

Follies in Biohacking: The Transhumanist Perspective

Jose Moreno



In our insatiable quest for control and understanding, humanity has arrived at a pivotal point in its existential journey. The experiment now under the microscope, the literal surgery at hand, is that which we hold nearest, and that which holds us intact: our human body and mind. The underlying premise here is that natural selection has taken us for a wild ride of genetic randomness that lasted a millennia, and dropped us off at the intersection of technology and decision. It is up to us, whether as a society or as individuals, contentiously, to decide whether the next stage of human evolution is propelled forward by genetic enhancements, implantable micro-devices, and brain-boosting nootropics.

There exists a school of thought that encompasses this ideology of radical self-actualization, known as transhumanism. Transhumanists are technologists who subscribed to a techno-focused form of libertarianism. Quite literally, the goal is to become a cyborg, and use any available means of biohacking to get there, regardless of what any regulator has to say.



My brief journey through the nascent transhumanist scene started this Summer, in the culturally forward-thinking hills and tech-worshipping hacker-houses of Silicon Valley. While wandering through the Mission district of San Francisco, I happened to strike up a conversation with a guy named Zoltan Istvan, amidst a group of other people at a comedy club one night after work. Zoltan is the de facto leader of transhumanism, and is running for Governor of California to spread awareness for the movement. Amidst audible gasps, he calmly explained to the group how he had three different micro-chips implanted in his hand and arm, and how he was waiting for an upgraded chip that came out in November which would allow him to store credit card information and pay for things by tapping his hand to a reader.

The concept of piercing your skin and implanting a semi-permanent RFID chip was a foreign thought, but a fascinating enough concept that I figured I'd keep an open mind and hear this story out. He paints a future where we can design our children through genetic modification, and where implants are viewed as “upgrades”, perpetually improving the human condition at the speed of Moore's Law. I decided to head home after a while, imagining what it would be like to implant a digital micro-prosthesis into my body. Upon arriving at the 30-person adult dorm hacker-house where I was living, my flatmate introduced me to his visiting friend from Australia. This turned out to be a friendly man who founded a biohacking space called the Biofoundry, whom like Zoltan, also had three chips in his hand, one being the aforementioned credit card chip that allowed him to tap and pay at most coffee shops.

He had legally changed his name to Meow-Ludo Disco Gamma Meow-Meow (his friends call him Meow-Meow), his demeanor like any friendly stranger you might meet in the park (starkly put, he's actually quit normal). He's currently in a legal scuffle with the metro authority over a transit card he implanted. He emulated the same sentiment towards technology that Zoltan explained, and put me in touch with the founder of a company that ships rice grain-sized implantable RFID chips that you can use to unlock your phone by simply tapping it to your wrist, open a digital door lock, or even start your car. Not exactly the bioengineering breakthrough that will divide society into different castes of enhanced-elite and natural-poor, but pretty unique and intriguing, if not a little weird.

So much so, that I found myself on a train to San Jose two weeks later to meet a professional piercer that would implant one in my hand for around \$50. The chip came in a little kit; it took longer to sterilize the area than to actually inject the chip into the fleshy area between my thumb and index finger. As of now, I mostly use this tiny chip in my left hand to unlock my phone, and am developing an app that delivers Jimmy John's to my location just by touching the phone to my wrist, but most of the time, I forget the tiny thing is even in there.



By transhumanist terms, I'm “enhanced”, but honestly, I don't feel any different.

More recently, I found myself standing in the back of Folwer Hall, listening to Michael Bess speak on the topic of genetically engineering our grandchildren, and the cultural implications of bioengineering and biohacking on a broader scale. While he pointed out benefits with regards to epigenetics, pharmaceuticals, and sustainable longevity, his view leans away from the transhumanist free-spirit and more towards doom. His most pressing concern is that of inequality: those who can afford to receive implants, genetic modification, or neural stimulants, will supersede those below them with regards to professional performance by factors never seen, and widen the inequality gap to a point that we can't ever close it again. This leads to the decay of value placed on humanity, and erodes self-worth to the extent of the bio-technical capabilities we can afford to implant.

I agree that the cultural and societal implications of biohacking will be profound. However, I also believe that intellectual capability and earnings only correlate up to a certain point. I would much rather live in a society where I can no longer compete with the top 20% of performers, but where the collective technological and medicinal breakthroughs from a super-enhanced workforce raise the quality of living and general intellect of everyone. For now, it's a small rice-grain chip in my hand. Tomorrow, it's the collective knowledge of the internet linked directly to everyone's mind (ask Elon Musk). Undoubtedly, the transition will challenge us like never before, but the Dawn will bring prosperity and quality of life on a scale never before imagined, for everyone, both human and transhuman.