

Of Minds and Machines: Transhumanism and the Gospel of the Incarnate God

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Since the beginning of post-Edenic civilization, human beings have used technology to overcome various physical and social limitations. Bifocals, automobiles, artificial knees, smartphones: the history of humanity is one littered with technologies created to address the diverse barriers that human beings face in their everyday lives. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have reaped a veritable cornucopia of new technologies, ranging from advances in computer science to improved bionic prosthetics for the disabled. Because of these remarkable technological advancements, a growing number of thinkers are beginning to wonder how new scientific and technological developments can help man not only overcome but transcend his physical limitations. “Transhumanists,” Ian Curran states, “believe that developments in science and technology will soon make possible the radical transcendence of human biological, cognitive, and emotional limitations and the evolution of a posthuman race, even the attainment of immortality.”¹

Whether or not future technologies will live up to the dreams of these transhumanists remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the growing advances made in recent technologies necessitate due ethical consideration when it comes to their acceptance and use. That more and more people are looking to burgeoning technologies for solutions to humanity’s ills—and are even questioning long-standing givens concerning the very nature of humanity—warrants a thoughtful examination of the underlying assumptions of transhumanism and the possible consequences of both biomedical enhancement and life-extension technologies as they emerge within the coming decades. This paper seeks to provide the Church with an ethical framework through which she can engage the message of transhumanism. It is hoped that, through this framework, the Church

¹ Ian Curran, “Becoming Godlike? The Incarnation and the Challenge of Transhumanism,” *The Christian Century*, Nov. 22, 2017, p. 23.

can incorporate the beneficial elements of future technologies while also remaining faithful to her gospel message.

Since the Enlightenment, many thinkers in the West have promulgated an optimistic view of human scientific progress, proclaiming that it was in science that humanity would one day find deliverance from all of his mortal ills. The French Enlightenment philosopher Nicholas de Condorcet, in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, expressed such confidence in humanity's capacity for "unlimited progress" that he wondered if "the duration of the average interval between birth and wearing out" would one day have "no time limit whatsoever."² Towards the end of the twentieth century, the advent of the computer sciences, along with significant advances in the fields of human biology and medicine, opened new horizons upon which such optimists could cast their visions for the future and evolution of humanity. Regenerative medicine, pharmaceutical drugs, genetic engineering, and cybernetics afforded new, potential possibilities not only for the alleviation of human suffering, but also the enhancement and transformation of the species.³ Recent innovations in bionic prosthetics, for example, have stimulated conversation about the prospect of one day replacing even perfectly functional body parts with enhanced bionic and cybernetic prostheses.⁴

Furthermore, as computers have continued to grow exponentially in terms of both speed and density of computation,⁵ it became conceivable, even imminent, that computers would soon exceed the human brain in terms of speed and capacity.⁶ For transhumanists, the *singularity*, the

² Nicolas de Condorcet, *The Future Progress of the Human Mind*, www.fordham.edu; cited in Gilbert Meilaender, *Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 35.

³ Curran, 23.

⁴ Mark Honigsbaum, "The future of robotics: in a transhuman world, the disabled will be the ones without prosthetic limbs...", *The Guardian*, June 15, 2013, www.theguardian.com/technology/2013, accessed December 3, 2017.

⁵ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 20-25, 102-105.

⁶ Kurzweil, 104-105. It should be noted that since 2000, computer technologies have experienced a plateau both in "maximum clock speed and thermal design power." For computer engineers, however, this is seen as yet another

term used to describe this proposed historic inevitability, will open the possibility for human beings to escape the mortal limitations of their bodies. As Ray Kurzweil, the tech innovator, philanthropist, and leading proponent of transhumanism, notes:

“[T]here won’t be mortality by the end of the twenty-first century...Up until now, our mortality was tied to the longevity of our *hardware*. When the hardware crashed, that was it. For many of our forebears, the hardware gradually deteriorated before it disintegrated...As we cross the divide to instantiate ourselves into our computational technology, our identity will be based on our evolving mind file. *We will be software, not hardware.*”⁷

According to Kurzweil and his fellow transhumanists, de Condorcet’s dream of human immortality will be fulfilled once human beings cease to be defined and confined to the limitations of their own bodies and opt for a post-biological, cybernetic existence.

The transhumanists, however, promise that post-biological existence will offer more than immortality. As human beings gradually rid themselves of biological limitations and integrate themselves with ever-evolving computational technologies, human beings will enjoy a whole host of abilities, pleasures, and experiences that far exceed those of bodily existence. Kurzweil, with obvious zeal, writes, “[T]he road we’re going down is a road paved with gold. It’s full of benefits that we’re never going to resist—continued growth in economic prosperity, better health, more intense communication, more effective education, more engaging entertainment, better sex.”⁸ Even spiritual experiences, Kurzweil boldly proclaims, will be capable of enhancement in the posthuman age. As scientists discover “the neurological correlates of the variety of spiritual experiences” that human beings have claimed, Kurzweil is certain that these

small barrier that human ingenuity can and will overcome. See Mark Patrick, “Is Moore’s Law still the law?”, *Electronics Weekly*, www.electronicsweekly.com, September 22, 2017, accessed December 4, 2017.

⁷ Kurzweil, 129. *Italics Original.*

⁸ *Ibid*, 130.

experiences, too, will be heightened as human beings achieve ever-increasing capacity and complexity through their assimilation of computational technology.⁹

Despite the far-reaching scope of transhumanism's vision for human evolution, however, one must not assume that transhumanists are unconcerned about the potentially negative consequences of emerging technologies. The most recent draft of "The Transhumanist Declaration," for instance, acknowledges "that humanity faces serious risks, especially from the misuse of new technologies" and calls for intensive research in order "to carefully deliberate how best to reduce risks and expedite beneficial applications."¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is worth noting some of the potential ethical objections to the transhumanist vision for the future. From a deontological standpoint, one objection that emerges is the potential loss of human volition. Drawing on Harari's *Homo Deus*, Curran warns that "[t]he integration of human beings with artificial intelligence may...make us increasingly reliant on computer algorithms for our decisions, including important life choices about our health, our careers...[etc.]."¹¹ Humankind, seeking to be free from all limitations, might in fact surrender itself to a life of cybernetically-imposed determinism.

The two strongest objections to be made against the transhumanist vision both concern the likely limited availability of post-biological technologies. Unless significant changes are made to the world's economy,¹² it is almost certain that a transition into a posthuman existence

⁹ Ibid, 152-53.

¹⁰ "The Transhumanist Declaration" (2009), *Humanity+*, www.humanityplus.org, accessed December 2, 2017.

¹¹ Curran, 24; cf. Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (HarperCollins, 2017).

¹² Allen Buchanan, in the last chapter of *Beyond Humanity?*, does propose an "institutional solution" to this unequal distribution of technology. In it, he constructs The Global Institute for Justice in Innovation (GIJI), an institute dedicated to promoting "the diffusion of existing justice-impacting innovations through a multistep process." Among these steps would be the encouragement of innovation through incentives, publicly denouncing "firms that restricted access to their products," and having a "standing compulsory licensing option for intellectual property rights whose owners were not sufficiently promoting diffusion to disadvantaged people." See Allen Buchanan, *Beyond Humanity? The Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 274-75.

will be quite expensive, and a large portion of the world's population simply will not have access to such technologies. As a result, a small portion of super-powered, super-intelligent “posthumans” could conceivably exist alongside a larger population of unenhanced persons. One possible outcome of this will be intolerance on the part of the enhanced towards those who are unenhanced. In *Beyond Humanity?*, Buchanan notes that, despite there being no logical reason for enhanced persons to see themselves as morally superior to the unenhanced, they nevertheless “might *think* themselves so superior that they would treat (mere) persons as if they had a lower moral status than they have.”¹³ Likewise, Kurzweil warns that “the more powerful technology—the technologically more sophisticated civilization—always wins.”¹⁴ Given humanity's history of violence against his fellow neighbor, one worries that the emergence of a superior “posthuman” race will have upon those who, either by necessity or by volition, remain unenhanced.

Even if posthumans did resist the impulse towards bigotry,¹⁵ it is also conceivable that they will shape the society at large in order to suit their increased ability and efficiency. While such a “super-society” might prove remarkably sophisticated, productive, and morally admirable, Buchanan notes that posthumans could possibly engineer it in such a way that “the unenhanced in effect become disabled: they are unable to participate, or unable to participate in a minimally competent way, in core economic and political processes.”¹⁶ Since modern society, in general, already has incredible difficulty incorporating those who are physically and cognitively disabled,

¹³ Buchanan, 225. *Italics Original.*

¹⁴ Kurzweil, 129.

¹⁵ Buchanan argues that such bigotry on the part of enhanced beings is by no means a certainty. “Much,” he says, “would depend upon whether the enhanced were merely stronger and smarter or also were morally enhanced, with greater capacity for empathy, a clearer understanding of the real basis of moral status, and more impressive powers than we possess for resisting the temptation to exploit others.” See Buchanan, 226-27.

¹⁶ Buchanan, 228.

one wonders what place there will be for unenhanced persons living in a society governed by and tailored to posthumans.

Beyond these ethical considerations, the transhumanist project assumes certain givens that the Church, in her response, must address. One fatal assumption amongst nearly all transhumanists, Meilaender observes, is “a thoroughgoing commitment to materialistic reductionism.”¹⁷ Even for thinkers such as Kurzweil, who are at least mindful of the spiritual dimensions of human existence, spirituality is tied directly to human consciousness,¹⁸ and for the transhumanist, Hayles notes, the sum of human consciousness is “finally reducible to brain activity.”¹⁹ Because of this, Hayles writes, the “informational patterns” of one’s brain take precedence over their “material instantiation” within the brain itself.²⁰ Thus, rather than seeing the body as integral to personhood, transhumanism joins the rest of modernity in its preference of “cognition over embodiment.”²¹

The Christian faith, on the other hand, does not hold such a negative conception of the body. Human beings were created by God as spiritual creatures, as beings endowed with both body and soul (Gen. 2:7, 21-22). Furthermore, the body is accorded all the more dignity because Christ, in the fullness of time, “became flesh and dwelt among us.” (Jn. 1:14). It was his human body that was glorified at the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-13). It was in a human body that the Son of God endured suffering, died, and was raised for the salvation of humanity (Mt. 16:21-28; Mk. 8:31-33; Lk. 9:22-27; Jn. 2:19-22; Acts 2:36; 1Tim. 1:15). It was Christ who, in his human body, ascended to the Father’s right hand in glory, where he now stands and intercedes on behalf of his

¹⁷ Meilaender, 28.

¹⁸ Kurzweil, 153.

¹⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2-3; cited in Meilaender, 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Meilaender, 26-27.

creation (Lk. 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11; Heb. 7:25). It is in the hope of a bodily—not an incorporeal—resurrection and glorification for which Christians throughout the centuries have longed (Rom. 6:5; 1Cor.15:12ff; 1Thess. 4:13-18; Rev. 21:1-22:5). The body, for all of its faults and limitations in this life, is integral to the Christian understanding of both personhood and salvation. For the transhumanist, however, the body is yet another obstacle, a limitation of the human will, that humanity must overcome.

Here, perhaps, lies transhumanism's greatest pitfall, namely its commitment to modernity's negative conception of human freedom. Freedom, for the modern man, is synonymous with autonomy, the capacity for the individual to govern himself or herself without hindrance or limitation. At the heart of transhumanism's quest for bodily transcendence lies an even greater desire: the freedom to be in complete control of one's own destiny. As C.S. Lewis writes in *That Hideous Strength*, "Dreams of the far future destiny of man were dragging up from its shallow and unquiet grave the old dream of Man as God."²² Despite all of the positive ends to which transhumanism strives—the improvement of quality of life, the mitigation of suffering, the greater communication of information between persons—the Christian Church's conception of being is not narrowly defined as sheer, autonomous will. Rather, as Cavanaugh rightly articulates, "all being participates in God, the source of being."²³ Freedom, for the Christian, is the pursuit of worthwhile ends, all of which find, as their ultimate source, the Triune God of love.

Despite this ultimate impasse between Christianity and transhumanism, the Church can embrace certain laudable emphases within this growing movement. Chief among these is a concern for those experiencing involuntary, bodily suffering. Although Christians trust that,

²² C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1979), 203.

²³ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 8.

because of Christ's suffering on humanity's behalf, suffering is not ultimately meaningless, Christians are still called to care for their neighbor and to walk alongside them in the midst of their struggles and sufferings. In the words of St. James, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (Jas. 1:27). Various technologies that transhumanism proposes, including bionics, cybernetic implants, and gene therapy, can and should be used to aid those who are suffering. Nevertheless, the ways that Christianity and transhumanism approach the issue of suffering do ultimately differ. Wells, in his discussion of human cloning, notes how modern medicine "attempts to perfect individual bodies and make them sufficient for themselves" and, in so doing, "bypasses the need for human care by substituting technological intervention."²⁴ In so doing, modern medicine has become increasingly negligent of "the pattern of care and relationships that make life sustainable in the face of suffering and death."²⁵ Because the Church trusts that God, in Christ, has provided and will provide the final answer to suffering, she is called to focus her attention on providing care and community for those suffering in the here and now. It is a call that, sadly, many parts of the Western Church have long neglected. The transhumanists' concern for suffering should be seen as a summons to for the Church to remember her call.

Likewise, alongside proponents of transhumanism, Christians look forward to the future of humanity. Their hope, however, does not rest in the possible evolution of humanity by means of technology. Rather, as C.S. Lewis notes in *Mere Christianity*, "the Next Step has already appeared. And it is really new. It is not a change from brainy men to brainer men: it is a change that goes off in a totally different direction—a change from being creatures of God to being sons

²⁴ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 199.

²⁵ Wells, 200.

of God.”²⁶ In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the next step in humanity has already come and will one day come again. Just as he himself died, was buried, and rose again in glory, Christians trust that they, too, will one day be raised in body and soul. In the sacrament of baptism, the Church’s members are united to their Savior in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-11). Likewise, by partaking of the “spiritual food” of Holy Communion, Christians receive assurance of “his favour and goodness towards [them]” and of their identity as “members incorporate in [his] mystical body,” the Church.²⁷ Transcendence, for the Christian, is more than a life of eternal consciousness. It is a visceral, bodily eternity, where men and women—now made sons and daughters of God—abide upon a glorified earth in glorified bodies (Rev. 21). It is in this heavenly city that Christians hope to live and rejoice in the presence of their God.

²⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 172.

²⁷ The Order for the Administration of The Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), 258.