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Christianity

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# TRANSHUMANIST'S SEARCH FOR IMMORTALITY VS. CHRISTIANITY

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## *Abstract*

Transhumanism, with its wish to transform the essence of human being, challenges anew the perennial discussion regarding the essence of human beings. If this transformation touches only the biological level of human existence, can we still talk about transformation? The idea of bringing humans to a higher level is also well-known in Christianity, not in terms of transformation, but in terms of salvation, which extends beyond the boundaries of biological existence. A Christian transformation does not approach human sin, pain, suffering, and death as external enemies, but as something that makes part of human existence without having the final word.

*Keywords:* transhumanism, transformation, salvation, Christianity, creativity.

## **Introduction**

The perennial questions “who are we as humans?” and “what do we really want?” have reached new dimensions with the appearance of transhumanism. In Francis Fukuyama’s writing, the biggest challenge that transhumanism places in front of us is our understanding of the essence of being human, which makes all humans equal despite differences in skin color, beauty, and intelligence. Next, we have the question of what constitutes a good human being despite their mortality and other natural limits? Transhumanism may look like a silly cult, but

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it is not, because it is essentially an idolatrous religion proffering a counterfeit salvation (Fukuyama 2004, 42-43).

Our human nature cannot be reduced to a biologically complex result of a very long evolution, or a synthesis of good and bad traits of our human nature. As rational and spiritual being, we are called to embrace, transform and transcend human finitude and limitness by being in touch with the transcendent. This is much more than modification of any one of the key human characteristics, which will inevitably entail modifying a complex, interlinked package of human traits with an unclear outcome. Environmental studies teach us that we should remain humble and respectful of nonhuman nature, with which we are intrinsically integrated. Transformation of only biological aspects of human nature remains a one-sided solution, if not integrated into a much deeper spiritual understanding of human nature, including the fallen human nature. Any transformation of human nature should be such that nothing and nobody is left behind.

### **What is transhumanism?**

The wish of transforming human nature is not new as such in our time; however, the same wish of transforming human nature has reached new dimensions with transhumanism. The word *transhumanism* was first used in the 1920s by Julian Huxley in his essay *Religion without Revelation*.

The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself – not just sporadically, an individual one way, an individual there in another way – but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature. (Huxley 1979, 195)

Humanism as an organized movement of technologists, philosophers, and scientists began to emerge in the 1970s with the transhumanist philosopher and futurist FM-2030, born as Fereidom M. Esfandiary. This pervasive movement and an important actant seek to hack the human biocomputer to extend life, increase welfare, and enhance the human condition in search of immortality.

This idea of bringing a golden age to humanity with the aid of technology can be traced back at least five hundred years to Francis Bacon (1561-1626), also called the father of contemporary science. In his main writing *Instauratio Magna*, his term *instauratio* can be translated as establishment and restoration of human faculties that have been lost in the Fall. To bridge the rift between God and humanity is within the power of humanity. With discoveries of boundaries of man's nature, and with religion, science and technology working together, humans should become able to transform their fallen nature, regain the central position in the entire cosmos and enjoy a more complete life in relation to God.

Not less thought-provoking, even though less known in the West, is the Russian philosopher Nicolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1828-1903), recognized as one of the central figures in Russian theological and philosophical history. When he was challenged with all possible evil that people have done to nature, and unsatisfied with philosophical solutions which were not helping him to become better, he wrote his *Philosophy of the Common Task*. When humans distinguished themselves from animals, humans became subjects afraid of their own death, now seen as the destruction of personal identity and self-creation in freedom. As the solution to this common human enemy, Fedorov sees unification of all humanity in regulation of the blind forces of nature through technology. Such unification, in Fedorov's reflection, has a spiritual component as well, at least in N. Berdyaev's writing on importance of Fedorov. Human resurrection is not only accomplished by Christ, but also by the scientific, technical, and physical activity of people. The joint effort of religion and science, of priest and learned technician, even the dead and buried will experience resurrection (Berdyaev 1950, 128).

Accelerated advancement in technology in the last decades has introduced a new meaning of transhumanism with more nuances and interpretations. These interpretations can be divided into two groups. The first group includes interpretations whose common denominator is the belief that humans must embrace science and technology, such as artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, to overcome certain biological limitations. Within this group, some scholars have claimed that transhumanism will bring us closer to salvation and immortality, i.e. the promises of Judeo-Christian religions. Consequently, cyberspace

will become the disembodied space of salvation with unheard possibilities of new fantasies and practices that will overstep the boundaries of the organic nature. Through the merger of biology and machine, we will reach a seamless continuity when machines will start thinking for humans. The postbiological world with its siliconbased life and ability of mind transplant will create intelligent machines that will provide humanity with personal immortality (see Hans Moravec). Transhumanists seek to advance over the legacy of humanist thought with a philosophy of life that rejects deities, faith, and worship. Their view of values and meaningfulness is based on the nature and potentials of humans within a rational and scientific framework, which will bring radical changes by planetary communications technologies and technologies of the body (Pilsch 2017, 1).

The second group of transhumanists disagrees with the first group in belief that perfection of the human being through artificial means is not possible. Technology, especially new ways of transportation, and easy access and exchange of information will create a new global mind and a deepening of human consciousness. This, however, will not lead automatically toward alteration of the human person, but to creation and greater expansion of human community and toward more being. Greater socialization, unification, and advancement of technology will increase freedom as well as responsibility of individuals. Once collectively unified, each individual will have better conditions to grow in his/her own personality. The main representative of this group might be Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955).

In the academic circles, the second group of transhumanists with its thought-provoking and more transient ideas does not trigger the same level of academic curiosity, skepticism and uncertainty as the first group does. Since development of technology is continuously opening new and unheard opportunities and challenges, it is almost impossible and even unnecessary to take a definite position either in favor or against transhumanism. Nonetheless, transhumanists' promise of human transformation needs to be critically examined in terms of idealism and realism, in order to avoid unrealistic illusions. What interests us are not so much new solutions and opportunities promised by the latest technology, but motivations, hope, and hidden energy behind transhumanists' promises and plans.

Pilsch delineates transhumanism as a utopian thought, as a retrogressive assertion of Cartesian humanism, as a techno-secular reimagining of Christian fundamentalist salvation history, and a celebration of the most brutal forms of capitalist excess in the present. This utopia merges together the post-Marxist theories and neoliberal capitalist expansions using the human body and the human soul as the material for imagining a radical future as radically alien as communism's idea of a classless society. This however flawed utopian rhetoric of transhumanism must be taken seriously into consideration (Pilsch 2017, 3-4).

### **Similarity and dissimilarity with Christianity**

Transhumanism can be in many regards connected to Christian theories of eschatology. The Christian awaiting of the second return of God is by transhumanists replaced with a host of posthuman-making technologies. This phenomenon as such is nothing new and can be dated back to the Middle Age or to every time when material and humble activities become invested with spiritual and transcendent meaning. Technological progress has been gradually replacing divine contemplation and associated with the return of a lost human perfection (Noble 1997, 6-12). Based on accelerated technology development, the advocates of transhumanism believed in replacement of religion with another meaningful system, this time, based on a posthuman-technologies, promising us a new perfection of fallen human nature. In addition, these technologies (*e.g.* neuroscience, neuropharmacology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence etc.) will create not only a new meaningful system but a much more intimate relationship with our bodies also. New technology shall become so internalized into human bodies that they will open a new human potential for us to the extent that the most inner part of human nature will be transformed.

Maxwell J. Mehlman talks about enhancements that "raises a person up by improving performance, appearance, or capability." Enhancements in this case are not meant as a therapy, aimed "at preventing, treating, or mitigating the effect of a disease or disorder", but to a modification of human beings freed from any disease (Mehlman 2009, 6-8). The therapy/

enhancement distinction remains blurred and will not go away. We cannot draw a simple line that separates the good and bad use of technology. Consequently, even the definition and evaluation of enhancements remains blurry and challenging. Ronald Cole-Turner claims that raising a person up in a specific area opens the question about what we value most and what it takes to improve what we value. If we believe that the highest value of each individual is expressed in their search for the meaning of life, then the enhancement has to be left to individuals. This opens another question: are individuals really free to choose their own view of life and their own way of achieving and enhancing the good? (Cole-Turner 2011, 2). The same definition of *good* calls for a new ethical discussion, which by definition cannot be left to random decisions of individuals.

The phenomenon of transhumanism calls religious scholars and leaders to take a more active part in this discussion, which is without any doubt very religious and spiritual at its surface. The Catholic Church's official position on the issues related to modern technology was stated in 2004 in "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church," published by *the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*. In general, the document supports scientific progress and technological advancement; at the same time, the ever-expanding power of technology must always be subordinated to moral principles that respect human dignity and the integrity of other living creatures. Molecular biology, biotechnology, and genetics must bear in mind the ecological impact and long-term effects of one's actions, which should be guided by the order, beauty, and usefulness of individual living beings and their function in the ecosystem (473). These general guidelines are based on belief that human beings have a privileged position in the entire universe. Nature should nevertheless be seen as a gift, compelling humans not to dominate but to develop the natural world responsibly and light of its inherent harmony.

Transhumanists' promises demand from us a more detailed theological debate, keeping in mind similarities and dissimilarities between Catholic theology and transhumanism. One of similarities is that the modern technologies of enhancement and the idea of human transformation yearn for transcendence in a similar way as theology

does. Similarly, both transhumanists and theologians are looking for answers on questions of death, human finitude and mortality; these dimensions of human existence are calling for a new salvific response and hope through human work and history. Following this aspiration, B. Waters claims that transhumanism is a late modern religious response to the finite and mortal constraints of human existence. Transhumanism is not a religion in the formal sense, but a new place of hope and confidence (Waters 2011, 164).

At the same time, there are substantial differences between Christianity and transhumanism. Christian theology grounds human transformation in a distinctive view of God, who became a human in order to transform the human condition. This transformation takes place through redemption and glorification. At this point, one might claim that bioethics distinction between therapy and enhancement is in many ways overlapping with theological principles of redemption and glorification. Both redemption and therapy are trying to restore what was the original or normal state of humans. Both glorification in the theological context and enhancement within transhumanism want to take us far beyond our present situation toward something completely new. Underneath this apparent similarity, however, lies the crucial dissimilarity as well. Human transformation as it is understood in Christianity would not be possible without God entering into the human condition. God becomes like us so that we might be made like God. So human transformation in terms of redemption and sanctification does not happen without grace and divine intervention, which does not find any place in a transhumanism.

This rather simplified division and differentiation between Christianity and transhumanism calls for further reflection. Ted Peters argues that the phenomenon of transhumanism is much more than a search of new technological gadgets; it is a search of new philosophy of life, a total worldview, a new metanarrative. One might say that with modernity we overcome the Western religious traditions; postmodernism with its nihilistic philosophy falls because it does not recognize the power of reason and progress. If this is the case, Peters continues, we need a new inspiring philosophy that will reverse scientific reason and pull us toward a positive future. Following this logic, transhumanists



offer a “totalized philosophical system” with a new metaphysics, psychology and ethics. The new metaphysical view reveals our world to be even more complex in its structures, form and operations. The new psychology stresses the importance of the innate human, which will evolve and expand our abilities in pursuit of well-being. By having a new ethical understanding, we might discover a new sense of purpose, direction, and the meaning of life (Peters 2011, 66).

There seems to be a lot of positive energy as well as a genuine desire to discover something new in the transhumanist search for a deeper meaning and goal in our life. The triads of metaethics, psychology and ethics might take us in different directions, T. Peters continues and mentions three possible options. (1) The benefits of the technological advancement will be reserved only for wealthy people who are the only ones able to afford/pay for the benefits of modern technology. (2) New technology will help us create a new world of benevolence and altruism, expressed in a common cooperation with one another for the betterment of all. (3) The same technology will put aside and denunciate religious traditions as being too conservative and resistant to the advancement of progress.

For the purpose of this writing, the most problematic are the first and the third options. The first one poses new concerns about social and economic justice. The advancement of modern technology remains only in reach of the wealthy who can buy something that the poor cannot afford. Consequently, the wealthy might convert their present wealth into future power, which will only increase the present social gap between the few and the many.

The most thought-provoking options seems to be the third option, i.e., denunciation of religion. It is true that transhumanism includes a very strong wish and dimension of human creativity and transformativity. Tomorrow’s human being shall be regeneticized, nanotechnized, cyborgized, and maybe even immortalized. Software experts might find a way to upload our self-consciousness into a computer where it could live forever, and could potentially be downloaded into another cyborg. There is no doubt that this and similar discoveries will mark a change, progress, and something completely new in our present way of thinking.

Claiming, however, that religion keeps us in the past and opposes future development is a misleading and one-sided statement. Christian theology affirms change and continuously looks forward to transformation and creativity. Its reluctance to embrace every novelty or change is based on the belief that prior to any change, humans should accept their own limits as humans, and look for a better understanding of the common good (Deane-Drummond 2009, 285). If we do not accept the limits of our human nature as such on biological and psychological level, and if there is no space for spiritual and transcendental dimension of human existence, every change of our human nature might result in a violent intervention and distortion of our humanity. Human nature is always linked with certain values and the common good, which is there to protect our humanness on the one side, and on other, challenges us to grow in our humanness. If the common good remains unknown, we might lose the right direction and clear vision of who we are as humans, which will trigger in us new anxiety and limits.

To be more specific, the first limit that a transhumanist's futurology needs to clarify and address is the real option of dehumanization of humans. Technological man or technologized humanity is and will most probably remain a myth, unless it seriously takes into consideration the question of values. Technology as such has been and should remain in service of something much bigger than technology itself. Technology in itself is neither good nor bad, but the human way of using and applying it might become either good or bad. If the new advancement of technology embraces values of a greedy- and lust-searching man, holding in his hand immense powers, we can only imagine an apocalyptic picture of horror.

Another reason for anxiety about dehumanization is loss of human dignity. If impersonal technological advance steps over human values, we might face a future that does not need us as humans. If we blindly embrace technological self-modification, our present understanding of human rights, civilization and dignity will be dehumanized. Maybe even more, the process of dehumanization might be such that we as humans do not exist anymore (Joy 2001). Behind these ideas lies a naïve sense of thinking that with advanced technology we will gain a complete control over nature. David Tracy warns us against such naïve trust in technology.

Now *techne* becomes the product of the will to dominate, power and control, ... a power on its own, leveling all culture; annihilating all at-home-ness in the cosmos, uprooting all other questions in favor of those questions under its control; producing a planetary thought world where instrumental reason, and it alone, will pass as thought... The object cannot think. The subject will not. (Tracy 1981, 352)

To sum up, the phenomenon of transhumanism calls for a deeper reflection and understanding about human existence from philosophical and theological point of view. It is true that transhumanism is an expression of human will to transform our present situation and create a better place for human existence; there is a lot of energy and good will in this transhumanist efforts. In agreement with transhumanism, our transformation is to a certain extent in our own hands; however, human transformation shall not be limited only to technology or external factors, it has to include moral and spiritual disciplines of religious life as well. There are at least two areas to which transhumanism does not pay sufficient attention: human disembodiment and sin.

Disembodiment: following the Enlightenment tradition, transhumanism focuses strongly on human consciousness and mind, and believes that human will with an appropriate use of modern technology will become able to control human body and the entire environment. At the same time, the same Enlightenment tradition does not pay sufficient attention on how the material body, the environment, the entire universe affects human mind. Human existence on the biological level needs to be embraced, integrated and incorporated into our reflection as an essential part of human existence. To be more specific, human aging, suffering and finally death, should not be considered as sickness or external enemies that need to be eliminated or transcended. Human aging, suffering and death are calling for a new integration and transcendence in a way that they become meaningful to us. As Christians, we believe that the human body is not something bad or the prison for human soul; the human body is the sacred space for our existence. Through incarnation, God embraced completely human body with all its biological limits. At the same time, Jesus' resurrection teaches us that the biological limits of human body, as well as the reality of sin, do not have the final word of human existence. It follows that human soul, or consciousness in the transhumanist reflection, should not be considered

as something separated from the human body as if there are two realities. Beyond any dualistic interpretation, there is only one reality that unites our biological existence on one side, and at the same time opens the boundaries of this biological existence to transcendental reality.

There is another thing that is almost completely missing in the transhumanist vision: a realistic understanding of what theologians call *sin*. We humans with our free will and capability to create new things are able not only to grow and create new things, but also to damage and destroy even its best achievements, and to corrupt what is pure. In other words, how can we be sure that all technological progress will help us to change what can be changed and respect what cannot be changed? The technological power is great and can move quickly, but this power is not automatically pure or in explicit pursuit of the good. In general, transhumanism seems to be overly optimistic and a little naïve about engineering of new solutions. Despite technological power, the inner disorder remains a challenge that humans are called to face, transform and transcend. In other words, we are still and again in front of the moral dilemma of the first men in Eden, i.e., whether accepting or not our own boundaries.

Charles Taylor in his reflection on authenticity summarizes this dilemma in terms of what will we choose to follow in order to make our life a better and higher mode of life, "where 'better' and 'higher' are not defined in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire." (Taylor 1991, 16)

For sure, transhumanism calls for a deeper theological reflection, intellectual engagement and honesty. From a Christian point of view, our lives have already been transformed in what we call "salvation" or by God's working for humans. This salvation does not take place automatically without our consent and collaboration; we are called to collaboration and engagement in this process of transformation. In addition, individuals are not consulted about the meaning of salvation. Salvation is not the same as the fulfillment of our desires, but is the replacement of our desire for the self with a desire for God. As Christians, we believe that salvation is possible by the action of God, which is not disembodiment or escape from the world, but the

transformation of the whole creation (Cole-Turner 2011, 197-198). This is much more than any human-centered or self-centered position.

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