

The future of humanity

A remarkable feature of contemporary culture is the impact of technology on the way we think. Politics is a way of *making* a better world or *fashioning* stronger communities. Psychologists advise us how to *build* stronger relationships. Fertility specialists help us to *make* a baby. Business entrepreneurs *create* wealth. In the words of Oliver O'Donovan, "When every activity is understood as making, then every situation into which we act is seen as a raw material, waiting to have something made out of it."¹

The Enlightenment project

This is what some have called 'the Enlightenment project' – the goal of building a better world through human ingenuity and the application of science and reason. Right at the origins of the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, there was a dream of extending progress across the final frontier of the human body. In a visionary article called "Dreaming with Diderot", James Hughes, Executive Director of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, refers to a series of essays written by the French *philosophe* Diderot in 1769.

"Diderot proposes that, since human consciousness is a product of brain matter, the conscious mind can be deconstructed and put back together. Science will bring the dead back to life. Animals and machines can be redesigned into intelligent creatures, and humanity can redesign itself into a great variety of types 'whose changes and whose future and final organic structure it is impossible to predict.'"²

Hughes claims that Diderot's prescient vision of the future is now coming close to fulfilment.

"In the coming decades, as pharmacology, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and biotechnology converge, life spans will extend well beyond a century. Our senses will extend to perceive sights, sounds and sensations beyond our current abilities. We will remember more of our lives, with greater fidelity. We will master fatigue, arousal and attention, and give ourselves more working intelligence. We will have greater control over our emotions, and be less subject to depression, compulsion and mental illness. Our bodies and brains will be surrounded by and merged with computer power which itself will become as, or more, powerful than our brains. As we merge machines into our minds we will indeed be deconstructed and put back together. We will use these technologies to redesign ourselves, our children and animals, into varieties of intelligent life impossible to predict."²

Hughes argues that the goal of human enhancement is not the idle utopian dream of few technocratic mavericks. Rather it is part of the mainstream of the Enlightenment project, allied with a liberal concern for the limitless extension of individual freedoms. For modern Enlightenment followers, the quest for freedom is conceived as freedom *from* the restraints of

¹ Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (OUP,1984) p. 3.

² James Hughes, *Dreaming with Diderot*, <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/1102>

nature. The natural world is seen as a straight-jacket which confines, restricts and limits our human possibilities. The goal of the Enlightenment project is to use technology to overcome the limits of the natural order which constrain our possible futures.

For transhumanists such as James Hughes and Nick Bostrom, to be human is to be subject to claustrophobic limitations and restrictions - limited life span, limited cognitive and sensory capabilities, fallible memory, vulnerability to disease, accident, progressive deterioration, ageing and death. Without enhancement technology our possible futures are constrained, inhibited, restricted and ultimately futile. Previous cultures have perceived these limitations as part of the human condition, to be accepted with stoicism, fortitude and resignation as part of the natural order. But we do not have to show such supine defeatism. Instead we must harness the converging technologies of the 21st century to fashion and create new versions of humanity, to break free from the constraints of our evolved nature.

In its more extreme forms it becomes clear that transhumanism has the features of religious belief. It is a secular form of eschatology, a future hope which inspires action in the present. It incorporates a potent vision of a new age, a new way of being which is achieved by human ingenuity and technological intervention.

So what are the moral values which underpin this technological dream? Most transhumanists have stressed the liberal values of individual choice, freedom from coercion and violence, and peaceful coexistence. But if conscious choice and self-awareness are the factors which give us moral significance, there are of course implications for many members of the species *H. Sapiens*. Those who lack the capacity for conscious choice - the fetus, the newborn, the brain-injured, the demented, and the psychotic - are relegated to an inferior moral status. And part of their inferior moral status is that they become in some sense at the disposal of the choosing agents. They become part of the raw material on which the technologists may act in order to achieve their goals.

It seems an inevitable consequence of this technological hope that vulnerable human beings will be instrumentalised – regarded as means for other people's ends. Although many secular bioethicists would dissociate themselves from the wilder excesses of the transhumanist dreams, they remain wedded to the Enlightenment project, the humanist belief in progress and a view of the future as a product of human construction.

In the secular eschatology of the Enlightenment, the future is built block by block, frame by frame, from the choices we make here and now, in the present. There is no ultimate purpose or *telos* to nature, apart from that which we construct from the present. This brings a terrible, even crushing, responsibility. Every choice must be calibrated to ensure that the outcome is desirable. Unless we choose correctly the future may become a hell on earth. The ultimate consequences of every choice, the utilitarian calculus, must become the supreme and only moral arbiter.

The radical philosopher John Gray writes "Humanism is not science but religion – the post-Christian faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have so far lived. In

pre-Christian Europe it was taken for granted that the future would be like the past...History was a series of cycles with no overall meaning. Against this pagan view, Christians understood history as a story of sin and redemption. Humanism is the transformation of this Christian doctrine of salvation into a project of universal human emancipation. The idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence. That is why among the ancient pagans it was unknown.”³

Gray provides an elegant critique of the Enlightenment project. “Modern humanism is the faith that through science humankind can know the truth – and so be free. But if Darwin’s theory of natural selection is true, this is impossible. The human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth... The conventional view that natural selection favours nervous systems which produce ever more accurate images of the world must be a very naïve view of mental evolution.” Gray is making the same point as the ‘horrid doubt’ which Charles Darwin confessed to. If our minds and cognitive processes have evolved merely to improve our chances of survival on the African savannah, there is no reason to believe that they will lead us to ultimate truth about the cosmos, or about the meaning of our own lives.

A biblical understanding of the future of humanity

The consistent biblical message is that the history of the physical universe does have a purpose, a meaning, a *telos*. But the future is not a construct of human activity. It is not an artefact – rather it is a reflection of the loving purposes of God. It is as though there is a great river of God’s providential purposes running through the cosmos. It starts from ‘before the foundation of the world’ and continues all the way to ‘the ages of the ages’. When we perform an action we launch it on the great river of history. What happens then is almost entirely out of our control. Our action may well have profound consequences downstream, but those consequences are not ours to control. We are called to act wisely, responsibly, within the limitations both of our knowledge and of our created humanity. And we are held accountable for our actions as responsible moral agents. But we have the humility to recognise the limits of our human responsibility. We are spared from the crushing God-like responsibility of those who want to construct a better world. The future is not ours to fashion. Unlike the secular humanist, who can never be spared from the crushing responsibility of fashioning the future, Christians can dare to rest and celebrate the goodness of the creation, sharing the rest, freedom and joy of their Creator.

The biblical eschatology which starts in the Creation narratives finds its most powerful expression in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. The Creator God takes on a human body made, like all other bodies, from the dust of the ground. And after death on the cross, he is raised as a physical, touchable, recognizable human being who goes out of his way to demonstrate his physical reality to his bewildered disciples. The four Gospel accounts of the resurrection are all clear. The tomb was empty and remained empty. And if we take those eye witness accounts seriously then the obvious conclusion is that the physical molecules that had constituted Christ’s incarnation were in some mysterious way incorporated into his resurrection body. The physical creation is not overturned but subsumed, or caught up, into a greater and richer reality. In Jesus,

³ John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, (Granta, 2002)

the Second Adam, we see both a perfect human being (what the original Adam was meant to be) and the pioneer, the blueprint for a new type of human being, the one in whose likeness a new creation will spring, the firstfruits of those who are to come (1 Corinthians 15:20).

The transhumanist dream is that our original humanity is an infinitely malleable and improvable reality – it is the raw material from which we can construct a better reality. But biblical eschatology teaches us to respect, protect and treasure the original human body, the form of physical humanity we have inherited. This kind of physical reality, this form of embodiment is the one that is vindicated in the person of Christ. Because Christ's body is raised, all bodies are special. Instead of the divisive distinction between the conscious, choosing members of the species and those who are available to be manipulated and instrumentalised, the Christian hope teaches us that all members of the human race are special, to be valued, protected and loved. Because Jesus was an embryo, a fetus, a newborn, a lost child, a weeping agonized figure, a dying man, we celebrate these forms of embodied humanity, we perceive their dignity and intrinsic worth.

If this kind of humanity was good enough for Christ, then maybe it's good enough for me too. It is not necessary to be enhanced - to have a greater intelligence, stronger muscles, better memory - in order to be fully human, to be human-as-it-was-intended-to-be.

In Christian thought, love is joined with the other virtues of faith and hope, as in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (verse 13). They are virtues which all point to the future. To use theological jargon, they are eschatological virtues - pointing towards the end times. When we love someone in the present, showing practical, empathic, respectful, sacrificial caring, we are also pointing them to the future, to the hope of the resurrection. We are treating someone now *in the light of who they are going to be*. This is why we can respect and treat with dignity even the most tragically damaged of human beings. Not only because of their creation in God's image but also because of who they are going to be. The anencephalic baby, the person in the persistent vegetative state, the profoundly demented individual are those who may, in God's grace, be transformed to become a new creation. So practical Christian caring for those with a degenerative condition like dementia is not a sentimental nostalgic reaction, treating someone with respect just because of what they once were. We treat them with respect because of the God-like image which, in God's grace, they will display in the future. In fact Christian love can only be intelligible in the light of the Christian hope.

This hope, reflected in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, is that though tongues will fail, prophecies will become unnecessary and partial knowledge will become complete, the acts of genuine *agape*-love will somehow remain – in some mysterious way they will become part of the new heaven and the new earth. "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...." (1 Corinthians 13:7).

From an earthly perspective it seems that, all too often, love does fail. To show persistent protective and sacrificial love to a disabled child, a violent disturbed adolescent, or a demented adult, may seem pointless, futile, and meaningless. And from one perspective it is; "If only in this

life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Corinthians 15:19). But Christian hope teaches, reminds and rebukes us - love never fails....

After a long description of the future hope of physical resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul concludes with these well-known words: “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Because of the future resurrection hope, Paul says that our labour now, in this space-time physical world, is not in vain. In some mysterious way the work we do now, which is motivated and directed by Christian love and truth (‘labour in the Lord’), will last into the new age. It will become part of the new heaven and the new earth. This is what Tom Wright refers to as ‘collaborative eschatology’.⁴ We are called to collaborate with God in transforming the present in the light of the future.

To the secular philosopher, life starts from nothing. It rises to a peak, to a brief flowering of autonomy, of pleasure, of meaning in the middle of life. And then it gradually declines into decay, dissolution and finally death. It rises to a crescendo and then slowly fades away into nothingness. But the Christian view of a human life transformed by God's power is totally different. It is a slow and growing crescendo without end. It is a journey, a pilgrimage, which starts from nothing but grows and grows: “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (Proverbs 4:18).

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⁴ N. T. Wright *Surprised by Hope*, (SPCK, 2007)