

Theosis contra Transhumanism

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Human transformation (metanoia) constitutes a core dimension of Christianity. This has led some scholars to claim that transhumanist projects have Christian roots. Athanasius and Irenaeus are therefore presented as *avant la lettre* transhumanists because of their avowal of *theosis* (i.e. divinisation). Such a view, I argue, is based on a misinterpretation of Christian self-transcendence. Transhumanism, both secular and Christian, may well open an era of inhumanity if it is not preceded by *theosis* because it can become the channel for the fulfilment of the wildest human dreams, which have usually turned into horrendous nightmares for many. This means that I am not demonising the aspiration to improve ourselves, but I am certainly disputing the claim that transhumanism is the path to God, just as I don't think that my having a better memory for names might bring me closer to God. While I will be using the term transhumanism, I do not endorse it myself since I think it rests on much confusion about who the human is, in the first place. At best, human enhancement is an alleviation of many human discomforts and suffering. At worst, it will create Nietzsche's Last Man, the one who lives the longest and who can no longer despise himself, fear himself, and therefore does not desire to transform his or her inner being. What I am therefore saying is that the transformation entailed by *theosis* is not one that can be achieved through scientific and technological prowess. And conversely, that transhumanism is not the human response to become the image of God.

While both transhumanism and Christian theosis rest on the idea that humans have the vocation (and possibility) to become like God, they rest on two different, clashing conceptions of God and hence of the human, and of the relationship between God and man. In the first case, God is implicitly conceived as the sovereign and self-sufficient God; in the second case, God is primarily love, a God with and for – a God who is associated with the Covenant, with gratuity and self-giving. The first can be referred to as the Promethean way, and the second as the way of the Cross. For the transhumanist, God may or may not be at the end of the transhumanist adventure; for the Christian humanist, God is, to borrow Pascal's words, a 'God of love and consolation; one who fills the soul and the heart of those he possesses; who

makes them feel their misery and his mercy'.¹ Christian humanism reckons with the strangeness of the human condition, with human depravity and greatness, and of course with the mystery of God, who is both close and distant. My focus on the implicit presuppositions of transhumanism implies that I will not go into detail about the different types of transhumanism. Neither do I have the ambition of providing clear demarcation lines between transhumanism and an integral, Christian humanism. Such distinction, I believe, is primarily one between different hidden motivations, or between aspirations driven by the weakness of the will and those driven by a will capable of affirming life (including decay, death, suffering, ugliness and other imperfections).

Though there are various versions of 'transhumanism', it generally refers to the ideal of 'enhancing' or 'redesigning' the human condition through the use of new technology.² A common feature that appears in all transhumanist declarations is the belief that individuals should have the right to decide whether and how they wish to improve their capacities. They should have the right and power to change the physiology and psychology that they did not choose to have. Though the endeavour to improve human capacities is not new, transhumanists clearly have reasons to call themselves 'trans'-humanists instead of humanists. The 'enhancement' that they support includes the transcendence of the 'limitations of the body and brain'; the 'increase of health-span'; the extension of 'our intellectual and physical capacities'; and, increased 'control over our own mental states and moods'.³ Some are even in favour of using technology to 'increase romantic attachment'.⁴ Transhumanism therefore builds on a particular form of humanism, endorsing the belief in science, progress, mastery of nature, and individual autonomy. Though its ambition to transcend 'biological limitations' and to enable individuals to have 'control over their lives' can also be found in some forms of humanism, it is able to aim at even greater (more drastic) 'human modification' and choice. Embryo selection is one of the many choices available. Embryo selection to the end of creating a 'posthumanity' is one of the practices defended by Nick Bostrom. The 'posthuman modes of life' that he advocates refer primarily to enhanced, ('posthuman') healthspan,

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 602.

² Ronald Cole-Turner, 'Introduction: The Transhumanist Challenge', in *Transhumanism and Transcendence* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 11. *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) is a useful collection of essays written by various transhumanists.

³ Cole-Turner, 'Introduction', 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

cognitive and emotional capacities.⁵ The transhumanist ambition is therefore not only to repair defects, but to create even more superior beings. This ‘superiority’ is measured in terms of particular capacities or characteristics (physical aesthetic norms, for instance).

It is quite noteworthy that proponents of a post- or trans – humanity seem to believe that the question of who the human is, what humanity is, or what humanism is has been settled. It is quite clear that the human and the posthuman is persistently being defined in terms of certain capacities. Such an approach, the capacities approach, as Nicholas Wolterstorff calls it, overlooks the undefinable in the human. Indeed, given our complex nature – both material and spiritual – we can never be fully ‘defined’ or measured. Today, perhaps more than ever, it may be necessary to recall Henri de Lubac’s words in this regard. Referring to a long Christian tradition, he reminds us that the human is the image of God, not primarily ‘because of his intellect, his free will, his immortality, not even because of the power he has received to rule over nature: beyond and above all this, he is so ultimately because there is something incomprehensible in his depths’.⁶ A materialist transhumanist, or should I say, the die-hard positivist, will of course deny such elusiveness. But if knowing oneself and each other does matter, the neglect of this essential aspect of ourselves cannot be harmless.

It could be argued that it is the already narrowed conception of the human that has led to transhumanism because the aspiration to become more than we are is indeed properly human. However, transhumanism has not been able to transcend certain stale dualisms such as the radical separation between subject and object, body and mind (spirit), God and the world, God and man, transcendence and immanence. It is still caught in an old epistemic framework. In fact, the ideals underlying transhumanist projects are not so different from the old ideals of the Enlightenment. They are autonomy and a disembodied rationality, as opposed to love and the dependence that flows from loving and being loved. Celia Deane-Drummond correctly points out the transhumanist ‘exclusive emphasis on the mental powers of willing, choosing, and understanding’; the ‘disembodied aspirations of transhumanism’, and relates these to a preference for ‘metaphors of God filtered through mental activity and imagery, rather than bodily nature’. Along this line, ‘human image bearing’, she says, ‘then becomes connected to the image of God by expressing a form of creative superintelligence. Humans share in this

5 Nick Bostrom, ‘Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up’, in *The Transhumanist Reader*, 28-53.

6 Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 210.

intelligence by becoming co-creators with God.⁷ It is this understanding of the *imago dei* (and of the corresponding conception of God) that Steve Fuller seems to presume when he claims that an ‘enhanced humanity’ ...somehow brings us closer to a divine standpoint – in the specific sense that our properties become like those of the Abrahamic deity’.⁸

But there is no Abrahamic deity. Instead, there are many conceptions of God and correspondingly different ways of becoming like this imagined God. The term God or deity that appears in the works of some transhumanists can easily be replaced by Superman. It is the sovereign, powerful and autonomous God imagined by some theologians, whom transhumanists are taking as role model. With transhumanism we have not left the realm of radical anthropocentrism. While Christian transformation precisely presumes a non-anthropocentric order in which immanence and divine transcendence are related and work together. The term ‘transformation’ does not convey much about the ‘end’ or measure and source of the transformation. We need an account of human flourishing, which, once again, depends on our understanding of the human, including his (her) ultimate destination. The humanism sustained by Christianity is one in which the ultimate destiny of the human is the kingdom of heaven, often depicted as the eschatological banquet to which we are all invited. How do we get there? Certainly through transformation. But which one? Given the fact that we are told that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit (Mat 5: 3), or that only the pure in heart can see God (Mat 5: 8), or that we should all become children (Mat 18: 3), we are clearly not being asked to first become trans- or post- humans, in the sense of expanding our emotional and cognitive capacities, just as we are not being asked to acquire as much wealth as possible. Health, intelligence and wealth are valuable goods for which we ought to be grateful, but we may lose them without losing our humanity. On the contrary, we may gain something. Needless to say, I am here not exalting suffering and pain!

The Christian transformation to which I am alluding and trying to recover is not the one that is involved in cases of prostheses, (brain) implants, or in human enhancement projects. Instead, it is one that implicates our innermost depths without the invasive use of technology, and hence without the subjugation to the new authorities under whose control such new tools fall. It encompasses our heart, mind, or soul, our ways of thinking, of feeling, and of experiencing ourselves, each other, and the world. Such continuous formation is a precondition for our living up to our promises on all possible levels – (inter) personal, social,

7 Celia Deane-Drummond, ‘Taking Leave of the Animal? The Theological and Ethical Implications of Transhuman Projects’, in *Transhumanism and Transcendence*, 122-123.

8 Steve Fuller, *Humanity 2.0: What it Means to be a Human Past, Present and Future* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 209.

and political. Of course, promise entails the possibility of failure and the hope of forgiveness. The Christian version of transformation (i.e. Christian *metanoia*, or conversion) is one that involves the creation of fuller human selves through the love of God. That continued creation has as end (or, measure) and source God himself. Charles Taylor aptly refers to it as ‘God’s pedagogy’. As he remarks, the transformation in question is ‘not just a matter of plasticity: that you train them differently and they [people] turn out to like helping old ladies cross the street...The transformation is much more mysterious, and involves offering another spiritual direction’.⁹ This scope of Christian *metanoia* has been lost because of the one-dimensional emphasis on ‘belief’ and right religious practices, but also because of an increasing social atomisation. Self-transcendence or *metanoia* has to be supported by others, those who want us to be fuller beings or selves. Conversely, this means that some contexts might prevent this form of transformation.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 673.