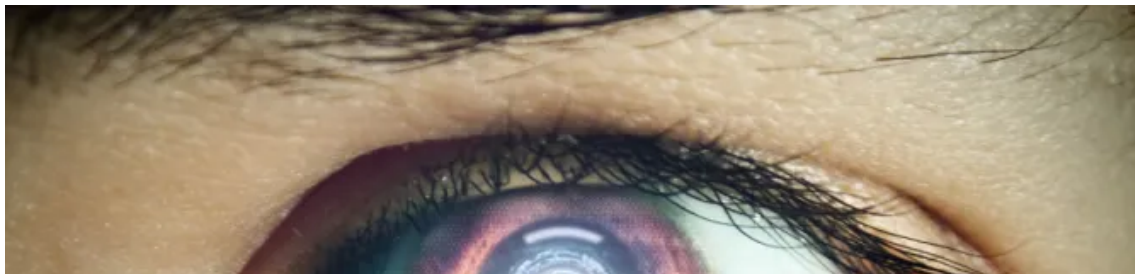




Can we delete death?

Transhumanism's lofty goal meets a Catholic response





Bionic eye (CC0 1.0).



By Adelaide Mena, Mary Farrow

Washington D.C., Mar 9, 2017 / 16:02 pm

It sounds like something out of a sci-fi movie – being able to "upload" our minds to computers to live on after we die, to freeze our bodies only to bring them back in the future, or to pop pills to enhance our mood and intelligence.

While these may seem like impossible notions, these are the kinds of things the transhumanism and posthumanism movements are hoping for and working toward.

However, as with most technological advancements, these proposals have bioethicists and theologians questioning: just because we can, does that mean we should?

Transhumanism is a loosely-defined cultural, intellectual and technical movement that describes itself as seeking to "to overcome fundamental human limitations" including death, aging, and natural physical, mental and psychological limitations, says humanity+, a transhumanist online community.

The movement overlaps greatly with posthumanism, which posits that a new, biologically superior race is on the horizon, and could replace the human race as we know it. Posthumanists support technologies such as cryogenic freezing, mood-and-intelligence-enhancing drugs, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, bionics and "uploading" a mind to an artificial intelligence.

These movements stem from the idea that human limitations **are just**

"technical problems" that need to be overcome, said history professor Yuval Noah Harari in a 2015 interview in "Edge," a non-profit website devoted to the advancement of technology.

"Once you really solve a problem like direct brain-computer interface ... when brains and computers can interact directly, to take just one example, that's it, that's the end of history, that's the end of biology as we know it," he said. "Nobody has a clue what will happen once you solve this."

But is human nature a problem to be solved? Will treading into this territory completely change the way man relates to God, to their own bodies, and to one another? These are the questions many bioethicists are grappling with as they consider the morality of such technologies.

For Catholics, escaping suffering and trials by escaping human nature itself is a morally unacceptable option, according to Fr. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D., Director of Education for the National Catholic Bioethics Center.

"Catholics cannot accept a vision of man which presupposes an

outright 'unacceptability' of his basic human nature, nor a vision that labors to replace it with an alternate bodily structure that is engineered to be 'post-human,'" Fr. Pacholczyk told CNA.

Instead, the "integral vision of man" accepts that man is incarnate – that humans have a body –and that "we are meant to embrace and grow through the limitations of our human nature," he said.

"Even if our nature were to be radically re-engineered and modified," he elaborated, "our innermost self would retain fundamental shards of incompleteness."

The human experience is a struggle between a longing for the infinite, and learning to accept and embrace human's finite nature, Fr. Pacholczyk explained. This longing would still exist even if technology were to significantly advance man's material reality, because the longing for the infinite transcends the material world, he added.

Christ's life provides the road map to transcendence – rather than transhumanism – for man's life, "achieved through repentance, discipleship, self-denial, committed love, and generous self-giving,"

said Fr. Pacholczyk. The infinite that man longs for "is effected from above through grace, rather than through the mere machinations of human cleverness or willfulness."

Only by accepting their nature can humans re-orient themselves to "the only authentic source of redemption compatible with his essence," which is Jesus, he added.

Peter Lawler, a bioethicist and government professor at Berry College, said while he did not think transhumanism is possible, the movement's ideology alone can impact society.

The mindset of detaching humanity from biology contributes to a "paranoia about existence" which sees the natural world as the enemy of man, and views the body as a mere machine rather than as an integral part of a person, Lawler said.

"We're living longer than ever," he said. Improvements in healthcare, life expectancy and other technologies have changed the way people think about many things such as sexual morality, desired family size, and the integration of elderly people into society.

Charles Rubin, a professor of political science at Dusquesnes University and author on the transhumanist movement, also takes issue with the transhumanist or posthumanist ideology. The idea of "a superior version" of human beings implies that humans are poorly-designed "creatures of evolutionary chance," Rubin said.

"They have the very 'thin' understanding of what it means to be human that is in many ways characteristic of our contemporary thin ideas about self-hood," he said. The movement also makes the assumption that "material circumstances can solve all our problems."

"Building as they do on a thin sense of self, they risk encouraging those tendencies of contemporary thought that treat human beings instrumentally or that otherwise diminish human dignity."

But it's not all necessarily bad.

Some technologies that improve and even extend human life can be beneficial, so long as they don't violate morality, Lawler noted.

"The consistent pro-life position is that we are for life," he said, referencing Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate"

(Charity in Truth).

"Technology is highly attractive because it draws us out of our physical limitations and broadens our horizon," the Pope wrote.

Still, he cautioned, technological advancements can never trump the good of the human person – they must always be done in an ethically responsible way.

"Human freedom is authentic only when it responds to the fascination of technology with decisions that are the fruit of moral responsibility," Pope Benedict XVI wrote.

While extending life can be acceptable, the promises of transhumanism should be critiqued, Rubin said.

What should be combated, he continued, is those who "dogmatically assert the benefits of a longer life without having ever having asked seriously the question of what constitutes a good human life."

This article was originally published on CNA April 9, 2015.



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