

Christianity and Transhumanism in a Secular Age

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We live in a post-Christian world. What marks our own generation? It is the fact that modern man thinks there is no one home in the universe.

*-Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City*¹*

When Francis Schaeffer wrote those words in 1969 he had no idea the technological developments which would later add so much more depth to his anguish over the state of the modern Western world. We live now in a time when the science of human enhancement has attempted to overcome the weaknesses of the fallen human condition, but in so doing runs the danger of ascribing to human beings' skills, abilities, and conditions which go far beyond God's intention in creation. This is allowed and even celebrated in a secular age because of the point Schaeffer makes and to which we will return, the belief that there is no higher power in the universe and so mankind is free to do as they please. Today this is becoming evident in the field of transhumanism and this work seeks to propose limits in human enhancement which can remain within God's intentions for humanity.

In any effort at apologetics, it is wise to first define terms, to ensure all participants in the conversation are using the same words to mean the same things. Ronald Cole-Turner defines transhumanism as: "a movement that advocates the development and use of technologies to improve human

¹ Francis A. Schaeffer. *Death in the City* (Downer's Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1969), pp. 11 and 19.

capacities and enhance human lives.”² He goes further however to demonstrate that advocates of transhumanism actually desire to change what it means to be human on the most basic level in order to transcend the weakness and frailties of the human biological condition. Nick Bostrom who has conducted significant research into the fields of transhumanism and human enhancement lays out an additional definition, by which transhumanism also encapsulates that “study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations, and the study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies”.³ What may be seen from these definitions is that a movement exists in certain scientific communities which holds that overcoming human limitation is not only good and right, but is desirable even to the point of changing or evolving the entire species. This then becomes some of the concerns to which we will speak from a Christian perspective later in this work. Another term which must be defined from the outset as it will occur often in this work and in those cited is that of enhancement. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines human enhancement as those “biomedical interventions that are used to improve human form or functioning beyond what is necessary to restore or sustain health”.⁴ Thus one can see an inherent goal of human enhancement is that of producing super-humans, unbound by their natural frailty and weakness.

Certainly, we have technological development to blame in this field as it is only the recent advancements that have been made in biomechanics, gene editing, kinesiology, biology, chemistry,

² Ronald Cole-Turner, ed. *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 18.

³ Nick Bostrom. Quoted in Ronald Cole-Turner, ed. *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 19.

⁴ No author. “Human Enhancement” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enhancement/>.

and computers that even allow the human race to pursue such advancement. An example is the development of CRISPR technology which combines super computers with biological specimens to dissect the genome of an organic species to detect flaws at the DNA and RNA levels and repair those flaws by use of purposeful mutation. This highly advanced science combines multiple fields of study and show great promise in the realm of disease control. However it also introduces ethical concerns in that it can be used to target down syndrome in utero, for instance, or to detect the signs of multiple sclerosis and is even capable to potentially edit such features out prenatally. Further if potential disease and disability could be essentially edited out of a person's future, isn't that a good thing? Of these considerations, John Harris, a staunch proponent of human advancement and enhancement states: "The phrase 'designer children' is almost always used pejoratively. But if the design is an improvement on the random combination of genes or if it is more reliable, could it be ethical *not* to be a designer?"⁵ Thus advocates of transhumanism point to an ethical responsibility to make people better and to overcome the naturally occurring weaknesses, diseases, disabilities, and limitations inherent to the human condition. This seems to imply the question of does development in technology come with a responsibility to use it? To this we will return.

Another area of technological advancement in the modern age seems to be far less endowed with ethical concerns and that is in the field of prosthetics. While prosthesis has returned to many thousands of disabled persons their abilities to move, lift, grasp, and communicate, the advanced combining of human organic physiology with artificial devices creates some concerning elements. In his work *The Hopeful Cyborg*, Stephen Garner notes: "The technologies which transhumanists see converging – nanotechnology, biotechnology and information

⁵ John Harris. *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 153. Emphases original.

technology – reshape and blur not just the traditional sense of what is considered natural but also the concepts used by individuals and communities to understand themselves and the world around them”.⁶ While some would argue that human reliance on tools, technology, and particularly the cyber element of our world which has become inherent to daily life makes all of us cyborgs on some level, the primary concern is with the marriage of prosthetic devices with the human body in a manner which goes beyond the therapeutic.

With this conversation in mind we will consider three areas of human advancement which most specifically point out the ethical dilemmas associated with enhancement: extreme long life, extreme mental acuity, and extreme physical prowess. Everyone it would seem has a fear of dying and extending life expectancy has been a focus for the world for centuries. Anti-ageing is the catchphrase of all beauty products it seems, and defying death is of interest to many in both the Western and Eastern worlds. Three primary avenues present themselves as transhumanists seek to push back against the perceived inevitability of death: mechanical and technological fixes, enabling the human body to repair itself far more efficiently, and uploading the human persona into a computer.⁷ The first is advocated from a medical perspective where everything from pace-makers to life support are available and often recommended by physicians to sustain life artificially. The use of many of these devices come with ethical underpinnings, although most people would feel a 50-year old man receiving a pacemaker to be in a different category than a 90-year old woman being kept alive against her wishes. The second effort is evidenced by experiments such as those conducted on

⁶ Stephen Garner. “The Hopeful Cyborg” in Ronald Cole-Turner, ed. *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 100.

⁷ Drawn from Pete Moore, and Pete Moore, Jr.. *Enhancing Me: The Hope and the Hype of Human Enhancement* (Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008).

“technology, called ‘tissue nanotransfection,’ [which] could be used to repair and regenerate body tissues, including organs, in a way that is non-invasive and painless”.⁸ Finally the third means toward the end of unnatural long life involves the technology of cybernetics, where potential exists for uploading the human persona into computer hardware. Yet the artificiality of defeating death remains the topic which must be front and center.

Another aspect of transhumanism is that of attaining extreme mental abilities. Pete Moore and Pete Moore, Jr. observe that “enhancement enthusiasts frequently talk of memory in the same sorts of terms as do computer scientists. It is not entirely surprising as many of them come from computing and engineering backgrounds. As a consequence, the answer to fickle memories is to improve our capacity to store information, and our ability to recall it correctly.”⁹ Some researchers have found that blocking strong emotion helps aid memory retention and so prescribe beta-blockers. Other experiments in mice have induced amnesia which seemed to cause the mice to live in bliss but also caused them to forget about pain-causing inputs, which is also unhealthy. Other experiments focused on allowing people to forget or more accurately effectively divest the memory from painful memories of the past, thereby allowing enhanced psychotherapy and healing from trauma. All of these mental gymnastics however involve tampering with the way the brain, mind, and memory and emotions work together to make us uniquely human.

Finally extreme physical prowess has been prized since before written language, and the most well-preserved documents of

⁸ Alyssa Pagano. “Repairing Organs with the Tough of a Nanochip”. *IEEE Spectrum*, 2017. Accessed 08 October 2025 from <https://spectrum.ieee.org/repairing-organs-with-the-touch-of-a-nanochip>.

⁹ Pete Moore, and Pete Moore, Jr.. *Enhancing Me: The Hope and the Hype of Human Enhancement* (Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008), 103.

the ancient past are epics which depict super-humans engaged in super-human tasks. With this in mind, Ted Peters describes the mood of transhumanism as “aggressively Promethean”, invoking the story of the Titan who disobeyed the wishes of Zeus and delivered the gift of fire to early humans, thereby incurring the punishment of the gods.¹⁰ Referencing a super-human who delivered the power to humans to better themselves for all eternity speaks directly to the concern of enhancing physical prowess by artificial means beyond the therapeutic aspects of restoring ability to those who have lost it. While prosthetics allow amputees to compete in the Olympics (another reference to human prowess and the ancient gods), enhancement beyond restorative function presents ethical concern.

Having thus laid the foundation for considerations around transhumanism and human enhancement, let us turn to a discussion of the human body centered upon a biblical worldview. In Scripture the human person is consistently upheld as God’s greatest creation and into the first persons God implanted his own image. The *imago dei* is God’s revelation of himself to the world and so the image bearers are by nature revealing some of God himself in their own bodies. Millard Erickson sees the image of God as not just something humans have within them but it defines their very nature. To be human is to be an image bearer. He states: “[t]he image refers to the elements in the human makeup that enable the fulfillment of human destiny. The image is the powers of personality that make humans, like God, capable of interacting with other persons, of thinking and reflecting, and of willing freely.”¹¹ It is these elements that make the human person different from any animal and in some small way demonstrate the nature of God himself in the world. The Scriptures build on this concept of image bearers to show taking a human life is an affront to God

¹⁰ Ted Peters quoted in Calvin Mercer and Tracy Trother, eds. *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), Chapter 2.

¹¹ Millard Erickson. *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 532.

(Gen 4:10), that God himself oversees our development in utero (Ps 139:13-16), that our bodies are made to glorify God (1 Cor 6:20), and that we can worship God by the manner in which we use our bodies. Michael Bird concludes: “This status (of image bearers) is a gift to humanity from which springs a vocation to represent God in the world. The *image dei* is more of an identity, a God-given foundational reality out of which we understand ourselves as belonging to God and distinguished from the rest of the created order.”¹²

Unfortunately, God’s perfect design for the human body was marred by sin. Sin and the subsequent curse introduced death, pain, want, exposure, and disease to a world where our human bodies were designed for perfection. Christian advocates of enhancement might make the argument that to overcome human weakness is actually bringing glory to God in that we are returning to his intended design before the fall. Especially in the realm of medicine this could potentially be seen through overcoming disease and the products of evil. In many areas where scientists have developed vaccines, effectively ended diseases which have ravaged the human race, and introduced healing techniques which extend life which would have been taken by cancer, leukemia, or the wide variety of deadly diseases, this may seem to be a good thing. And it is. Medicine is a gift from God and researchers working in the areas of health sciences are bringing well-being to many.

However a shadow is cast over the good done in the world of medicine by some ethical considerations. First the advancement of technology can lead us beyond what is restorative and into the world of enhanced humans. What will happen when technologies exist to reverse down syndrome in utero, bring to the world babies who are immune to all major diseases, or perhaps are immune to cancer. Should we as a society pursue such technology? The concept of designer babies

¹² Michael Bird. *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 749.

is certainly tempting, as portrayed in such stories as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or the 1997 movie *Gattaca*. However, both of these portrayals also speak to the downsides. First is inequality where only the wealthy can afford these designer babies. Additionally, physicians are placed in a position of having make their own ethical decisions. As Pellegrino notes:

The possibility and probability of a serious conflict of interests on the part of the physician cannot be ignored. Money can easily induce the physician to provide enhancement of dubious merit or marginal efficacy. More specifically, for example, is the conflict that involves the team physician who is expected to do his part to produce a winning team. Enhancements of athletic performance are in worldwide use. Their deleterious side effects are well known. Who does the physician serve—the good of the patient, the success of the team that pays his salary, or his own infatuation with athletic success?¹³

Finally, we may consider the slippery slope into eugenics of which history serves to show the clear dangers to society.

The benefits of technological advances in the sciences of medicine, sports, and prosthetics demonstrate clear value. Simultaneously, dangers emerge as humankind seeks to enhance themselves beyond what was intended in creation. Therefore, limits must be imposed to set guardrails for human advancement in order to continue to glorify God with our bodies. Paul in the epistle to the Romans urges his readers then and now to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). It is not just possible to worship God with how we use our

¹³ Edmund Pellegrino. “Biotechnology, Human Enhancement, and the Ends of Medicine”. *Dignitas* Vol. 29, No. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2022), 15–17.

bodies, but it is also possible to offend him in the same arena. Nicholas Agar proposes adopting moderate enhancements and rejecting radical ones.¹⁴ By moderate he means that medical advancements such as cochlear implants for the deaf and brain implants that counter the effects of a stroke could be acceptable forms of enhancement, combining the human body with implanted or attached technology, but more radical forms of enhancement should be avoided. By radical he means those enhancements which represent advancement beyond human norms. Therefore a few rules are suggested in order to find and live this balance.

First enhancement must be restorative. That is, it must restore limited human function to full human function, restore ability to the disabled. This is countering the effects of sin in the form of mutation, amputation, accident, or other evil encountered in the world and which God did not intend for our bodies to deal with. Second enhancement must be therapeutic. In this way medical advancements that cure disease and allow human flourishing may be adopted. Third enhancement must not be excessive. It cannot exceed normal human function. Thus technologies which allow someone to run as fast as a cheetah, or carry enormous loads, or live a very long time, or see infrared are to be avoided. Where one draws the line of “normal human function” is of course up to debate, but avoiding extreme enhancement for its own sake places one far more closely aligned with God’s design for humanity and for our bodies.

A term that arose from medieval stage production is *deus ex machina*, or God from machines. It initially referred to rudimentary special effects that allowed people to “fly” through the air or disappear. In the context of the current conversation it may seem to be applicable as well. When humans enhance themselves sufficiently they are taking the role of God who created the body as it is designed to function. Exceeding that

¹⁴ Nicholas Agar. *Truly Human Enhancement: A Philosophical Defense of Limits* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2014), 139.

design is to see a god coming from the machines we have built with our hands. In this way the transhuman has transcended reality and limitation. Father Tad Pacholczyk observes that “there’s something about our nature...that aspires to transcendence”.¹⁵ Unfortunately what we cannot transcend is our own original sin, baked into each of us by nature. Pacholczyk goes on to say: “We need instead to have salvation from sin and wrongdoing. And so even if we modify our bodies in significant ways, if we do genetic engineering and we change how we look and make all kinds of modifications, there’s still going to be the inner reality of who we are and our struggles that we face”.¹⁶ Returning to imagery from Greek Mythology, Ted Peters points out “the proud aggressiveness of the transhumanist reminds us of Prometheus and the promethean spirit. Here is the promethean promise: We humans will arrest from the gods and from nature the principles and resources we need to take our destiny into our own hands.”¹⁷ The spirit of transhumanism is that of making gods, not of wood and stone as did the ancients, but of ourselves. This is the spirit of the age which must be shunned at all costs if we as a race and especially those of us as believers are to avoid the pitfalls shown in Romans chapter one, where the deluded and lustful have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator”.¹⁸ Rather let us give all the glory to Christ who upholds the universe by his word and has made purification for our sins, an act at which we could never succeed with any amount of enhancement.¹⁹

¹⁵ Tad Pacholczyk. “The Ethical Dilemma of Transhumanism” as interviewed by Cy Kellet. *Catholic Answers*, 2023.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ted Peters in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, edited by Ronald Cole-Turner, Georgetown University Press, 2011, 78

¹⁸ Rom 1:25 ESV.

¹⁹ Hebrews 1:3 ESV.

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