

Transhumanism

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
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History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Transhumanism is a movement whose advocates hope to enhance and improve human beings through the use of technology, allowing people to evolve beyond current limitations and become “posthuman.” Professor of philosophy Nick Bostrom describes transhumanism as an “‘intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition,’ especially by the careful study and use of technology ‘that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations.’”¹ Limitations to be overcome include intellectual capacity, undesirable emotions, disease, aging, and death.

Transhumanism is not necessarily a “religious movement,” but its advocates address religious and spiritual issues. The term “transhumanism” was first coined by Julian Huxley in the book *New Bottles for New Wine* in 1957 as he described ways in which humanity might one day transcend itself. Huxley suggested that transformed human beings might be taught techniques to achieve spiritual peace in much the same way as they learn skills such as dancing or tennis.

Founder(s):

There is no single founder for the transhumanism movement. Ideas are contributed by many authors, scientists, and researchers, including Irving John Good (mathematician), Vernor Vinge (retired professor and science fiction author), Raymond Kurzweil (author, inventor, and futurist), Aubrey de Grey (biologist and life extension researcher), and Nick Bostrom (professor of philosophy).

Statistics:

There are no statistics as to membership or advocates of the movement. Statistics referenced most often refer to rapid growth in technology.

History:

Transhumanists cite as inspiration early futurist works by authors such as J. B. S. Haldane, Bertrand Russell, and Aldus Huxley. In 1965, the British mathematician Irving John Good discussed the possibility of machines that would one day surpass human intelligence:

Let an ultraintelligent machine be defined as a machine that can far surpass all the intellectual activities of any man however clever. Since the design of machines is one of these intellectual activities, an ultraintelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an “intelligence explosion,” and the

¹ John S Hammett, “A Christian View of Human Nature: Between Radical Freedom and Total Determinism” *Christian Research Journal* 34:2 (2011):38.

intelligence of man would be left far behind. Thus the first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make.²

At a meeting of the American Association for Artificial Intelligence in 1982, author Vernor Vinge first used the term “singularity” (a word from physics that refers to a point in space-time) to describe Good’s idea of an “intelligence explosion.” The idea of the singularity is discussed in *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (2000) and *The Singularity is Near* (2006) by futurist Raymond Kurzweil.

The Extropy Institute founded by Max More in 1992 further developed the definition of transhumanism. “Extropianism” is a particular form of transhumanism; extropy is the limit of a system’s intelligence and extropians wish to extend those limits. Extropians embrace the principles of perpetual progress, self-transformation, practical optimism, intelligent technology, open society, self-direction, and rational thinking. The World Transhumanist Association was founded in 1998 by Nick Bostrom and David Pearce. The WTA advocates the ethical use of technology to improve and expand human abilities.

Texts:

There are no particular founding texts for the movement.

Beliefs and Practices:

Transhumanism embraces a wide variety of ideals for the future. Artificial intelligence (A. I.) is one important aspect of the transhumanist program. Ray Kurzweil predicts that by the end of the 2020s computers will have human level intelligence and that in 2045, the year of the singularity, artificial intelligence will be about a billion times the sum of all of today’s human intelligence. A goal in the study of A. I. is the creation of a computer that cannot be distinguished from a human being in a blind test (called the Turing test). Kurzweil believes that artificial intelligence would have a spiritual consciousness:

Just being—experiencing, being conscious—is spiritual, and reflects the essence of spirituality. Machines, derived from human thinking and surpassing humans in their capacity for experience, will claim to be conscious, and thus to be spiritual. They will believe that they are conscious. They will believe that they have spiritual experiences. They will be convinced that these experiences are meaningful.³

Another important issue for transhumanism is life extension. Old age is viewed as an illness to be cured. One scientist views the human body as a machine that accumulates damage over time, damage that can be repaired much as a car can be repaired. Others believe that human consciousness might one day be transferred to a computer, granting a form of “eternal life.” Transhumanists believe that people do not need to accept natural, human limitations. In support of this belief they point to currently available technology such as social networking, handheld digital devices, neural implants for Parkinson’s patients, psychotherapy medications, and the use of robotic technology in war.

² Lev Grossman, “Man and Machine,” *Time* (February 21, 2011), 45.

³ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 153.

Transhumanists have a high view of human potential in terms of relationships and attitudes toward others. They believe advanced human beings will come to respect others and their differences. Max More writes, “Emotionally and intellectually advanced humans—those on their way to becoming psychologically posthuman—have refined their emotional responses. Their vision pierces emotional fogging of perception, keeping differences and dislikes in proportion. They continue to recognize, appreciate, and respect the basic nature, abilities, and potential of persons.”⁴ Past religious systems, it is believed, undermined self-esteem with teachings on sin. Transhumanists hope to replace such ideas with a greater sense of self-worth. “Lifelong, emotional well-being might be described as a ‘realized transhumanist eschatology.’”⁵

A Lutheran Response

Through the gift of God-given reason, human beings continually develop new and useful advances in technology. Progress in science, medicine, agriculture, communication, and other fields of study has the potential to improve the lives of millions of people. Human beings already try to overcome natural limitations through such things as education, physical training, diet, corrective lenses, hearing aids, and medicine. However, potentially helpful technology can also cause harm if used for the wrong purpose. Discussing the responsible use of technology in education, Dr. Renea Gernant of Concordia University Nebraska advocates a certain amount of caution:

As teachers of the faith, we must then be good stewards of technology, remembering not only its uses but also the limits of technology and the digital culture from which it comes. We must appreciate the admonition of Paul in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. So that you may discern what is the will of God—which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Technology is certainly transformative but not necessarily renewing.⁶

Human beings are created by God and our Creator established boundaries for His creation. He created light and darkness, day and night, and imposed limits on the gathered waters, telling them, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther; and here shall your proud waves be stayed” (Job 38:11). God also imposed limits on His human creatures for their own good: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16).

Our first parents Adam and Eve followed their desire to be “like God” and crossed those divinely imposed limits—“they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen” (Romans 1:25). Trying to overcome our created nature does not make us more human; it has instead made us less human in the loss of our right relationships to God and to each other. Yet even after that trespass, the Creator’s Law remains written on human hearts corrupted by sin. Even though we are now filled with the inborn desire to keep on crossing His imposed limits, we are still responsible to our Creator: “They show that the

⁴ Max More, “Self-Ownership: A Core Transhuman Virtue,” 14 at <http://www.maxmore.com/selfown.htm>

⁵ Darrel R. Jackson, “Constructing Futures: Outlining a Transhumanist Vision of the Future and the Challenge to Christian Theology of Its Proposed Uses and New and Future Developments in Technology” *The Journal of Faith and Science Exchange* (2000): 53.

⁶ Renea Gernant, “Is It OK To Be a Technology Illiterate Teacher of Faith? ‘YES!’” *Issues in Christian Education* 44:1 (Fall 2010): 16.

work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Romans 2:15).

In *The Abolition of Man*, Christian author C. S. Lewis refers to the moral law, the law written on the human heart, as the *Tao*. Lewis describes as “Conditioners” those people who, like the transhumanists, have “devoted themselves to the task of deciding what ‘Humanity’ shall henceforth mean. ‘Good’ and ‘bad,’ applied to them, are words without content; for it is from them that the content of these words is henceforward to be derived.”⁷ Lewis says of the Conditioners: “It is not that they are bad men. They are not men at all. Stepping outside the Tao, they have stepped into the void. Nor are their subjects necessarily unhappy men. They are not men at all: they are artifacts. Man’s final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man.”⁸

Even as they attempt to redefine humanity, transhumanists acknowledge the risks and the potential for misuse in the escalating developments of technology. They lack, however, a true grasp of sinful human nature. They believe that further development will overcome evil as people increase in self-confidence and emotional stability. While acknowledging the works of self-sacrifice and charity carried out by believers and unbelievers alike, as Christians we are well aware of our inability to ultimately overcome or transcend our sinful nature. Holy Scripture tells us about human attempts to transcend ourselves and the destructive results.

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken” (Genesis 3:22-23).

And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Genesis 11:6-7).

The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands. . . (Revelation 9:20-21).

The penalty for the human attempt to transcend created limits is death. Yet God in His grace does not permit death to have the final word. The Creator knows our created limitations. He took those limitations into Himself, taking on human flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ. Within those blessed limitations the Son of God suffered the penalty of death on our behalf. Through faith in Jesus Christ we have forgiveness and an “abundant life” (John 10:10), an eternal life, that far transcends the dreams of the transhumanists.

As we make use of advances in technology, we remember that our ultimate confidence is not in ourselves but in Christ and His promises for our future. Martin Luther wrote, “We are meant to be human beings, not divine. So let us take comfort in his word and, trusting his promise, call upon him

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 76. Lewis is not promoting the Asian philosophy/religion of Taoism (or Daoism). He chose the term *Tao* (which can mean a way or a path) to represent natural law, the law written by God on human hearts (Romans 2:15).

⁸ Lewis, 77.

confidently for deliverance in time of distress and he will help.”⁹ Repenting “in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6) we acknowledge our limitations. We are dust and will return to dust. Yet trusting the risen Lord Jesus who overcame death for us, we find that our limitations are now our strength, born of grace and shaped by forgiveness:

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:13-14).

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Transhumanists believe that they will find freedom in future technology. Many argue for the total control of nature and the removal of all control over the individual. Max More writes, “Liberty is not license. Liberty means freedom from compulsion. It means being free to choose your own actions, make your own plans, and act on your own beliefs and values. If we wish to live a productive, rewarding life in a flourishing society we will affirm that in demanding liberty we agree to take charge of ourselves.”¹⁰ Self-serving liberty stands in sharp contrast to the freedom we have in Christ. The apostle Paul wrote, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them” (1 Corinthians 9:19). Martin Luther, in his work *The Freedom of A Christian*, linked true freedom in Christ to Christ-like service. Transhumanists might approve of Luther’s first statement, but likely not the second:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.¹¹

As God’s redeemed and forgiven people, we give ourselves in service to others as Christ gave Himself for us. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are a new creation. “The old has passed away; behold the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Instead of attempting to *transcend* our created nature, we *fulfill* our created purpose to the glory of God as we live in love and service to others, and—as appropriate—bring advances in technology to bear upon that service.

In C. S. Lewis’ book, *Prince Caspian*, the lion Aslan offers comfort to Prince Caspian, who wishes he had come from better ancestors:

“I do indeed, Sir,” said Caspian. “I was wishing that I came of a more honourable lineage.”

⁹ Martin Luther, “Sayings in Which Luther Found Comfort,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Gustav K. Wiencke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 43:177.

¹⁰ Max More, 9.

¹¹ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Harold J Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 31: 344.

“You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,” said Aslan. “And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor in earth. Be content.”¹²

We are the descendants of Adam and Eve, created in the image of God. In repentance we acknowledge the shame of inherited sin and our own sins. In Christ Jesus we are forgiven and renewed. Created from dust, we look forward to the day of resurrection when we will be raised from the dust to which we return in death. On that day our risen and glorified bodies will far transcend the empty hope of the transhumanists. We will not be posthuman, but redeemed, restored, and fully human.

For Further Reading

Baker, Robert C., ed. *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*. St. Louis: CPH, 2011.

Kurzweil, Ray. *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Macmillan, 1947.

Luther, Martin. “The Freedom of a Christian.” *Luther’s Works*. Vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957.

The President’s Council on Bioethics, 2003. *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* at <http://bioethics.georgetown.edu/pcbe/reports/beyondtherapy>

Links and Websites

www.humanityplus.org [World Transhumanist Association]

www.cbc-network.org [The Center for Bioethics and Culture Network; see especially the tag for Theology and Human Nature]

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: Collier Books, 1951), 211–212.