turns to a favorite tactic often deployed in contemporary social and political rhetoric: fear. The anthropology and corresponding lifestyles he commends should be adopted because they offer the best chance for the survival of the human species. Yet Frodeman tacitly admits that a political consensus around his agenda is unlikely given the pandering of corrupt politicians and the existence of powerful corporations and their consumerist stooges. Perhaps in light of such entrenched power and ignorance, progressives should turn to more authoritarian political strategies to save the planet—an option the author does not reject out of hand.

Second, Frodeman fails to recognize, or at least admit, his own complicity in the transhumanist culture he decries. This is a curious and lethal omission, lending a hypocrisy to the book that is often understated but nonetheless breathtaking. Frodeman eventually admits that despite his scathing criticisms he has no desire to dismantle technological progress or return to the (bad) good ol' days, especially when it comes to dentistry. Apparently, the problem is not technology per se,

but the wrong people who use and regulate it. The solution is to put the *right* people in charge, namely, those who hold convictions most similar to those of the author. For example, social media would be far more edifying and effective if they were used solely by enlightened individuals to champion causes and policies designed to prevent the transhumanist outcome of the Enlightenment, or even better reverse its present trajectory. But since Frodeman provides no normative account of the ends and means to be had, who will (or should) muster the sufficient will and power to achieve his preferred outcome? Some amount of—or even extensive recourse to—censorship, surveillance, and public shaming seems inevitable to keep democratic impulses under control in the way Frodeman envisions.

It is not surprising that Friedrich Nietzsche is the philosopher visited most frequently in this book. And rightfully so, for it is hard to find a more astute writer on late modernity, one who even anticipates much of the transhumanist agenda. Nietzsche's envisioned future was a sober one, at least for what he called the "last men" who, in their materially comfortable but spiritually empty lives, appear remarkably similar to those Frodeman holds in disdain. Nietzsche was particularly perceptive of the nihilistic consequences of turning Plato on his head: exchanging what Plato considered the true, the good, and the beautiful for what Nietzsche called the will to power would create a world dominated by the banal last men. I think Frodeman believes he has dealt with Nietzsche's nihilism, but he leaves his own unacknowledged and untouched.

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