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Review of "Eclipse of Man, Human Extinction and the Meaning of Progress"

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Charles T. Rubin, *Eclipse of Man, Human Extinction and the Meaning of Progress*, (New York: Encounter Books, 2014), 224 pp.

The short lifespan of humans in comparison to the length of time the cosmos has existed leads humanity to have a shorter and more encapsulated view of time. Overall, we are able to relate to the idea of 150 years on the time scale. However, our fragile nature and natural curiosity has us pondering what the future will bring. The ability to look to the future and dream of what may be can be considered one of our most desirable and terrifying traits as a species. We look to the change with wonder of how we may advance our capabilities and longevity. There is a degree of awe that some of us look to the future with and see the technological advancements we make today compounding into greater and greater possibilities. The flow of information has accelerated to the pace that a vast majority of the world's information is available at our fingertips. Our mastery of the natural world has reached new heights and we are now no longer bound to our planetary home and have reached out into the vastness of space. From what we know, this trend will only continue and some assume at an even more accelerated pace. This face is fascinating to some that salivating like a Pavlovian dog at the possibilities of the unknown while others take a cautionary approach.

Charles Rubin's *Eclipse of Man* attempts to be a cautionary tale of the multi-faceted transhumanist movement. Rubin looks to the advancements of technology and our changing perceptions of our interaction with it through the backdrop of historical thinkers who have hypothesized the dangers of this trend. His book does not endorse us cannonballing into the pool of the future with the advent of cybernetic implants, mind data uploads, and extraterrestrial excursions. It instead pushes us to be the toddler who dips their toe into the water only to run away screaming. Rubin takes the stance that our foray into technological advancement will lead to the "extinction" of humanity. He backs his theory of extinction by exploring the perception of the future according to those in the past. Citing thinkers like Malthus and Fedorov, Rubin points that there is a trend of natural fear about the future and that we should be concerned with a variety of issues from the practical in resource scarcity to the philosophical in having to redefine what it means to be human. This leads to a larger thread of confusion in what Rubin means by "extinction." Extinction alludes to the disappearance of a species whereas a term like evolution would more properly

He looks at this through a three pronged approach: discovery, ability, and perfection. Rubin's first exploration into the trend of transhumanism focuses on the discovery of humanity by those that might be our interstellar neighbors and the departure from our home. There is insight to the idea of how our habitat has defined us. Moving away from Earth and exploring the stars creates disconnect, Rubin contends. We see this with other species as they see a connection to the



place that they are genetically attached. A house cat does not thrive in the wild unless drastic changes are made to its behavior. However, this fantastic voyage would see a sub dividing of the species, not the extinction.

Whereas Rubin's first exploration deals with our external surroundings, his next two deal with the internal abilities and the perfection of those abilities in our human form. Rubin looks at the development of new technologies that augment our current abilities as beneficial but again might lead to our eventual downfall. One of his largest ponderings is on nanotechnology. Rubin's paints a future where microbots are able to replicate and alter us to where a wound would be healed instantaneously like we have Wolverine's activated X-gene. If we look at the principle of nanotechnology and why it is developed, it is a similar to most technologies to aid humanity, specifically in the medical field. Cast aside are the possibilities of nanotech fighting cancer cell by cell or the repairing of neural pathways through debilitating conditions like Alzheimer's or ALS. We already currently do the mission of nanotech but on a larger scale. We repair limbs by fusing them together with metal plates, joints held together by titanium screws, and our spines repaired by organic patches. Rubin's problem sits on the extreme nature of it citing the idea of Drexler's disembodied brains running rampant like villains from Doctor Who and whoa to those that stand in their way. This is the blurring of science fiction with science fact. The possibility may exist but its likelihood is weak and not due to the inertia of human will to advance but because we have a natural tie to our humanity.

This brings us to Rubin's third area of exploration and the perfection of humanity through technology. Rubin focuses again on one aspect of technology and us perfecting our memory and intelligence capabilities through brain modification. Rubin again takes a stance that is pushed the extreme where he describes beings of pure memory like human computers that just process endless strings of information. The comparison to a computer with new found hyperintelligence is unfounded. Many believe in the Asimov myth of computers gaining a high enough level of independent thought to reason that they will seek to destroy humanity. Think of a chess program that is designed to beat its competitor at any cost. Eventually, the program will understand that the only way to total victory would be to destroy its opponent physically and not just on the game board leading to an absolute conclusion. This would probably be the likeliest situation where humanity would see an extinction. We would be done in by our own intelligence from Rubin's perspective. This also leads us to examine Rubin's definition of progress.

The end of Rubin's piece looks to define what progress looks like for humanity. The idea of doing things for the sake of doing them does not align with a sense of progress and Rubin is right for this theory. Progress can operate on multiple levels both internal and external. Beneficial progress needs to see a communal advancement and not just an individual one. We must seek to benefit all of humanity as a species instead of a few individuals being able to progress. This



disjointed approach to progress is what Rubin truly fears. He must think of a world that parallels H.G. Wells' *Time Machine* where those without are cast into the darkness like Morlocks, eternal slaves to the machinations and dependent on the elite casting us scraps. However, Rubin failure to isolate his argument to extinction of humanity instead of a possible evolution or maturation of humanity never takes place. It can be distilled from his writing that Rubin looks at humanity as standing above the universe but in fact we are a part of it. The atoms that make up our bodies are traceable to the crucibles that created the first stars that supernovaed and spread that life through the universe. We are not above the universe but are a part of it and are connected to it. As the universe expands and changes, we too must change and are forced to since we are in this universe. Even though change is scary, we must relish it and welcome it because it is necessary for us to continue to participate in the cosmic dance.

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