

Religion and Theology Facing the Challenges of Transhumanism

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Abstract

Transhumanism has been interpreted in various ways. On one hand, it is considered a futuristic scientific expression with eschatological aspirations, suggesting that technoscience could overcome humanity's biological limitations. On the other hand, it is seen as a materialistic movement seeking to enhance human capabilities through technological advancements. Additionally, it has faced significant criticism for allegedly overlooking the ethical and social implications for humanity. This paper aims to analyze religion and theology in light of the challenges posed by transhumanism. The methodology employed is framed within the qualitative tradition, using the hermeneutic method and design to interpret texts in their context. The conclusion emphasizes the urgent need to reflect on the potential scenarios humanity faces in a transhuman society that challenges natural and divine laws. Interdisciplinary work is crucial to guide advances in technoscience, recognizing the contributions that religion and theology can offer to contemporary society.

Keywords: Religion, Theology, Transhumanism, Technoscience

INTRODUCTION

Transhumanism proposes the creation of a new culture and a renewed perspective of knowledge. Its goal is to establish itself as an innovative philosophy, a new form of religion, and even a new epistemology that will direct human conduct on Earth. It represents the promise of solving all problems related to the finitude and materiality of human existence.

As a cultural, intellectual, and scientific manifestation, transhumanism is based on an ethical premise that seeks to improve humanity's physical and cognitive capabilities. According to this approach, humans use new technologies to eliminate unwanted and unnecessary aspects such as diseases, ailments, aging, and ultimately their own mortal nature.

The transhumanist project promises to satisfy deep human desires for absolute autonomy and freedom, to avoid death, and to achieve perfection. These aspirations are based on the premise that science and technology can free humans from the laws of evolution and nature, eliminating the need to adhere to religions or theological explanations.

Transhumanism promises an ideal solution for humanity, allowing control over essential aspects of life. According to this perspective, transhumanist individuals would have the power to control their destinies and fulfill all their desires. However, despite more than six decades since Julian Huxley, one of its pioneers, presented the first ideas about transhumanism and notable advances in technoscience, the promised new society has yet to arrive. Instead, we observe with great concern how the planet faces increasing limitations, including a continuous rise in poverty, persistent violence even in advanced societies, aggressive proliferation of diseases, depletion of natural resources, and a political and economic elite manifesting in narcissistic and arrogant individualism.

This panorama compels us to question the meaning of life, which might be found in the struggle and defense of ideals such as freedom, justice, peace, equity, and human dignity. The thousands of people dedicated to religious life who devote their existence to serving others, as well as the contributions of art, poetry, music, literature, religion, and philosophy, demonstrate how these areas promote humanism in our societies.

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The objective of this work is to analyze religion and theology in light of the challenges of transhumanism. This research is methodologically robust, based on a qualitative approach using hermeneutics and exegesis as fundamental tools of analysis.

Scientific and Philosophical Transhumanism: Basic Concepts

Although some ideas about transhumanism can be traced back to the 1923 work of British biochemist Haldane, "Daedalus; or, Science and the Future," where he suggests that technology could be used to enhance human capabilities and envisions a more prosperous and healthy society. In his vision, genetics would be used to boost human capacities, and exogenesis would become a common practice for gestating life (Bostrom, 2011). Julian Huxley is considered one of the pioneers who introduced the term transhumanism in 1946, using it as a synonym for evolutionary humanism to describe how humans can improve themselves through technology, thus reaching a new level of existence (Garcés Castellote & Jiménez Rodríguez, 2016).

In 1962, physics professor Robert Ettinger published a book titled "The Prospect of Immortality," which discusses cryonics, a technique that would allow people to be preserved after death with the hope of being revived in the future. This book is also considered a precursor study of transhumanism (Garcés Castellote & Jiménez Rodríguez, 2016).

In the 1980s, transhumanism began to gain new momentum. Other authors who have delved into this subject include Nick Bostrom, Ray Kurzweil, David Pearce, Aubrey de Grey, Max More, Natasha Vita-More, Julian Savulescu, among others. They agree with the idea that through transhumanism, human capacities can be enhanced through technology. Additionally, the most relevant organizations and institutions that delve into transhumanism are the World Transhumanist Association, the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET), Singularity University, Alcor Life Extension Foundation, among other prestigious institutions, all of which promote transhumanism and conduct research on the technologies that could enable its realization (Garcés Castellote & Jiménez Rodríguez, 2016).

From this perspective, transhumanism is assumed from the belief that technology has the potential to overcome the biological limits of humanity. With this premise, it is believed that people should have the right to enhance their own capabilities, regardless of their social or economic status, a stance that has gained more relevance in recent decades.

Despite this, transhumanism has been understood in different ways. On one hand, it can be considered a futuristic scientific expression with eschatological pretensions, meaning that technoscience has the potential to overcome the biological limits of humanity. On the other hand, it is seen as a materialistic current in the sense that it seeks to enhance human capacities through technological advances. It has also been heavily criticized for being considered to transcend the ethical and social implications of humanity. Its impact could lead to further increasing existing inequality and discrimination, as only people with economic resources could access the technologies that enhance human life.

Despite the criticisms, transhumanism continues to be an important movement that is influencing the way we think about the future of humanity. It is argued that it is possible and desirable to improve the human condition using reason, especially by applying technologies that prevent aging and significantly enhance people's intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities (Garcés Castellote & Jiménez Rodríguez, 2016).

At the same time, it has transformed into an ideology that maintains the moral obligation to enhance the physical and cognitive abilities of the human species, using new technologies to eliminate the undesirable and dispensable aspects of the human condition, such as suffering, disease, aging, and even mortality, with the aim of creating a new posthuman species. This message is presented attractively to people who belong to an economic, scientific, and intellectual elite. But it is not a proposal for everyone.

This notion of human enhancement encompasses any effort, whether temporary or permanent, to overcome the natural limitations of the human body through natural or artificial methods. This term applies to the use of technology for the purpose of choosing or modifying human characteristics, even if the resulting alterations are not natural for humans (Garcés Castellote & Jiménez Rodríguez, 2016). This proposal can be

understood in two directions, one as a form of progress that will allow us to overcome natural limitations, and the other as a threat to the human condition.

Bostrom (2005) suggests that the enhancements proposed by transhumanism can manifest in various ways: either permanently or temporarily, invasively or non-invasively, individually or transmissibly, and encompassing genetic, physical, psychic, or cognitive aspects, as well as affective or moral dimensions. Consequently, these improvements are linked with extending healthy life, eradicating diseases, eliminating unnecessary suffering, and increasing intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities (Garcés Castellote & Jiménez Rodríguez, 2016). While it is true that these proposals offer significant improvement in people's quality of life, they also pose important ethical and social challenges.

For Pearce (2004), the general goals of transhumanism are to achieve superintelligence, super longevity, and superb well-being for all humanity. This author believes that the constant increase in technological advancement, driven by the development of artificial intelligence and the convergence of NBIC technologies (nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technologies, and cognitive sciences), will lead to a technological singularity in the near future.

It is imminent that NBICs will modify the destiny of humanity. Nanotechnology would allow solving a wide range of global problems and creating new materials. Advances in biotechnology would be the basis for designing new drugs and therapies. Cognitive sciences and neuromedicine would expand our knowledge of brain functioning, and the development of information technologies would provide a common language to equip other sciences with computational capacity.

Kurzweil (2012) asserts that technological singularity is a moment when technological progress will accelerate at such a rapid pace that it will have an irreversible impact on human life. This advancement could lead humanity to become a higher form of life, known as posthumans or posthumanity. The technological singularity presents itself as an opportunity to create a better future, but it also represents a challenge that we must address with ethical criteria.

We would be reaching a posthuman era in whose evolution is no longer natural but directed through technology. Where the manipulation of the germline allows modifying the DNA of reproductive cells through the implementation of technoscience, which could become advanced enough to extend to a large part of the human population (Mehlman, 2009). This would mean that humanity could direct its own evolutionary process, which could have a profound impact on human nature.

Transhumanism, from a philosophical perspective, proposes the increasing use of technology to improve human life, creating humans with greater intelligence, immunity to diseases, beauty, and physical strength through fusion with artificial intelligence. It is believed that humans will overcome their present natural state, known as the intermediate state, and overcome their limitations using technologies, thus reaching a phase of self-directed evolution (Alba and Calero, 2023).

Pavlov (2019) argues that from a philosophical standpoint, although posthumanism and transhumanism can be considered two approaches to postmodernism, they present important distinctions. Both address the relationship between humans and other forms of life, but posthumanism focuses on the boundaries between the human and the non-human, while transhumanism explores how humans can perfect themselves through technology (Alba and Calero, 2023).

Meanwhile, Dubrovsky (2013) posits that the main philosophical issue of today's world is the global crisis of civilization caused by an interdependence of global problems, such as climate change, resource scarcity, and increasing inequality, with transhumanism being a real possibility for improving life on the planet (Alba and Calero, 2023).

From a bioethical perspective, Mainetti (2014) defines transhumanism as a techno-futuristic movement with utopian and ideological elements. At the same time, it seeks a self-transformation of the human species, considering human enhancement as a new objective for medicine, going beyond the conventional attention to diseases and health (Alba and Calero, 2023).

Traditionally, the responsibility for human enhancement techniques has fallen on states. However, transhumanists argue that this responsibility should fall on biotechnology and its advances. Therefore, the goals and scope of transhumanism are multiple and varied. It is the use of reason, technology, and science that will allow us to combat poverty and disabilities. But we are moving into a type of society that has generated more inequality as well as a loss of human identity.

Furthermore, Bostrom (2016), who is one of the main advocates of transhumanism, acknowledges that development without proper ethical accompaniment would lead to negative implications, such as increased social inequalities. For this author, the responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means allows us to challenge the evolutionary scale and advance towards a new phase of humanity, where we will improve our well-being and have more control over our lives (Terrones, 2018).

It is important, according to Bostrom (2016), that human enhancement technologies are accessible to everyone, to avoid generating social inequality. Broad access to these technologies could generate collective support for the transhumanist project, as it would expand the horizon of beneficiaries and attract more people to the movement (Terrones, 2018).

In this context, it is inadmissible to risk the existence of humanity, either in the present or the future, under any scientific justification. As Jonas (1995) indicates, it is never ethically acceptable to risk, in decisions of action, the existence or complete essence of the human being. This ethic emphasizes the imperative to preserve the collective existence of humanity, as well as the very essence of the human being, which is questioned by technoscientific experiments (Terrones, 2018).

The technoscientific proposal must be evaluated from a philosophical perspective with responsibility towards the future, avoiding the abuse of our capabilities and ensuring that we do not cause harm under the pretext of enhancement. Uncertainty should serve as an impetus to develop a sense of responsibility, seeking options that truly benefit humanity and applying reasonable doubt to the power and potential of technoscience (Terrones, 2018).

Although transhumanism primarily focuses on the individual enhancement of the human body, it can also serve to overcome limitations imposed by congenital diseases and advance towards equality. New technologies and innovative social systems have the potential to contribute to overcoming these limitations. For example, virtual reality could offer people with disabilities greater autonomy and participation in society.

Death and Transhumanism: A Theological Reflection

One of humanity's primary concerns is the contemplation of death. Accepting our finitude is difficult, and thus, we continuously question our mortality. The promise of immortality and advanced longevity offered by transhumanism becomes an appealing discourse that resonates with our deep desire to avoid death.

Despite this inevitable anguish, the most certain reality for humans is death. The death of the body is as fundamental to our existence as life itself. Our essence and identity are intimately connected to both death and life. However, this fear of death has led us to make great efforts, through technoscience, to find alternatives to prolong life and enhance the human body's capabilities through natural or artificial means.

Transhumanism seeks to overcome the limits of the human condition through technology, including artificial intelligence. It aims to prolong life and well-being for all humanity, but it has yet to surpass pre-established dualisms, such as the separation between the natural and the artificial (Meza-Rueda, 2023). Simultaneously, it proposes overcoming the traditional opposition between the body and the soul, or between mortal flesh and consciousness. To this end, it suggests the technification of consciousness, transforming it into information that can be manipulated by technology.

Currently, science and technology exert significant attraction on humanity with the promise of immortality and perfection. These promises are irresistible because they appeal to our desire to overcome death and imperfection. However, transhumanism, which promotes the use of technology to enhance the human condition, also poses challenges to the validity of Christology, theological anthropology, and eschatology— theological disciplines grounded in Judeo-Christian scriptures (Meza-Rueda, 2023).

For Christianity, death is not the end of existence but a passage to a more perfect and eternal form of life. In this sense, death is a temporary separation of body and soul, with the soul continuing to exist after death. This belief is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who died and rose from the dead. Conversely, for transhumanism, death is an obstacle to be overcome. Through technology, mechanisms are sought to indefinitely extend life or even achieve immortality. This belief is based on the continuous progress of medical and scientific technology (Meza-Rueda, 2023).

The figure of Jesus Christ is fundamental to the development of Christian thought. He embodies the "living hope" derived from the resurrection (1 Peter 1:3). This resurrection demonstrates that death is not the end of our existence but the inevitable path to immortality. This hope drives us to believe in Him and build a life project based on the strength that helps us face the transient challenges of mortal life. Believing in Jesus Christ is an act of liberation from any subjugation and suffering. In contrast, the transhumanist project proposes freeing ourselves from our own body and soul (Meza-Rueda, 2023).

The belief that we have been created in the image and likeness of God, both body and soul, is denied by transhumanism. This movement considers the body as an entity awaiting submission to information from hardware, acting as the memory where consciousness, subjectivity, and intelligence reside. When the body ceases to function for any reason, its information stored in a device can be transferred to another entity, whether semi-human or artificial (Meza-Rueda, 2023).

According to Meza-Rueda (2023), several questions arise for consideration: Which message will be more appealing, that of transhumanism or Christianity? Will we see a reinterpretation of Christianity that responds to the human desire for eternity? Can faith, hope, and love, in their fullness in Christ, give meaning to the death that people fear today? These questions invite us to reflect on the future and destiny of humanity.

Christianity invites us from love and charity to face physical death as a mere transition to eternal life, urging us to maintain belief in hope and faith. This Christian theological vision does not deny the advances of science and technology. However, it considers that these advances should be subject to each person's moral and spiritual values. Science and technology should be used for the good of all humanity, and it is not feasible to blindly trust their unlimited progress, as their advances move in a dichotomy between development and destruction that endanger the evolutionary creation of life on the planet.

In other words, this theological perspective suggests that we should adopt a more realistic and responsible stance. Advances in science and technology can bring great benefits to humanity if applied for the common good, but they also carry significant risks if used irresponsibly. Therefore, it is crucial that an ethics based on principles and spiritual values guides the development of science and technology, with the aim of promoting a new society.

Theology and Religion in the Face of the Challenges of Transhumanism

When addressing transhumanism, we must analyze how its technological advancements affect human life, reflected in developments such as nanorobotics and technological biology that propose new forms of existence. These solutions include the creation of cyberhumans and humanoids. From an ethical perspective, the question arises whether these projects are being implemented responsibly or if they distance us from our essence as human beings.

Transhumanism proposes a world based on technology that advances incessantly and in which artificial intelligence has become the benchmark for control and dominance over human nature (Zamora, 2023). This approach is oriented towards the constant perfection of humanity, which will reach its zenith with the achievement of immortality in the posthuman era.

In this context, it is imperative to foster dialogue between new forms of evangelization and the continuous search for the meaning of life, from the perspective of theology and philosophy. This will allow us to question the individualistic approach of transhumanism, which seeks to separate humans from their essence and social relationships. Instead, we should advocate for technology that is oriented toward the well-being of

life and not the destruction of nature. This technology should move away from the pretext of building a new robotized era mediated by artificial intelligence, which diverges from the essence of life itself (Zamora, 2023).

It is worth asking: How far will experiments with humans and robots go? Is the effort being invested justifiable? What kind of theological reflection can we make in the face of technoscience? These questions bring into tension the topics we have addressed so far. Indeed, we find ourselves in two parallel realities, where the need to strengthen a culture of alterity, interculturality, and dialogue of knowledge becomes increasingly evident.

It is essential to recognize the other in their essence, as the richness of humanity lies in understanding our social interdependence. As social beings, our existence is intrinsically linked to that of others. The parable of the Good Samaritan exemplifies this truth by teaching us that we must offer help to those who need it most. This approach to life should prevail over any individualistic attitude (Zamora, 2023).

The theological legacy, in this context, adheres to the message of Jesus Christ, which implies recognizing the other as a neighbor, accepting others, and committing to the building of a better world. In this vision, the categories of life, hope, and compassion are fundamental guides to addressing the main challenges humanity faces in the age of globalization and digitalization. Thus, theology seeks to offer responses to the challenges posed by the transhumanist project. In this scenario, theology has the responsibility to contribute to the construction of a new society, guided by Christian principles, as urged by Pope Francis (Zamora, 2023).

Christian theology advocates for establishing the foundations of a new society based on hope, justice, peace, and solidarity. Under Pope Francis's influence, a more inclusive, open, and pluralistic approach has been promoted, calling for listening to the voices of the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable. In this context, the dialogue between theology and other disciplines, such as science, technology, and philosophy, becomes crucial.

Transhumanism, as a project, presents a paradigm of equal or greater magnitude than that proposed by modernity, in which the religious vision is excluded. Although transhumanism offers numerous possibilities for scientific and technological advancement, it does not contribute to the development of human life in crucial aspects such as freedom, justice, equality, and spirituality.

Indeed, the project of modernity, based on instrumental rationality, market logic, and science, promised to create a more just and equitable society. However, in practice, it only served to deepen inequalities and strengthen the hegemonic centers of power.

Modernity, with its ideal of an autonomous and free individual, has generated a fragmented and unequal society. This is reflected in the massification of the individual, the coexistence of utilitarian groups, social inequalities, violence, spiritual poverty, damage to the planet and its resources. Added to this are the millions of human lives lost due to extreme economic poverty. All these evils demonstrate that modernity did not resolve humanity's true problems (Mafla, 2023).

Transhumanism represents an ambitious project that proposes using technology to improve the human being in every sense, to achieve perfection and immortality. This project is based on fulfilling the most universal desires and aspirations of humans, such as the desire not to die, the desire for autonomy, the desire for freedom, the desire for improvement, and the desire for perfection. These desires are the driving force behind the dialectical spirit of human existence, that is, humanity's constant movement towards overcoming and transformation (Mafla, 2023).

However, Mafla (2023) points out that it is not the desires of the aboriginal men and women of the Amazon or Australia that prevail, whose spirits are clearly akin to nature, Pachamama, and Abya Yala. It is the desires of the great hegemonic centers of power that prevail, in whose hands rest the science, technology, and economic resources sufficient to carry out these pretensions of such magnitude.

Despite facing various challenges, religion continues to exert significant influence as a spiritual and moral reference today. It provides meaning and purpose to life, offers unconditional support, and fosters initiatives

of social intervention. Religion continues to support those who actively practice their faith, not only through prayer but also through concrete actions of solidarity, justice, and assistance to those in need (Mafla, 2023).

Thus, in societies seeking to advance towards transhumanism, the role of religion is to foster awareness of the existence of the other. This implies promoting an ethics of alterity that facilitates the understanding that it is through accompaniment, help, and the charisma of others that a better world can be built. This approach is based on values of respect, consensus, and dialogue, and recognizes the importance of collaboration and human interaction in the pursuit of collective progress (Mafla, 2023).

By focusing attention on the existence of others, religion promotes values of compassion, mercy, and solidarity, exerting a significant moral and spiritual influence in the formation of new societies, as aspired by transhumanism. Through the promotion of ethics based on alterity, religion can be crucial in creating a world that values and respects each person to the fullest.

Science, technology, and religion possess significant potential to benefit humanity but also carry risks if handled irresponsibly. The accelerated advancement of science and technology raises uncertainties about their future impacts on humanity. To ensure their optimal utilization, religion could play a role as a guarantor of ethical and moral principles, providing guidance for their responsible application and considering the long-term implications for humanity's well-being.

We face two realities with diametrically opposed worldviews. The impact of these realities will depend on the actors who direct their principles and how this influence humanity positively. If these realities do not exclude each other, the diversity of thought can persist, if experimentation with technoscience does not lead to the destruction of life on the planet. If science, technology, and religion fail to rectify this human attitude, we will be on the brink of the abyss between life and death.

CONCLUSIONS

Transhumanism presents an ambitious project for a posthuman era. However, it is concerning to observe how our planet faces growing limitations, evidenced by the persistence of problems such as poverty, violence, the spread of diseases, and the depletion of natural resources. Additionally, there is the narcissistic and arrogant individualism of current political and economic leaders. In this context, the vision of a posthuman society still does not provide effective answers to these global challenges that affect our societies.

This work invites us to rethink the possible scenarios humanity faces in a transhuman society that challenges natural and divine laws. Interdisciplinary contributions are essential to accompany advances in technoscience, ensuring they are managed in a way that does not stray from religion and theology. These, along with the human sciences, will be essential in shaping more sustainable, equitable, and conscious progress for humanity.

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