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George F. McLean

Humanity on the Threshold

Religious Perspectives on Transhumanism

Christian Philosophical Studies, VI

Edited by
John C. Haughey
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The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy

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PREFACE

GEORGE F. McLEAN

The project on “Faith in a Secular Age” began with two research teams. The first team studied “Humanity on the Threshold: Religious Perspectives on Transhumanism.” It met some five times for the determination and extended discussion of its theme; the verbatim extends to some 125 single-spaced pages. It is indeed a unique instance of coordinated, in-depth theological discussion of one of the great developments of our times, namely, the effects of science and technology on the understanding of our very nature as human persons.

Hence it would seem truncated to present this report without some account and extended sample of the team’s deliberations. Indeed, the central concern of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (RVP) has always been the promotion of in-depth work in philosophy and its relation to all modes of human experience and understanding. The following is then an attempt not only briefly to indicate the direction of the deliberations, but to present a substantive sample of the deliberations carried out by such a research team in action.

In this case the first and second of the five meetings consisted in developing a list of the concerns which the team brought to their discussion of transhumanism. This was taken especially as an understanding that technology had the capability and was in the process of pushing humanity against the borders of its nature as hitherto understood. Somewhat counter intuitively it was noted that as technology depended on science as abstractive and reductive it focused attention on a relatively narrow range of reality. Hence, it would be important for the team to situate its efforts in a broader and wider context. This was marked by a number of characteristics: the inner emergent and dynamic, the creativity of desire; and the uniqueness and social character of freedom, all of which should evoke a reverence for human nature. In this light a number of pairs emerged in need of reconciliation: mind and body, freedom and control, ethics and ontology, midwifing and creation.

By the third meeting – the verbatim of which alone reaches 50 pages – it became clear that not only had each of the participants chosen to address a distinctive part of the issue but that each approached their work with a related but yet distinctive concern in mind. This gave promise of the broad yet subtle range of vision exemplified in their papers.

Moreover, for actually experiencing the discussions – to be as it were present in them – we are in the unique situation of having a

complete verbatim of the whole series of meetings. If printed it would constitute an entire book in its own right, but as part of the present volume it is feasible to reprint only a few edited selections.

Included here are not only a summary of the session with Jürgen Habermas but the verbatim of the team's discussion of three specific issues. The first is the basic material character of human life; the second is whether, in what sense and to what degree the transhuman is a desirable objective for humankind. What appeared here is that, while transhumanism is generally developed on a reductively materialist and scientific basis, this team would see a vast fund of meaning over and above that confine. This was suggested by the above list of insights, factors and concerns which emerged in the first two meetings marked especially by the inner dynamic and uniqueness of freedom. Hence, the discussion of whether and in what terms a materialist transhumanism might or might not be a desirable goal was followed by a third exploration of an explicitly transcendent, spiritual dimension of the meaning and exercise of human life.

It thereby engages the issue of humanness as a whole, rather than as a disjunction of matter and spirit. This issue is central to the present irenic efforts to find the human value of the secular. All three of these discussions are presented in an appendix in a form only slightly edited for purposes of literary expression. This provides a truly unique opportunity to observe theology as a process – indeed as a struggle – and thereby to take part in the very act of theological discovery through dialogue. It constitutes a great learning tool enabling one to observe how scientific, social, spiritual, etc., concerns shape theology and conversely how the sacred texts inspire and guide social life in a secular age.

After this the team returned for two additional sessions in which they sought a unifying focus for the project as a whole. Candidates for this were: value, person, prayer, unity, evolution vs technology, culture, difference vis a vis community, autonomy vis a vis authority, affectivity, and the trilogy of vitality, subjectivity and creativity, to which was added beauty. Throughout there was an explicit desire not to eliminate, bypass or transcend the human as understood by science and further implemented by technology, but to deepen and enrich the human with an emphasis upon its continuity and deepening evolution and enrichment. In this light the work provides a truly positive reading of transhumanism.

INTRODUCTION

ARE WE ASPIRING TO “MATTERS BEYOND OUR SCOPE”?

JOHN C. HAUGHEY

When one goes to the doctor it's not surprising to find out that a new version of our old pill has been developed. Pharmacology is not standing still. And when we open the newspaper it's not surprising to find a new generation of software or hardware being advertised making yesterday's purchase seem as wise as having bought a covered wagon. Technology and the sciences have been hard at work even while we sleep, it seems. We are all the better for this inventiveness and innovation.

A new industry has grown alongside of these breakthroughs. It is a naming industry which has few authors, but many subscribers, maybe most of us. Though it does not have a name, describing it goes something like this: we are getting beyond our limitations by our own hands; we are seeking immortality immanently. This industry leads us to believe that it is only a matter of time before technology or science will overcome the present obstacles to our well-being. Presumably we all experience the promise which deeper scientific probes and further developments in technology are delivering now or soon will.

The expectations generated by these kinds of breakthroughs were behind the establishment of an international organization in 1998, called The World Transhumanist Association (WTA). Since then it has evolved somewhat both organizationally and in its nomenclature but it retains its enthusiasm about the enhancements of the conditions of human life. The secularity of its ethos is unmistakable. The spokespersons for this transhumanist ethos are few. But some of them scale their expectations about human prowess so high that they expect religion will become passé, since science and technology are beginning to deliver the goods that the faiths have believed only God can.

One of the most exuberant of transhumanism's voices is Ray Kurzweil's. His utopia expects that the human mind has a destiny of super-intelligence through uploading by means of electronic neuroprosthesis. Our neurons, he believes, will be enhanced exponentially by a conversion into machine minds. For example, his 2005 book: *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (Penguin Press). Another authoritative voice is the founder of the WTA, Nick Bostrom. This Oxford philosopher is enthusiastic about the

potential perfectibility of humans. He is sure that genetic engineering will bring us much further than we have imagined. Further intervention into the ageing process, for example, is within reach. One of the best sources to tune in on the conversations going on about transhumanism is the electronic *Journal of Evolution and Technology*.

There is an ambiguity about transhumanism, not in its aspirations but in how it expects them to be delivered. What is beyond our scope and what is within it? The image of the tree of knowledge in the middle of the Garden of Eden comes to mind. There were any number of trees for Adam and Eve to eat from but only one which was not to be eaten, implying that we are relatively autonomous but not absolutely so. We are to cultivate the Garden so that our well-being is possible but dominion over our mortality is a matter beyond our scope.

Over the course of the last two years the authors of the chapters in this volume have gathered a number of times to mull over where we are about this topic of transhumanism. In general we were trying to map the terrain between what is humanly doable and knowable, and what is humanly beyond us. Are we trying to construct a new tower of Babel, or are we just beginning to live up to the challenge latent in our genes? To be human, collectively and individually, is to be vectored towards a more, a “magis”, a tomorrow that just has to be better than yesterday. To help us get there, there are the promises of the natural sciences and the breakthroughs of technology.

Transhumanism which is the gathering point of the essays in this volume is an anthropologically descriptive category but, of itself, it is normless. So it can be easily arrogated to convey the belief that it is only a matter of time before the natural sciences and developing technologies will deliver on the promises the religions have been holding up to us since time immemorial. Those who call themselves transhumanists as well as all who are inadvertently of the same mind are an amorphous group. We, the authors of this volume, are indebted to them because their aspirations have helped us to differentiate two different kinds of transhumanism, one whose scope is wholly immanent and non-theistic and the other which is both immanent and transcendent.

These essays have a theological bias without at the same time being an apologetics. While they combine a profound respect for the developments humanity has achieved and its further aspirations, they do not expect that even at our best we will be able to deliver the kingdom of God or an acceptable facsimile thereof. Our bias is that neither autonomy nor secularity by themselves will suffice or be satisfied or satisfying. A transhumanism, on the other hand, which looks for a good beyond what our scientific and technological prowess can achieve can help us to both enhance our condition and take the measure of our

limitations. Try as we might we will not be able to produce the immortality we seek.

One of the happier moments of our very interesting project was a day spent with Jürgen Habermas, who deserves the reputation of being one of Europe's reigning "public intellectuals". He read with interest our chapters in manuscript form and chose to bring his well-known methodological agnosticism to bear *not* on what we wrote but on transhumanist aspirations themselves. He wondered whether the actual and promised enhancements that are in the works (in general, what he called "eugenics") might be jeopardizing something as foundational as how we human beings have come to understand the meaning of our lives.

Habermas was as challenged by some of the vistas transhumanism envisions as we who are the authors of this volume have been. He wondered whether the challenge of those vistas is putting "man" on the brink of losing his self-authorship by blurring the lines between life and an-organic matter. More concretely, whether the human "path to salvation" is going to be eventually attained through biotechnological interventions. The alternative is to stay the course which the religions of the first axial age mapped out even though they gradually came to see the mythical for what it was.

A sense of the chapters:

The first and the last chapters of this volume operate like book ends. In the first, John Haught sets transhumanism in a theological context by viewing the universe in an anticipatory way. He elaborates on how the biblical motifs of promise and liberation "provide fertile constraints within which any future technological transformation of human persons and our planetary habitat may be carried out."

The next two chapters, 2 and 3, bore down on transhumanism analytically in different ways. Gennaro Auletta weighs the pluses and minuses of its trajectory. Transplants and their integration, genetics and computer view of the mind/brain, culture and the canalizing of personhood are some of the issues he and his two colleagues at the Gregorian University in Rome weigh in on.

Kevin Fitzgerald's essay gets even more particular. His case study peeks under the disparities in the world views people have of what "betterment" means. His study reflects on the tensions that developed between the worldview of the Native American tribe who live near the Grand Canyon, the Havasupai, in contrast to the way the team of scholars from Arizona State University understood what constitutes the enhancement they were trying to bring about for them. Whose betterment is better?

Chapters 4 and 5 have a connection to one another and to the volume's topic. Ilia Delio's spells out a transhumanist world view the

parameters of which are as cosmic as the Christian faith can go. It is the world view of Teilhard de Chardin, a 20th century visionary whose ideas remain remarkable. They are still being fruitfully plumbed by her and by many others.

Howard Gray does two things in his chapter. One is he brings to light the way Ignatius Loyola would have addressed transhumanism, that is by supplying a method whereby a person can be enlightened about themselves by petitioning for the graces he believed God would give one. But he introduces this method by reflecting on four universal human experiences of self-transcendence: hospitality, friendship, suffering and reorientation.

Chapters 6 and 7 also have a consonance. Nancy Tuchman and Michael Schuck's piece looks at how we humans have been affecting our planet, negatively. But they are not content to simply be exasperated by our anthropocentrism. They have been reversing the direction by a number of concrete practices that describe how in one place, Loyola University Chicago, is educating students to think and act in a way that makes a "preferential option for the earth".

My own chapter is interested in the changed understanding we humans have come to in 20th century physics about space and time. As a result of these new insights into the parameters in which we live, the chapter goes back to our traditional understandings about the after-life to see how the new physics might have us revisit some of the scriptural symbols that have conveyed after-life and see it in a new light.

Finally, there is an afterword done by my colleague and this volume's co-editor, Ilia Delio, O.S.F.

This volume was undertaken as a first step of the project of The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (RVP) on "Faith in a Secular Age", designed with Charles Taylor. Subsequent volumes concern both the socio-political order and the emerging disjunctions between Church and people.

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