

Should We Consider Transhumanism as Pelagianist?

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Abstract: If the Christian theologian is to respond to the ethical risks of transhumanism, he or she may benefit from referring to the past for guidance. Is it a contemporary form of Pelagianism, the heresy commonly believed to have elevated free will to an unorthodox status? Particularly, how should one think of transhumanist efforts to bioenhance morality? In the present paper, I explore transhumanism, examine moral bioenhancement, discuss Pelagianism, compare and contrast transhumanism with Pelagianism, and discern some pastoral challenges of the Christian theologian vis-à-vis the preceding sections.

Keywords: Bioenhancement • Biotechnology • Morality • Pelagianism • Transhumanism

Introduction

What does it mean to be human? The question has elicited a variety of answers from philosophers and theologians for centuries. Yet, given current biotechnologies, there are those already anticipating what it means to be beyond human. Transhumanism is a broad movement encompassing the enhancement of human nature, eventually reaching a posthuman stage of existence. While largely theoretical, transhumanism challenges traditional notions of what it means to be human, among which is the Christian doctrine of the human person as a created being by God. For example, the intellectual thrust of transhumanism to bioenhance morality is seemingly at odds with the belief that the human person is dependent on God for moral perfection. At face value, moral bioenhancement appears to be a contemporary version of Pelagianism, the heresy commonly believed to have elevated free will to an unorthodox status.

thodox status. In line with this, the transhumanist project risks distorting our understanding of morality by suggesting that it is entirely subject to our will. Nevertheless, giving the initial benefit of the doubt to transhumanism in general, I find dialogue between transhumanism and Christianity helpful for their mutual understanding. In what follows, I explore transhumanism, examine moral bioenhancement, discuss Pelagianism, compare and contrast transhumanism with Pelagianism, and discern some pastoral challenges of the Christian theologian vis-à-vis the preceding sections.

Transhumanism

Transhumanism, as we know it today, dates to the namesake 1957 essay of Julian Huxley, where he proposed that human beings can use technology to surpass biological limitations.¹ According to the creativity framework of transhumanism, Johann S. Ach and Birgit Beck state that human nature “– somewhat paradoxically – consists in having no (pre-given) nature or essence. On the contrary, human nature is precisely characterized by its openness and malleability.”² Prominent transhumanist Nick Bostrom further states that transhumanists tend to “view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways.”³ Corollary to this perspective is the belief that there is no moral obstacle to

¹ Julian Huxley, “Transhumanism,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 8, no.1 (1968): 73-76.

² Johann S. Ach and Birgit Beck, “Transhumanism and Moral Enhancement,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Ethics of Human Enhancement*, eds. Fabrice Jotterand and Marcello Ienca (New York: Routledge, 2023), 270.

³ Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” 2003, accessed 11 March 2024, <https://nickbostrom.com/ethics/values>.

applying biotechnological interventions to modify human nature. Indeed, there is an imperative to actualize the fullest potential of human nature through enhancement. Why this is so can be gleaned from the fact that the progressive advancement of the medical field and biotechnologies has greatly improved human life. There are many examples of how we live in an age of life-improving research. Elon Musk, through his company Neuralink, announced the implantation of a brain-reading device into a human being with the long-term goal of allowing a severely paralyzed patient to control devices with thought alone.⁴ Genetic engineering is another interesting development. Not only might we genetically cure a disease in an individual, but also prevent a disease from transmitting to subsequent generations by altering the genetic makeup of gametes or an embryo. However, there could be unintended consequences down the generational line. A risk of transhumanism is that “we will never be able to anticipate the ultimate outcome.”⁵ One common thing to the previous examples is that they are therapeutic, but not all life-improving research could be limited to strictly therapeutic applications. In any case, current research provides a basis for transhumanist aspirations.

Underlying transhumanism is the natural scientific curiosity of human beings to explore the unknown. Unfortunately, science without ethics has proven to be a hazard to human society. Until the worldwide scientific community commits to a common ethical framework for

⁴ Reuters, “Neuralink’s first human patient able to control mouse through thinking, Musk says,” *Reuters*, accessed 22 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/neuralinks-first-human-patient-able-control-mouse-through-thinking-musk-says-2024-02-20/>.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, “Transhumanism,” *Foreign Policy* 144 (2004), 42-43.

transhumanism, there could be an accountability gap, resulting in subpar research. But even if there were a common ethical framework, it might not necessarily align with the Christian vision of the human person. There are already ethical frameworks that diverge from Christian anthropology. Adding to the mix is that transhumanism is a transitory stage into posthumanism, an even vaguer concept. Like transhumanism, posthumanism is a broad movement that advocates for deconstructing the human person as an independent part of the environment; this contrasts with Cartesian dualism, which distinguishes the human from the animal.⁶ How posthumanism is possible is still speculative. Other concerns regarding transhumanism are the consumerist tendencies toward scientific research as strictly therapeutic applications may gradually become available to the public for elective purposes. Without adequate regulatory policies, much abuse is possible. Overall, transhumanism raises questions about what it means to be human and beyond.

Moral Bioenhancement

One notable question raised by transhumanism is: should we bioenhance morality? Inmaculada de Melo-Martin and Arleen Salles point out the lack of a single definition of moral bioenhancement among proponents.⁷ For our purposes here, moral bioenhancement generally refers to any biomedical intervention for improving morality. Karolina Kudlek adds that the debate on moral

⁶ Jay David Bolter, "Posthumanism," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, eds. Klaus Bruhn Jensen, Robert T. Craig, Jefferson D. Pooley and Eric W. Rothenbuhler (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016), 1-8.

⁷ Inmaculada de Melo-Martin and Arleen Salles, "Moral Bioenhancement: Much Ado About Nothing?" *Bioethics* 29, no. 4 (2015): 225.

bioenhancement “is insufficiently theoretically informed. It seems caught up in details of fictional scenarios and implementations and their outcomes, whereas there is still fundamental disagreement at the conceptual and normative level.”⁸ Let us course through representative perspectives on moral bioenhancement.

Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu argue that cognitive enhancement alone, whether through genetic intervention, pharmaceutical drugs, or stimulants, could lead to global catastrophic results (or ultimate harm) if left to individuals with questionable morals, like terrorists.⁹ Persson and Savulescu believe that if cognitive enhancement research were to continue, there must be commensurate efforts toward moral enhancement to avoid the misuse of knowledge. Yet traditional moral enhancement is a process that involves many factors, like education and socialization. Hence, Persson and Savulescu highlight the possibility of expediting safe and compulsory moral enhancement through biomedical means for altruistic (do unto others principle) and just ends to reduce the risk of global catastrophes. They do not, however, think that effective means for moral bioenhancement will be forthcoming soon but they note the scientific data leading to such and that any should complement traditional means, such as moral education.¹⁰ John Harris responds with two concerns: the apparent incompatibility between moral bioenhancement with human freedom and the seeming

⁸ Karolina Kudlek, “Towards a systematic evaluation of moral bioenhancement,” *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 43, nos. 2-3 (2022): 104.

⁹ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2008): 162-175.

¹⁰ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “The Duty to be Morally Enhanced,” *Topoi* 38, no. 1 (2019): 9-14.

redundancy of moral enhancement given cognitive enhancement, since he believes only rational capacities are morally relevant.¹¹ Persson and Savulescu address the first concern by stating that morally enhanced people would likely act in the same way as morally upright people now, but somehow more efficiently.¹² They then address the second concern with the point that knowledge of goodness is insufficient unless accompanied by a strong motivation that overpowers selfishness and other problematic attitudes.¹³ All in all, Persson and Savulescu cautiously propose moral bioenhancement to promote altruism and a sense of justice to mitigate or eliminate the growing risks of harm associated with modern scientific-technological progress, such as nuclear annihilation and overconsumption.¹⁴

Toward the other side of the issue, de Melo-Martin and Salles outline three central but flawed assumptions underlying discussions on moral bioenhancement.¹⁵ The first assumption is a tenuous view regarding the ease of changing morality. According to them, morality is not the same as motivation. The former is more difficult to change than the latter, which is situational. Even if one were to have a different motivation in a given situation, does that imply better morals overall? John R. Shook thinks that “only by presuming that increasing moral

¹¹ John Harris, “Moral Enhancement and Freedom,” *Bioethics* 25, no. 2 (2011): 105.

¹² Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “Getting Moral Enhancement Right: The Desirability of Moral Bioenhancement,” *Bioethics* 27, no. 3 (2013): 128.

¹³ Persson and Savulescu, “Getting Moral Enhancement Right,” 130.

¹⁴ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “The Art of Misunderstanding Moral Bioenhancement,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2014): 48-57.

¹⁵ Inmaculada de Melo-Martin and Arleen Salles, “Moral Bioenhancement: Much Ado About Nothing?”, 224-230.

motivations guarantee some enhancement of moral conduct ... can enhancement of motives be taken as a reliable way to enhance morality.”¹⁶ Unless there is a greater appreciation of the multifactorial nature of morality, any single targeted approach would inevitably be deficient. Kudlek maintains that “[a] narrow focus on boosting specific moral capacities will not do the job entirely (e.g., increased empathy can lead us astray when it comes to making certain moral judgements)[.]”¹⁷ Yechiel Michael Barilan adds that “[s]uch enhancement of capacities may actually erode moral judgements and behavior, especially in unusually and complex circumstances.”¹⁸ The second assumption is a hyper-focus on individual moral deficits as the primary cause of moral evils. For de Mello-Martin and Salles, a broader view of reality reveals structural forces at work in propagating evil in the world. The third assumption is an ambiguous interpretation of scientific data. Biases and prejudices associated with moral deficiency may be rooted in anxiety, discomfort, or other things rather than outright hostility, with each one having corresponding factors behind it. With that in mind, where would we start moral bioenhancement? For her part, de Melo-Martin emphasizes the often-myopic approach of proposals for moral bioenhancement that does not consider the complexity of a person and his or her context.¹⁹ Tracy J. Trothen concludes: “Questions including how virtues are

¹⁶ John R. Shook, “Neuroethics and the Possible Types of Moral Enhancement,” *AJOB Neuroscience* 3, no. 4 (2012): 5.

¹⁷ Kudlek, “Towards a systematic evaluation of moral bioenhancement,” 102.

¹⁸ Yechiel Michael Barilan, “Moral Enhancement, Gnosticism, and Some Philosophical Paradoxes,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 24, no.1 (2015): 80.

¹⁹ Inmaculada de Melo-Martin, “The Trouble With Moral Bioenhancement,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 83 (2018): 26.

affected by context and by theoretical lens, must be probed and factored into the development and use of moral bioenhancements.”²⁰ As I understand their line of reasoning, if, for example, moral bioenhancement research and tests occurred in the Global North, it is suspect whether their results could easily apply in the Global South where cultures differently condition moral values. Such a conundrum does not appeal from decolonial and postcolonial perspectives.

The main contentions against moral bioenhancement tend to be practical. On that note, assuming researchers satisfyingly address the practical impediments, does that justify moral bioenhancement on a theological level? The perspectives thus far constitute a variety of disciplines ranging from scientific to philosophical. To better adjudicate transhumanism and moral bioenhancement, Christian theology is another helpful dialogue partner, especially with a large portion of the global population being Christian. Transhumanist efforts would impact many of them. Christian theology has dealt with a similar problem in the fifth century regarding the extent to which humankind can be moral. Let us now briefly review the controversy.

Pelagianism

The twenty-first century is far different from the fifth century, yet the inherent mysteries in theology ensure that some issues resonate down the centuries. One of which is the exact relationship between free will and divine grace. Is it possible for a human person to be without sin while on Earth? Christianity teaches that humankind, apart from Jesus Christ and (for Catholics,

²⁰ Tracy J. Trothen, “Moral Bioenhancement through An Intersectional Theo-Ethical Lens: Refocusing on Divine Image-Bearing and Interdependence,” *Religions* 8, no. 5 (2017): 4.

at least) Mary, inherited original sin from Adam and Eve; this is notwithstanding the debates regarding the hermeneutics of Genesis. Because of this, the answer to the given question would be negative. However, Pelagius and his associate Caelestius denied original sin and suggested that human free will allows the possibility of sinlessness. In terms of personal sin, he considered it not as a substance one transmits but as a quality discernible in individual actions.²¹ Augustine responded that sinlessness may be theoretically possible (bar original sin), but only with the active aid of divine grace. He wrote:

Whether it be possible for a man in this life to be without sin? I should allow the possibility, through the grace of God and the man's own free will; not doubting that the free will itself is ascribable to God's grace, in other words, to the gifts of God, not only as to its existence, but also as to its being good, that is, to its conversion to doing the commandments of God.²²

Specifically, he believed that sin could be avoided only through the merit of Jesus Christ, especially in the sacrament of baptism *ex opere operato*.²³ Thus, Augustine did agree with Pelagius that sinlessness could theoretically happen. What they diverged on was the means to realize it. Pelagius, after all, did not deny the reality of divine grace. Their disagreement ran in their understanding of divine grace. Pelagius believed in general grace initially endowed by God to humankind

²¹ John Ferguson, *Pelagius* (Cambridge: W Hefner & Sons LTD, 1956), 160.

²² Augustine, "On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants," EWTN, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-the-merits-and-forgiveness-of-sins-and-on-the-baptism-of-infants-9101>.

²³ Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 160.

that cooperates with and is accepted by free will. Augustine believed in special grace through Jesus Christ mediated by baptism independent of our free will. After 415 CE, Augustine took a stronger stance against Pelagius and his followers, describing them as *inimici gratiae* or enemies of grace. Later on, the Councils of Carthage and Ephesus formally condemned Pelagianism. According to Michael R. Rackett, due to the triumph of Augustinianism and its widespread influence, Pelagianism now connotes a negative stance on divine grace rather than the primary focus of Pelagius on the theoretical possibility of sinlessness.²⁴ Over time, Pelagianism fell out of vogue, even though Pelagius had positive moral contributions to Christian theology. Recent scholarship does try to rehabilitate Pelagius from his historical image. Thomas P. Scheck observes that “[a]n important result of the modern reappraisal of Pelagius’s theology has been a more sympathetic assessment of his theology and doctrine of grace and the recognition of its deep rootedness in the antecedent Greek theologians.”²⁵ He elaborates:

Pelagius’s doctrine of grace, free will, and predestination, as represented in his Commentary on Romans, has very strong links with Eastern (Greek) theology and, for the most part, these doctrines are no more reproachable than those of orthodox Greek theologians such as Origen and John Chrysostom, and of St. Jerome.²⁶

²⁴ Michael R. Rackett, “What’s Wrong with Pelagianism? Augustine and Jerome on the Dangers of Pelagians and his Followers,” *Augustinian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 235.

²⁵ Thomas P. Scheck, “Pelagius’s Interpretation of Romans,” in *A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steven Cartwright (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 80.

²⁶ Scheck, “Pelagius’s Interpretation of Romans,” 80.

Despite the apparent misconstruing of the full breadth of Pelagianism, does a sense of Pelagian optimism exist in transhumanism, notably in moral bioenhancement? The following section outlines the comparative bases for thinking there is as well as the contrasting nuances to keep in mind to maintain their distinctions.

Compare and Contrast

Referring to the experiences of the early Church to make sense of transhumanism is not unprecedented. Lee A. Johnson analyzes how the second-century Christological controversies shed light on transhumanism.²⁷ The background to his analysis is the transhumanist vision of a disembodied self where the body is either replaceable or absent. One transhumanist goal is to upload the mind of a human person into a digital computer to defy aging for cybernetic immortality. More than the plausibility of this goal, what does it say about how we understand ourselves? Johnson hears echoes of the corporeal controversies between the Gnostics and the early Church during the second century. The Gnostics treated the body as inferior to the spirit, and the early Church treated the body as imbued with sanctity due to the incarnation. The transhumanist exclusion of the body for the mind as the basis for personal identity resonates with the gnostic position of the spirit over the body. Jeffrey C. Pugh adds that “[w]hile not Gnostic in seeing the divine spirit within as the essence of human identity, transhumanism shares

²⁷ Lee Johnson, “Return of the Corporeal Battle: How Second-Century Christology Struggles Inform the Transhumanist Debate,” in *Religion and Transhumanism The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, eds. Calvin Mercer and Tracy Trothen (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 273-290.

this eschatological vision—the end of all things leads to escaping the body.”²⁸ Barilan extends the Gnostic lens to moral enhancement. He finds similarities between Gnosticism and the position of Persson and Savulescu in that “there is a strong metaphysical dualism separating *cognitive* from *moral* faculties [italics original].”²⁹ He continues with: “In place of divine grace and salvific sacraments, they identify cutting-edge biotechnology, its ‘epistemological community’ and coterie of experts as humanity’s priesthood.”³⁰

Comparatively fewer authors touch upon Pelagianism in relation to transhumanism. Joel Thompson examines the presumptive attitude underlying it and transhumanism as they try to achieve perfection.³¹ He argues “The Pelagianism of transhumanists is seen in their assertion that human beings can create perfect bodies (including ones devoid of moral weakness) all on their own. It is therefore difficult to see what room if any is left for the continual assistance of divine grace.”³² Brent Waters adds that “Christian theology cannot embrace the transhumanist salvific strategy and eschatological horizon for reasons...similar to its earlier rejection of the Manichean and Pelagian heresies [in light of supposed human self-perfecting capabilities].”³³ Building on their preliminary insights,

²⁸ Jeffrey Pugh, “The Disappearing Human: Gnostic Dreams in a Transhumanist World,” *Religions* 8, no. 5 (2017): 1-10.

²⁹ Barilan, “Moral Enhancement, Gnosticism, and Some Philosophical Paradoxes,” 77.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Joel Thompson, “Transhumanism: How Far Is Too Far?” *The New Bioethics: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Biotechnology and the Body* 23, no. 2 (2017): 165-182.

³² Thompson, “Transhumanism: How Far Is Too Far?” 177.

³³ Brent Waters “Whose Salvation? Which Eschatology? Transhumanism and Christianity as Contending Salvific Religions,” in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of*

the crux of the comparative lens through which to view transhumanism and Pelagianism is what we aspire for here on Earth. For transhumanism, it is an ambiguous state of perfection, while for Pelagianism, it is a type of moral perfection. Hence, both aspire to some theoretical perfection. Yet, is any perfection, assuming it is possible here on Earth, even a legitimate aim? Jesus does mandate perfection in Matthew 5:48: So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect (NABRE). What do we do? Transhumanists may argue that, according to the theory of evolution, humankind is still evolving, albeit at a slow pace. Over the millennia, we have overcome various limitations, such as traveling on all fours. Today, there is no definitive direction in which evolution will take us. Hence, would it not be preferable to direct evolution and even speed it up? The transhumanist organization Humanity+ (formerly the World Transhumanist Association) proposes on its website:

The human is a biological animal, which evolved approximately 200,000 years ago as the subspecies *Homo sapiens sapiens* (modern humans). The Western world's consensus on what is "normal" for a human biology, life span, intelligence and psychology established certain precedents. Outside these precedents would mean that a human is subnormal or beyond normal. A person who is afflicted with a physical affliction, a mental condition, or degenerative disease would be considered to be outside the normal range. Likewise, a person who has increased physiological performance or cognitive abilities, or lives beyond the human maximum lifespan of 122-123 years, would be considered outside the normal range. This

Technological Enhancement, ed. Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 170-171.

determination of “normal” has not kept up with the advances in technology or science.³⁴

Humanity+ acknowledges there are distinctions across the variety of human limitations we experience. Some are normal, like a healthy heart rate, while others are not, like a congenital heart defect. As per the excerpt, Humanity+ believes what is normal should update as technology and science progresses. Understandably, our idea of “normal” can tread on ableism without proper awareness. Still, the ability of the body and mind to act as an integrated whole should be the normative basis for deciding whether treatment is necessary. Transhumanism should carefully consider whether certain acts promote that integration or not. In the case of the latter, for example, one transhumanist aim is to overcome death or prolong life through either bodily changes or digital mind transfer. The psyche, however, may not handle the emotional turmoil of a stretched-out nostalgia for bygone years. What, then, would enhancement entail if the transhuman must struggle to find internal peace? Perhaps in the future, nostalgic memories, or anxiety for eternity for that matter, could be removed as one would a computer file. Yet, this would suppress one aspect of the human experience to enhance another. It would, thus, be a form of disintegration rather than integration.

While transhumanism does not explicitly deal with sin, there is parallelism in that sin is a human limitation, and some human limitations are attributed to sin, such as death in Romans 5:12: “Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned” (NABRE). Hence, the quest for moral bioenhancement would find a similar spirit to the theoretical possibility of sinlessness

³⁴ Humanity+, “Our Mission,” accessed 11 March 2024, <https://www.humanityplus.org/about>.

in Pelagianism. Pelagianists are right in presenting sin as something to resist because it is not an original part of the divine plan for humankind. For Pelagianists, though, sin is only a matter of the free will of each individual. Divine grace is more of a supporting thing than a prerequisite for holiness. Death, furthermore, is not a consequence of the fall of humanity. If death were not the result of original sin, the crucifixion and resurrection would lose much of their theological significance. As it is, Pelagianism does not have a sufficient explanation for the evils found in the world, including death and suffering. Hence, the Church considers Pelagianism doctrinally unacceptable because it is incompatible with scripture and tradition, as traditionally interpreted by the magisterium with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, impossible to achieve sinlessness without divine grace, whether one acknowledges it or not. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. This latter is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith, and in sanctification through charity. God brings to completion in us what he has begun, “since he who completes his work by cooperating with our will began by working so that we might will it.”

Indeed we also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us. It has gone before us so that we may be healed, and follows us so that once healed, we may be given life; it goes before us so that we may be called, and follows us so that we may be glorified; it goes before us so that we may live devoutly, and follows us so that we may always live

with God: for without him we can do nothing.³⁵

In short, transhumanism and Pelagianism offer tenuous promises of perfection. Ironically, the demands of effective personal integration and theological consistency condition their aims to overcome limitations. Be that as it may, their similarities are not to be overstated. As for their differences, whereas Pelagianism denies the fallen nature of humanity as a result of original sin, transhumanism appears to view human nature as, by default, “fallen” until enhanced. In a sense, human nature has basic goodness in Pelagianism but not in transhumanism. The source of this goodness is God, who is absent in most transhumanist discourse. Proceeding from this basic goodness is an inviolable dignity within each human person, regardless of physical or mental disorder. Pelagianism accepts that everyone has equal dignity. Without an objective foundation, like God, transhumanism risks being an unequal enterprise because enhancement may succumb to a consumerist mentality where having more is good. The problem is that not everyone can experience or may want enhancement. Their differences extend to their eschatology. Pelagianism believes that the *telos* of humankind is God, or, more precisely, unity with God in heaven. Transhumanism, meanwhile, is still in the process of determining what posthumanism would be like and if it is one thing. Some transhumanists believe that cybernetic immortality is the *telos* of human existence.³⁶ They are similar in their quest for immortality, but there

³⁵ Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Vatican Archives*, sec. 2001, accessed 15 March 2024, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6Z.HTM.

³⁶ Mikael Leidenhag “Saved through Technology: Exploring the soteriology and eschatology of transhumanism,” *Religion Compass* 14, no. 11 (2020): 7.

is a crucial difference here. Pelagianism defines immortality as a relationship with another, specifically God. Transhumanism, on the other hand, defines immortality primarily in deconstructive terms. It seems easier to state what we must overcome than become. By losing all sense of humanness, the posthuman would have lost what makes a relationship possible, which is individual personal identity. In short, transhumanism and Pelagianism do not have common ground regarding the basic goodness of human nature and the relational dimension of immortality.

Pastoral Challenges of the Christian Theologian

Considering everything, I argue that because God respects our free will, we should aim here on Earth to be perfect by being open to God perfecting us through divine grace. Not in a purely passive way, to be sure lest we succumb to quasi-Jansenism,³⁷ but our free will must aid us in becoming free recipients of the saving action of God. In our hyper-technocratic context, a sense of humility is necessary against the Pelagian optimism of transhumanism. As humankind progresses biotechnologically, there must be corresponding means for moral reflection that promote responsible biotechnology use. The Christian theologian must be aware of biotechnological developments because they are significant parts of “the signs of the times” today. Afterward, the Christian theologian should critically engage with transhumanism regarding these biotechnological developments to help direct them to ends compatible with Christian theological

³⁷ Jansenism was a heresy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries propagated by Cornelius Otto Jansen, who claimed to have rediscovered the teachings of Augustine. He stressed the fallen nature of humankind, denied the efficacy of human free will, and believed that God would save only certain people.

anthropology, according to which life is a gift from God. Thus:

To acknowledge the giftedness of life is to recognize our talents and powers are not wholly our own doing, despite the effort we expend to develop and to exercise them. It is also to recognize that not everything in the world is open to whatever use we may desire or devise. Appreciating the gifted quality of life constrains the Promethean project and conduces to a certain humility.³⁸

The irony of biotechnology is that while it helps us develop the aspect of our *Imago Dei* that participates in the creativity of God, the misuse of it could lead us to lose sight of our being *Imago Dei* by attempting to appropriate divine prerogatives. What about the fact that some transhumanists do not believe in God? The concept of our being *Imago Dei* would be irrelevant to them. As Western society becomes more secular, the Christian theologian must be at the forefront of advocating for existential and moral reflection by initiating dialogue on what it means to be human. Is being human even something to transcend from? Since the transhuman would have more capabilities than a regular human person, it would be wise to remember the words of Jesus, “to whom much is given, much is expected (Luke 12:48).” The Christian theologian must ask if transhumanism would also allow us to sin in more sophisticated ways. For example, an enhanced mind capable of broader mathematical capabilities might lead to more financial anomalies if used by a greedy corporate employee. In such a scenario, biological and mental enhancement would enable one to fall even shorter of moral standards. Adam M. Willows

³⁸ Michael J Sandel, “The Case Against Perfection,” last modified April 2004, accessed 3 March 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/04/the-case-against-perfection/302927/>.

highlights the need for developing a sense of prudence when pursuing transhumanism.³⁹ Perhaps human limitations are valuable in providing the parameters for a meaningful life oriented toward salvation.

At the same time, Ronald Cole-Turner offers a counterbalance to the cautionary tone thus far. He suggests that transhumanism is “[a]t its core... authentically and essentially Christian.”⁴⁰ According to Cole-Turner, transformation beyond the human (or self-transcendence) is “the central promise of the gospel.”⁴¹ If the divine plan for humankind is to experience communion with God in eternity, two points that need further theological analyses are how biotechnologies can contribute to this divine plan and to what extent it would be morally acceptable.

Concerning transhumanist moral bioenhancement, it is unfortunate that we live in an imperfect world with pain, suffering, and death. Those with a skewed sense of morality inflict much of them on the self and others. If we enhance biological and mental attributes, does it follow that humankind would be morally better? Why wait and not just directly bioenhance morality by seeking biomedical interventions that reduce or eliminate tendencies toward evil? Yet, Ach and Beck point out that there is some dissent regarding which “morally relevant properties and capacities should be improved.”⁴² Simeon Zahl inquires:

³⁹ Adam M Willows, “Supplementing Virtue: The Case for a Limited Theological Transhumanism” *Theology and Science* 15, no. 2 (2017), 177-187.

⁴⁰ Ronald Cole-Turner, “Going beyond the Human: Christians and Other Transhumanists,” *Theology and Science* 13, no. 2 (2015): 151.

⁴¹ Cole-Turner, “Going beyond the Human: Christians and Other Transhumanists,” 151.

⁴² Johann S. Ach and Birgit Beck, “Transhumanism and Moral Enhancement,” 271.

Could Christians enhance their way out of the desire for another person's spouse that is talked about in the Ten Commandments and in the Sermon on the Mount? . . . Does this mean Christians will in principle be able to 'hack' the sin of adultery in the future, using technology to preclude it as a physiological and psychological possibility, if they so choose? . . . There is little question that the use of an effective antidepressant can in many cases significantly change, for example, the ability of a depressed parent to give their child loving attention . . . But if this is the case, does it mean that antidepressants are helping us, in a quite concrete way, to sin less, and to become more sanctified? To put it bluntly: are such enhancement technologies a kind of immanent means of grace?⁴³

Humankind indeed struggles to promote goodness in our imperfect world, but we must be cautious of resorting to any means to do so. King-Ho Leung contends that "*even if* technological enhancement can somehow make humanity 'sinless' or even attain some form of immortality, given that such 'unfallen' human nature would still require grace to attain to humanity's ultimate end which exceeds its natural capacity (*italics original*)."⁴⁴ Ted Peters adds that the transhumanist vision of idyllic existence "are naïve because they take insufficient account of the human propensity for using neutral things or even good things for selfish purposes, which results in chaos and suffering."⁴⁵ Moral

⁴³ Simeon Zahl, "Engineering Desire: Biotechnological Enhancement as Theological Problem," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2019): 223.

⁴⁴ King-Ho Leung, "The Technologisation of Grace and Theology: Meta-theological Insights from Transhumanism," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33, no. 4 (2020): 486.

⁴⁵ Ted Peters, "Progress and Provolution: Will Transhumanism Leave Sin Behind?" in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian*

bioenhancement at the theoretical level might not necessarily translate well to the practical level. A morally bioenhanced person may misjudge the proper implementation of moral values in a given situation. Moreover, from a psycho-spiritual perspective, a morally bioenhanced person risks succumbing to a heightened sense of scrupulosity, which could lead to long-term frustration and depression. For these reasons, the Christian theologian must ensure that holistic moral and psychological considerations are in the scope of moral bioenhancement.

A final word on social justice is worthwhile. Christianity teaches that we need divine grace for our betterment. One way we receive divine grace is through the experience of love. The Christian theologian can partly temper the Pelagian optimism of transhumanism by highlighting that what moral bioenhancement should lead to is solidarity with the least in society. Other than transcending humanness, we need to talk also about having a more grounded sense of humanness rooted and expressed in love for one another. Is this not the context of the mandate of Jesus for us to be perfect? There would be little to no progress with individual moral bioenhancement if unjust social structures and norms continue to oppress the marginalized and perpetuate other social injustices. If we want more to the human experience, let us remember the words of Athanasius, “[Jesus], indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”⁴⁶ His kenotic acts of ministering to the poor and marginalized, undergoing the passion and dying by crucifixion for

Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement, ed. Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 81.

⁴⁶ Athanasius, “On the Incarnation,” EWTN, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-the-incarnation-12496>.

others are stark manifestations that solidarity sanctifies the human experience.

Conclusion

Transhumanism pushes Christianity to reaffirm doctrine on the createdness of humankind and clarify the necessities of moral life in the face of possible Pelagian optimism. I have shown that there are overlaps between transhumanism and Pelagianism as they do not fully align with magisterial teachings on human dependence on God for moral perfection. However, their eschatological visions differ in terms of relationality. In response, I advise the Christian theologian to engage with transhumanism in a spirit of dialogue rather than refute it outright. Regarding moral bioenhancement, I encourage the Christian theologian to uphold Christian moral values and the social-developmental aspects of moralization to ensure consistency with the calling of the human person to become more Christlike.

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