Article

The Pilgrim's Progress or Regress? The Case of Transhumanism and Deification

Kimbell Kornu (ID)

Office of the Provost, Thomas F. Frist, Jr. College of Medicine, School of Theology and Christian Ministry, Belmont University, Nashville, TN 37212, USA; kimbell.kornu@belmont.edu

Abstract: Transhumanism presents a view of human progress by transcending the human, regarding finitude and suffering to be fundamental problems that must be overcome by radical bioenhancement technologies. Recent theologians have compared Christianity and transhumanism as competing deifications via grace and technology, respectively. Ron Cole-Turner is a cautious yet optimistic interpreter of the relationship between Christian deification and transhumanism, regarding them, on the one hand, to be incompatible based on self-centeredness vs. kenosis, while on the other hand, they can be compatible through a robust theology of creation and transfiguration such that creative human efforts via technology will be an active agent in transforming the world in glory. In this way, Christian transhumanism offers a vision of human progress in deification that transfigures creation through technology. In this paper, I challenge this proposal. I wish to show how transhumanism in any stripe, whether secular, Christian, or other, is fundamentally incompatible with Christian deification for two reasons: (1) incompatible views of progress and (2) incompatible views of human agency in deification. I will address each in turn. I then propose that human progress is infinite growth in the love of Christ. Finally, I suggest how a view of human agency affects how we think about suffering as a means to human progress.

Keywords: progress; transhumanism; deification; human agency; suffering; Gregory of Nyssa; Maximus the Confessor; Francis Bacon; Friedrich Nietzsche

1. Introduction

An overarching goal of modern medicine is continual progress in relieving the human condition. Who would not want to find a cure for dementia? Or cancer? What about a "cure" for suffering? Or what about a "cure" for aging and death? In medicine's quest for techno-medical progress, what do we lose?

Let me tell a story. When I was a college student, my older sister Lillian was diagnosed with leukemia. But she had the kind of leukemia typically found in white men over 60, not Asian women under 30. She went through monthly chemotherapy, radiation, and ultimately a bone marrow transplant at one of the premier cancer hospitals in the world, which boasts about its continual progress in treating cancer. During the post-transplant period, Lillian had a bone marrow biopsy that revealed no cancer cells. Techno-medical progress, indeed! However, she also needed a liver biopsy to check for possible complications of the transplant. For unclear reasons, the liver biopsy was the beginning of a medical chain reaction that resulted in respiratory failure and eventual mechanical ventilation. Lillian was gravely ill. Since the liver biopsy seemed to be an inciting medical event, my family and I wanted to speak with the liver doctor who performed the biopsy. To our dismay, we were told by a nurse that the doctor was not going to speak with us because he only deals with the liver, not with the lungs. We were dumbfounded at his cold response that reduced my sister down to her liver. Sadly, she died not long thereafter. My family had experienced both medical progress and moral regress, all in one fell swoop.

This techno-medical progress is a part of the logic of modern medicine.[1] Although I am a physician, I am critical of modern medicine in terms of its internal logic: it has

Baconian and Nietzschean impulses that feed into each other. Francis Bacon, the early modern philosopher, is known for what has been called the Baconian Project: mastering nature through experimental knowledge to relieve the human condition (McKenny 1997). Following this turn to knowledge as power, medicine's Nietzschean streak is to wield scientific knowledge as a will-to-power. To master nature is to bend it under our will to realize our projects of self-actualization. So, for Bacon and Nietzsche together, the logic of modern medicine is to exercise will-to-power for the sake of relieving the human condition.

What about transhumanism? It is the technological fulfillment of this logic of modern medicine. Transhumanism serves as an important limit case for helping us think through what human progress really means and what it should look like.

The primary goal of transhumanism is to progress beyond the human. The transhumanist organization Humanity+ formally defines "transhumanism" in two parts:

(1)   The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally *improving the human condition* through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available *technologies* to *eliminate aging* and to *greatly enhance* human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.

(2)   The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to *overcome fundamental human limitations*, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies.[2]

Looking more closely at the definition, we can highlight the major themes of transhumanism: power, radical life extension, maximizing intellectual capacity, and freedom to overcome finitude, all through radical biotechnological enhancement. In improving the human condition, the transhumanist project seeks to conquer suffering and death[3] through a "techno-can-do-ism" (Peters 2015).

Recent theologians have actively engaged transhumanism showing their differences and affinities with Christianity through the doctrine of deification. Ron Cole-Turner has been a cautious yet optimistic interpreter of how transhumanism and deification relate to one another. On the one hand, Cole-Turner clearly delineates secular transhumanism and biblical deification as mutually exclusive. The goal of secular transhumanism is a never-ending self-expansion and self-protection, not other-oriented. For Cole-Turner, biblical deification or *theosis*, however, is essentially about self-emptying of one's own self-centered will, desire, and power. In other words, this self-emptying is kenosis. Thus, *theosis* is kenosis: one must embrace and live a collective, cruciform life to challenge the culture of human enhancement (Ron Cole-Turner 2018).

On the other hand, Cole-Turner claims that "transhumanism" is not a secular concept but rather is Christian. He traces the idea of transhumanism back to Dante in the term *trasumanar*[4]. *Trasumanar* can be translated as "passing beyond the human" or "transhumanizing". Dante invented the word *trasumanar* to describe how a great transformation lies ahead for humans on their way from grace to glory. This way of glorification is rooted in the incarnation, in God becoming human so that humans can become God. In this way, transhumanism is essentially deification. Cole-Turner considers technology to be a proper way for humans to participate in the transformation of humans and creation, as long as it is credited as God's work. The end of Christian transhumanism is the transfiguration of humanity and the rest of creation in Christ (Ronald Cole-Turner 2015).

Cole-Turner's proposal is alluring. On the one hand, he does not want to conflate transhumanism and deification when it comes to its moral core: self-centeredness flies in the face of the gospel of the kenotic Christ of Philippians 2. On the other hand, he seeks to carve out a space for a robust theology of creation and transfiguration such that creative human efforts through technology will be an active agent in transforming the world in glory.

However, I challenge this proposal. I wish to show how transhumanism in any stripe, whether secular, Christian, or other, is fundamentally incompatible with Christian deification for two reasons: (1) incompatible views of progress and (2) incompatible views of human agency in deification. I will address each in turn. I then propose that human

progress is infinite growth in the love of Christ. Finally, I suggest how a view of human agency affects how we think about suffering as a means to human progress.

2. Perpetual Progress

Gregory of Nyssa is known for developing the notion of "perpetual progress" (Ferguson 1973; Blowers 1992). Perpetual progress entails both the moral life and the mystical life, through a never-ending deepening participation in the life of God with a never-ending growth in virtue. This perpetual progress is the highest calling for human beings. The conditions of possibility for perpetual progress are the mutability of humans and the infinity of God. Human mutability entails change and movement, whereas the infinity of God is the source and goal of that movement, so God is immutable (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, prologue 5, prologue 7, p. 30).

Before Gregory, human mutability was thought to be like a curse of cyclical change but ultimately without progress. Instead, Gregory of Nyssa saw a virtue in human mutability: that human beings can change means that it is now possible to improve. Creation itself was a change from non-being to being. So, creation itself is a primary, natural movement of created being in progress (Danielou 1997, pp. 47–53). But such a notion of progress and human changeableness for the better could easily be a transhumanist idea. So here is a key question: progress into what, and for what?

Gregory has been regarded as the first in the philosophical tradition to attribute to God a positive infinity. For Greek thought, rationality and goodness required order and boundaries, so infinity is irrational and chaotic because it lacks boundaries and thus should be avoided (Achtner 2011). Gregory turns that on its head and regards the infinity of God to be the very source of his beauty and goodness. An infinite God is, on the one hand, necessarily incomprehensible so as not to be tamed by human reason, but, on the other hand, God overflows in goodness and beauty (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, 2.162–163, 2.165, p. 95; 2013, Homily 11, p. 339).

For Gregory, the nature of God is the nature of perfection. If God is infinite, then perfection is infinite. If perfection is the goal of human virtue, then the goal of the virtuous life is infinite. But if humans are mutable and thus finite, how can they attain the infinite? Gregory grants that humans must have an infinite desire to seek the infinite God so that there is a match between the subject and object of perfection. This infinite desire for and growth in God is how Gregory of Nyssa interprets Philippians 3:13 (ESV): "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead". The "straining forward" is *epektasis*, a never-ending upward ascent into the life of God. Each step of the way in this never-ending movement is a new beginning (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, 2.225, p. 113). If God is infinite, then there is an infinity of new beginnings in the divine life and an infinite growth in virtue into the life of God since God is virtue (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, prologue 7, p. 31; 2013, Homily 8, pp. 259–61). As one increases in progress, God gives an increase in desire, so that perpetual progress is a virtuous spiral upward (Gregory of Nyssa 2013, Homily 5, pp. 171–73). Since perfection is infinite, the limit of human perfection is that there is no limit. Perpetual progress constitutes perfection (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, prologue 10, p. 31). Perpetual progress into the divine life means ever-becoming more like God. Through a never-satisfied desire and a never-ending growth, the goal of perpetual progress is deification (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, 2.318, p. 136).

It is important to point out that mutable human perfection without limit can easily sound like a transhumanist. In fact, Cole-Turner makes this exact argument. He draws on Gregory of Nyssa to make two important claims: (1) insofar as God is unlimited, stages of transformation and entry are unlimited; and (2) no specific human definition can be given for the human goal or for the meaning of human perfection. He concludes that Christian theology's contribution to the debate over the goal of human enhancement is to say that there is no goal (Ron Cole-Turner 2022). In this way, technological progress and divine progress are one.

In *The Origins of Neoliberalism*, Dotan Leshem picks up the themes of infinite desire and infinite growth and applies them to economic history (Leshem 2016, pp. 91–96). Gregory of Nyssa is a seminal figure in Leshem's telling of economic history because desire fulfillment is made to be the goal of human life, and divine excess is put at the center of human existence individually and socially. Perpetual progress is not simply a personal striving to be like God; rather it becomes the very engine for an economic system. We have infinite desire and we have infinite growth. Gregory of Nyssa provides the philosophical and theological foundation for neoliberalism, in which everything is a market for desire fulfillment with the goal of never-ending economic growth. It is economic perpetual progress.

I am not interested in further pursuing the notion of economic progress, but Leshem's method is suggestive for our purposes. Instead of economics, what if we applied infinite desire and infinite growth to enhancement technologies? For transhumanism, there is an infinite desire for self-fulfillment and self-love, manifested in power and control.[5] Herein lies a major difference between Christian deification and transhumanism: desire and growth in divine love vs. desire and growth in self-love. There is a vast difference between moral progress and moral regress.

Gregory of Nyssa accounts for these two paths. Humans have the power of choice to shape one's life towards virtue or vice as if begetting themselves anew (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, 2.3, pp. 55–56). If one goes on a path that is dominated by passions and disordered desire, then one becomes less than human: "Being a man by nature and becoming a beast by passion, this kind of person exhibits an amphibious form of life ambiguous in nature" (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, 2.70, p. 70). Desiring self-love makes one less than human. So, the transhumanist infinite desire for improving the human condition and increasing the will-to-power may advance technological progress but devolve into moral and ontological regress.

But how did we get to this point where it is possible to consider technological progress to be good at the expense of moral regress? How could we gain the whole world and yet lose our souls? There is a tale of two progresses, whereby "progress" was transformed through a new understanding of science.

3. Tale of Two Progresses

The transformation of science and its philosophy of nature provides the philosophical and historical background for how transhumanism became paradigmatic of infinite progress of mastery over nature, including our own bodies. The change in how we understand the practice of science was accompanied by how we understand the essence of nature and humanity's relationship to nature, epitomized in Francis Bacon's transformation of natural philosophy and Nietzsche's modification of Darwinian evolution that gives priority to power and control.

Drawing on Peter Harrison's story of the historical relationship between science and religion, the transformation of science from a virtue to a body of knowledge created the conditions for infinite progress in mastery over nature. Science as it is currently understood is a recent invention since the early modern period. *Scientia* was initially understood to be an intellectual virtue, but through a process of objectification, "science" became a body of practice and knowledge (Harrison 2015, pp. ix–x).

Before the seventeenth century, *scientia* was primarily a personal quality. Virtue is not merely moral but also a habit that perfects the powers that the individual possesses. *Scientia* is an intellectual virtue, a habit of mind that is gradually acquired through rehearsal of logical demonstrations, such as studying geometry. The purpose of science was to grow in clear and ordered thinking as an interior quality of the mind. However, after the seventeenth century, "science" became a system of belief and practice, and the purpose and method of gaining knowledge changed. *Scientia* was transformed from an interior quality as an intellectual virtue to "science" as an objectification of method and doctrine. With the change from the pre-modern understanding of *scientia* to the early modern understanding of science, there was an inversion of internal and external aims. In the pre-modern under-

standing, scientific knowledge was instrumental for the purpose of growing the intellectual virtue of *scientia*—that is, the habit of clear and ordered thinking—whereas the intellectual virtue of *scientia* became an instrumental, rational procedure for the production of scientific knowledge (Harrison 2015, pp. 1–19).

So how does this apply to the infinite progress of mastery over nature? Harrison tells a long history that starts with ancient Greek philosophy and the early Church. There were two common ancient assumptions. First, moral order was built into the structure of the cosmos. For example, for Plato, the mathematical study of the cosmos contributed to the moral and intellectual formation of the philosopher. Second, natural philosophy was essential for moral and spiritual formation. Knowledge of nature allowed the philosopher to align her life with the rational principle that animates the cosmos. Natural philosophy was a spiritual exercise that helped transform the philosopher's mode of seeing and being, leading to a spiritual ascent to the mind of God. Early Christianity was not a "religion" but understood as a new kind of philosophy, which was a way of life. The only way to understand Christianity as a philosophy is if philosophy is primarily concerned with moral and spiritual formation. Christian spiritual formation occurred, in part, through natural philosophy because it was a form of spiritual practice. The Christian contemplated visible things through natural philosophy and then progressed to the invisible things of truths about God (Harrison 2015, pp. 21–54). Studying nature was meant to transform the one doing the studying to have new spiritual eyes to see the divine through nature.

However, during the early modern period, this framework was turned on its head. Central to the pre-modern understanding of nature was the Aristotelian framework of four-fold causation. Natural entities have formal, final, material, and efficient causes. Formal cause identifies what the entity is, and the final cause is the intrinsic purpose of the entity. In the early modern period, the conception of nature with an intrinsic teleology was challenged (Oliver 2013). Modern science set aside formal and final causes and focused exclusively on material and efficient causes (Burtt 2003). Virtue understood as both moral qualities of persons and inherent dispositions of natural bodies was overturned. This meant that nature no longer had an inherent purpose. The understanding of nature in terms of intrinsic teleology changed to laws of nature. The goodness and order of nature were no longer intrinsic to nature but rather became dictated by the will of God, manifested in God's law and, consequently, the laws of nature. The laws of nature governed a kind of extrinsic teleology—that is, will imposed upon nature. The imposition of God's will upon nature shaped the scientific imagination to impose human will upon nature (Funkenstein 1986). Nature becomes a standing reserve for humans to manipulate, control, and bend to their wills (Heidegger 1977).

What results is a transference from inward dominion to outward dominion. The notion of dominion over one's inner passions and inner nature became externally transferred to dominion over the nature outside oneself (Harrison 2015, p. 90). The shift from inward to outward dominion was inaugurated by Francis Bacon's transformation of natural philosophy. Bacon re-oriented the purpose of natural philosophy away from the growth of moral and intellectual virtue toward a new goal of relieving the human condition, called the Baconian Project (McKenny 1997). Not surprisingly, transhumanists claim Francis Bacon as an inspiration for their philosophy. What is often missed is that the Baconian Project was a kind of theological project: scientific experimental knowledge enabled a return to Eden and sovereign dominion over nature (Wolyniak 2015).

Bacon's natural philosophy has the two key elements of utility and progress, characterized by dominion over nature. The utility of knowledge reflects the changing view of knowledge from self-improvement to usefulness. Knowledge is only good if it wields power to help relieve the human condition. For Bacon, knowledge is power: "those two goals of man, knowledge and power, a pair of twins, are really come to the same thing" (Bacon 2000, p. 24). Progress also took on new meaning. Pre-modern progress was teleological and personal: human progress is the natural motion of the individual toward the goals of wisdom and virtue, fulfilled in life with God, which we saw in Gregory of Nyssa.

In contrast, modern progress is objective and cognitive in an ever-increasing external body of knowledge, like an encyclopedia. Instead of nature being a source of self-improvement through contemplation, nature becomes the object of improvement. The goal of progress is not personal improvement but rather contributing to an external body of knowledge. The utility of progress is growing a mass of information for the purpose of materially improving human welfare. The means of progress is technological since it exerts ever-greater power over nature.

The difference between pre-modern progress versus modern progress is clear. Pre-modern progress is dominion over one's nature and its passions. Controlling passions enables growth in virtue. Modern progress is dominion over nature and the exercise of control over the natural world. Bacon separated self-dominion from physical dominion over nature. Self-dominion was relegated to faith and religion and had nothing to do with nature outside of humans. Physical dominion over nature was exercised through the experimental sciences. Baconian natural philosophy seeks transformation of the world rather than the soul of the philosopher. Bacon proclaims, "our design is to discover whether in truth we can lay firmer foundations for human power and human greatness, and extend their limits more widely" (Bacon 2000, p. 90). The progress of natural philosophy is dominion over nature for the sake of relieving the human condition. Natural philosophy lost the core element of the virtuous progress of the inward transformation of the mind (Harrison 2015, pp. 117–44).

Now that we have seen how progress has been transformed through a new understanding of science as mastery over nature, we can see how it speaks directly to discourse on transhumanism and deification. I want to take seriously Ron Cole-Turner's suggestion that the two most important diagnostic questions in theology's engagement with transhumanism are how we think about evolution and technology. Rooted in a materialist philosophy, transhumanism affirms Darwinian evolution but thinks that evolution should be enhanced for the purpose of human enhancement since waiting and relying upon Darwinian evolution for human fitness is too slow of a process. Rather, precisely because of the Baconian moral imperative to relieve the human condition, radical enhancement technologies should accelerate and direct evolution. They could redefine what it is to be human or even go beyond the human by linking Darwinian evolution with what has been called "enhancement evolution" (Harris 2010, p. 24). The notion of "directed evolution" has been challenged as incoherent since, by definition, Darwinian evolution is blind, random, and not willfully purposeful, while transhumanism is inherently purposeful towards breaking the bonds of biological evolution (Askland 2011). So, is directed evolution incoherent?

A Nietzschean Darwinist evolution provides the way forward for transhumanist-directed evolution. It is rooted in a Nietzschean "power ontology". Power ontology means that there is an ontic priority given to will-to-power, such that will-to-power is a kind of cosmic force that drives all things. Nietzsche is unsatisfied with mere mechanistic explanations because they still don't explain the "why" of things. However, will-to-power does explain the nature of things (Richardson 2004). What happens when power ontology is applied to evolution and humans?

The power ontology in evolution selects power as a strategy that outcompetes all other strategies for fitness maximization. Power as a competitive strategy entails control over nature and the environment. Nietzschean Darwinian evolution presumes the necessity of direct struggle between organisms. Selection for will-to-power is a result of the Darwinist direct struggle among organisms, as it is a naturalistic explanation for organismic drives for control. Humans are the pinnacle in Nietzsche's conception of evolution. The "good" of human beings is the preservation of the human species through a drive for power, which "constitutes *the essence* of our species and herd" (Nietzsche 2001, §1, p. 27, emphasis original).[6] The essence of Nietzschean Darwinist evolution is power and control over nature. We can see how this applies directly to transhumanism and its notion of directed evolution. Through the power of radical bioenhancement technologies, humans can fulfill their "natural" goal of power and control over nature, including the nature of

their own physical bodies through enhancement or even leaving their bodies behind in the maximization of power and control. Even leaving the body behind follows Nietzsche's logic of nature and will-to-power. When Nietzsche famously declares, "*Long live physics!*", he is proclaiming that human beings must become physicists to be creators—that is, humans must understand the natural laws of necessity in order to overcome necessity and thereby self-create: "We, however, want to *become who we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves! To that end we must become the best students and discoverers of everything lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be creators in this sense" (Nietzsche 2001, §335, p. 189, emphasis original).

So here is the rub: the Nietzschean power ontology of evolution aligns with the Baconian project of relieving the human estate by exercising dominion over nature. The Nietzschean power ontology of will-to-power to maximize power answers the urgent call of the Baconian Project to relieve the human estate. This Nietzschean and Baconian coupling provides the philosophical underpinning for transhumanism, which is an infinite progress of dominion over nature through will-to-power for the purpose of relieving and improving the human condition.[7]

Transhumanism as a kind of self-deification is not only a problem of lust for power and control over nature through technology. Nor is it merely a problem of how one directs the will for self-exaltation or self-denial. Based on Nietzsche's power ontology, transhumanism presupposes a metaphysics of nature that begins and ends with power. Evolution should be "enhanced" because humans have the moral imperative to go beyond being human and superhuman (*Übermensch*). But this is not the only way to understand the essence of nature. Rather, the metaphysics of nature ought to begin and end with love, which underscores a different kind of agency and directly shapes how to understand deification. So, the opposition between transhumanism and deification can be grounded upon an opposition between philosophies of nature either rooted in power or in love. Transhumanism has a Nietzschean Darwinian power ontology that exalts will-to-power with endless effort, whereas Christian deification assumes a created nature that is directed towards God in ever-moving rest. The two opposing agencies are active effort vs. active receptivity. This follows two opposing progresses of power vs. love.

4. Human Agency: Active Effort vs. Active Receptivity

The Christian way to understand human agency, transhumanism, and deification must contrast the active effort of transhumanism and the active receptivity of deification. Simone Kotva has recently shown that within the recent discussion of philosophy as a spiritual exercise, a division has been set up between active effort and passive receptivity (Kotva 2020). Kotva draws on the insights of Simone Weil, who sets up a distinction between "muscular effort" and "negative effort" (Weil 2009, pp. 57–66). Muscular effort is the elevation of effort in praise of the virtue of activity and human accomplishment. In contrast, negative effort is inspired by the tradition of Augustinian mystical prayer, which recognizes that not all things are under our control through positive technique. Rather, mystical prayer entails the passive receptivity of relaxation, effortlessness, and desire. Following the model of mystical prayer, philosophy as spiritual exercise entails both activity and passivity, willing and waiting, effort and grace, such that it does not depend solely on active effort—that is, not on will-to-power—but rather is paradoxically enmeshed with passive receptivity. Taken together, active effort and passive receptivity combine in a singular action in what I call active receptivity.

Active receptivity entails effort, but it is a negative effort, which Weil calls the effort of attention. Attention is not pure activity in contrast to inactivity. Rather, attention is an active receptivity. Weil applies the notion of attention to school studies and connects it to prayer. For example, in the effort of trying to solve a problem in geometry, even if there is no sense of progress after an hour, there is still progress being made each minute. For Weil, there is "another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this

apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer" (Weil 2009, p. 58). In other words, endlessly striving to solve the geometry problem will not bring about the solution. Instead, in following the model of prayer, one must expend intellectual effort, but then must effortlessly receive the light that illumines the mind. This light is the light of desire, for "the intelligence can only be led by desire" (Weil 2009, p. 61). The substance of this desire is pleasure and joy in the work at hand. The joy of work is what makes work a spiritual exercise, "for desire directed toward God is the only power capable of raising the soul" (Weil 2009, p. 61). Practicing the effort of attention "will help form in them the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer" (Weil 2009, p. 59). One must expend active effort to accomplish something but passively receive grace. Indeed, accomplishment is ultimately a gift to be received: "We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them" (Weil 2009, p. 62). As Kotva puts it succinctly, "In the organic as well as the moral life, active effort and passive receptivity depend upon one another" (Kotva 2020, xii).

Maximus the Confessor developed the concept of an agency of active receptivity in his doctrine of deification and wedded it to infinite progress in love. His own philosophy of nature puts Christ at the heart of creation, as he makes Colossians 1:16–17 a metaphysical truism: "for by him all things were created…and in him all things hold together". For Maximus, to articulate a philosophy of nature is to articulate a Christological metaphysics of love.

Maximus's doctrine of the two wills of Christ brings together both suffering and Christ to show how suffering plays into deification, and it acts as a powerful critique of the transhumanist will-to-power, summarized in the Transhumanist Declaration, propositions #8 and #1, respectively: "We favour allowing individuals wide personal choice over how they enable their lives"; and "We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, [and] involuntary suffering".[8] Taken together, will-to-power works to overcome limitations in life, intellect, and suffering, all through active effort.

In direct contrast to the intuition that suffering must be overcome, Maximus's doctrine of the two wills of Christ gives primacy to the importance of the suffering of Jesus in Gethsemane, which enables deification and provides the paradigmatic model of active receptivity. It is significant that the account of Jesus in Gethsemane focuses on Christ in prayer. Prayer is the paradigm for active receptivity: one actively prays but must wait to receive grace from God. A related point is that the manner in which one responds to suffering is also an important instance of active receptivity. In suffering, one submits to the affliction but responds in faith, hope, and love to what God will give. In the love of the Son for the Father and for the sake of deification, the human will of Christ perfectly aligns with the divine will.[9]

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the human free will of Christ needed to reverse death since death entered the world by the exercise of free will in the Garden of Eden (Maximos the Confessor 2014, PG 91.1076AB). Christ submitted his human will to the divine will, foregoing active effort of human will, and instead accepted the divine will, which then deified his human will. In submission, Christ suffered, which manifested as sweating blood. Sweating blood is an identified medical condition called hematidrosis, typically found in persons who experience extreme mental anguish, such as acute fear of death (Holoubek and Holoubek 1996). Gethsemane was the occasion to demonstrate two things: (1) the weakness of Christ's flesh according to human flesh and (2) the perfect concordance between the Father's will and the human will (Maximus the Confessor 1996, PG 91.80C–D, 81C–84A). Christ's suffering in Gethsemane was the redemptive precondition to allow the liberation of the human will to align with the Father's will, for "although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8) (Blowers 2016, p. 234). Christ deified human nature through the hypostatic union and demonstrated that deification entails obedient sonship to the Father (Maximus the Confessor 1996, PG 91.77B–80B). For

human nature to be truly free, it must submit to the divine will. Those with a deified human nature obey the Father's will.

Expanding beyond the will, Maximus gives an account of cosmic motion, which Adam Cooper calls a "metaphysics of created desire" (Cooper 2015, p. 363). This metaphysics culminates in an ever-moving repose of an eschatology of active receptivity, which counters the transhumanist endless striving of active effort. Maximus's metaphysics is fundamentally a creaturely metaphysics, which is a study of motion (Balthasar 2003). Its basic structure is the triad of coming-to-be, movement, and rest. Maximus's clearest expression of motion as the mark of creation is found in *Ambiguum 7*, which is a response to Origenism, which holds to the cosmological triad of rest, motion, and becoming with the view that motion is a result of the fall. In contrast, Maximus demonstrates that motion is not a result of the fall but rather constitutive of created existence. Here he is following Gregory of Nyssa (Blowers 1992). For Maximus, created existence is in motion toward its ultimate object of desire in order to be brought to rest (Maximos the Confessor 2014, PG 91:1069B).

We can see that this metaphysics of created desire can be cut both ways. The transhumanist desire is for absolute power over nature through willed active effort, but because the ultimate object of desire has not yet arrived and will never arrive, there can be no rest. In contrast, in Christian deification, the ultimate object of desire is God, the only one who can bring the creature to rest. In other words, rest must be actively received, not strived for.

Maximus goes on to show that rest is not intrinsic to the thing itself because it is not uncaused. If rest were intrinsic, then the thing "would be uncreated, without beginning, and without motion, having no way of being moved toward something else" (Maximos the Confessor 2014, PG 91:1072B–C, pp. 1:81–83). Only that which is uncaused, namely God, transcends motion because he exists for the sake of nothing outside of himself. Thus, all created things are in motion until they have rest in the ultimately desirable who is God the Beautiful (Maximos the Confessor 2014, PG 91:1069D–1072C). "For from God come both our general power of motion (for He is our beginning), and the particular way that we move toward Him (for He is our end)" (Maximos the Confessor 2014, PG 91:1073C, p. 1:87). With God as the beginning, the manner, and the end of one's motion, Maximus describes the order of motion as a motion of ecstatic love culminating in deification (Maximos the Confessor 2014, PG 91:1073C–1076A).

Following the cosmic motion of active receptivity, humans are moved by God through knowing him as the object of love. God moves us by desire for him. Tellingly, Maximus uses the word "suffers". We must receive the beginning of our motion toward Him. But God does not merely implant desire that then follows mechanical necessity. A human person "suffers this ecstasy" of love and "urges [herself] onward" and then accelerates her motion in the manner of active effort. The goal of this accelerated motion is to be completely enveloped by the love of God, but it must be willingly received. The consequence of attaining this goal is deification, signaled by the language of an iron in a forge that is completely penetrated by fire. The one deified retains human nature but is suffused by divine love. In short, Maximus's cosmic motion is a metaphysics of created desire that ends in deification based on an agency of active receptivity. At every step of the way, the motion of love must be received and willed. Maximus's metaphysics of created desire follows this schema: desire for the beautiful → will-to-love → habit of love → true human nature deified and suffused by love.

The active receptivity of deification culminates in ever-moving rest, a paradoxical concept of motion and rest. Ever-moving rest is a complete envelopment of divine love when one is in union with God (Maximos the Confessor 2018, 59.8, pp. 416–18). Maximus uses the language of motion towards the fulfillment of desire in the object of desire. What is significant is the explicit language of participation in the divine realities that transcend nature. In participation, the participant becomes identified with the one who is participating, who is God, and yet the creature maintains ontological differences. In union with God, one is deified. But the nature of this deification is an ever-moving rest. How do we reconcile this paradox? Because God is infinite and is love, the motion of love for the creature is

everlasting. And yet, because the motion of love is completed in union with God by grace, not effort, then there is rest. Ever-moving rest is the eschatology of active receptivity. In contrast, the eschatology of the transhumanist is a never-ending active effort.

5. Suffering as a Means to Progress

What could this deified ever-moving rest look like? Just as suffering for Christ was a means to learning obedience, suffering for us can be a means to human progress in love. As we've seen, transhumanists would just as well eliminate suffering altogether as a goal of progress. Indeed, suffering is not an intrinsic good. Yet, suffering was central to the divine sonship of Christ. In union with Christ, deification occurs, in part, through suffering in our own divine sonship. In Christian deification, one goes beyond the human to become divine, while paradoxically remaining essentially human.

For the apostle Paul, cruciformity is the very character of God, as revealed in the Christ hymn in Philippians 2. Likewise, for us to be like God, we must be cruciform (Gorman 2009, pp. 1–2). Here is how Paul's logic goes: if Christ is the true human, and if the form of God in Christ is cruciform, then true humanity is cruciform. To be like God is to be like Christ. To be like Christ is to be cruciform. In this way, deification (becoming like God) is Christosis (becoming like Christ) (Blackwell 2016). Christosis means living out the crucified Christ in the flesh through suffering.

Christosis is a cruciform transfiguration. Maximus's theology intertwines the cross and transfiguration. Transfiguration is grounded upon the eternal relationship of Father and Son in the context of incarnation. The suffering of Christ is a means of transfiguration since it reveals his divine sonship of the Father. For Maximus, the cross is the logic of the divine economy. Knowing the way of the cross is knowing the depths of God's work in history and creation (Maximus the Confessor 1985, pp. 139–40). Maximus's theology of the cross takes knowing the crucified Christ and elevating it to a cosmic, metaphysical reality.

This cruciform theology lives out power-in-weakness (2 Cor. 12:9–10) and grace through suffering and death. "To become God" is Christosis. This Christosis of power-in-weakness and suffering grace critiques transhumanism's power ontology. Active receptivity of power-in-weakness is true progress, not transhumanist power over nature.

6. Conclusions

We can clearly see the stark difference between the two different progresses. Transhumanist progress culminates the modern, scientific logic of progress through power, control, and active effort that never ends yet never rests and thus never arrives. Human progress comes through improving humans' powers and then going beyond human finitude with radical bioenhancement technologies. But this transhumanist progress that never ends, never rests, and never arrives is ultimately a Sisyphean task. So, transhumanism is not progress but regress.

Christian progress is fulfilled in what we have seen from Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. An infinite God is infinitely beautiful and thus we have a never-ending desire with never-ending growth as we become like God, while paradoxically remaining human. While we strive in prayer and in love for God and for our neighbor, we also receive grace that only God can give. Through active receptivity, we find our ever-moving rest in God. And in love for God, we respond to suffering by remaining obedient to God and growing in conformity with Christ. But also, in love for neighbor, we seek to relieve suffering by, in part, suffering with those who suffer. Together we grow in human progress to become transfigured into the total Christ, in whom our life is hidden. This progress in love isn't flashy, but it is good, true, and beautiful.

Let us return to Lillian's story. When she was first diagnosed with cancer, she never asked, "Why me?" She was so assured of God's love for her that she said, "Why not me?" When she was in medical isolation in the hospital for her bone marrow transplant, she was bald and experiencing bone pain. Imagine that in one hand she held her pain pump, pushing the button during a pain attack, while in the other hand, she held a phone receiver,

giving relationship advice to a friend. Even during pain and isolation, my sister was loving her friend to the end.

During Lillian's memorial service, a close friend shared a story about a note Lillian had written to her during cancer treatment. In the note, she expressed hope and excitement for the future—that her life would be a living testimony of God's love for her. She thanked God that she had cancer. Why? Because cancer forced her to cast off her idols and rely ever more upon God.

Through cancer and death, Lillian progressed as a pilgrim beyond the transhumanist.

Notes

1   What I mean by "logic" is a kind of practical logic, in the sense of general principles and practices that organize a way of knowing and being in the world. See (Bourdieu 1990, p. 86).

2   H+Pedia, "Transhumanist FAQ Live", https://hpluspedia.org/wiki/Transhumanist_FAQ_Live, accessed on 5 June 2024. Emphasis added.

3   See (More 2013, p. 3). For a theological account of how suffering is a means of deification over transhumanism, see (Kornu 2022).

4   Dante, *Paradiso*, I, 70.

5   Cf. "[T]he most immediate expression of the progress of pride is self-love. [...] Love of pleasure begins when power is conceived self-referentially, in the service of self-maintenance and self-protection" (O'Donovan 2015, quotations on pp. 64, 67).

6   Cf. John Richardson commentary: "Nietzsche's will-to-power idea is...a naturalistic thesis about a class of drives—tendencies toward power as control. These drives have control as their explaining goal, insofar as they've been selected for producing it; such drives are widespread, because control is *strongly* selected for" (Richardson 2004, p. 59).

7   Not all transhumanists affirm inspiration from Nietzsche, but affirmation is not important for my argument. For differing views on the role Nietzsche plays in transhumanism, see (Tuncel 2017).

8   H+Pedia, "Transhumanist Declaration", last revised 2009, https://hpluspedia.org/wiki/Transhumanist_Declaration, accessed on 1 November 2023.

9   Over against the position that in Christ there are two natures but one activity and one will, Maximus affirms that Christ has two wills and two activities in accord with two natures. Maximus holds that will is a capacity and process that cannot be removed from activity, and that activity is nature in action. In other words, human beings share a common human nature that exhibits an activity, one of which is will. See (Maximus the Confessor 1996, Opusculum 7, pp. 179–90).

References

Achtner, Wolfgang. 2011. Infinity as a Transformative Concept in Science and Theology. In *Infinity: New Research Frontiers*. Edited by Michael Heller and W. Hugh Woodin. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 19–51.

Askland, Andrew. 2011. The Misnomer of Transhumanism as Directed Evolution. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society* 9: 71–78.

Bacon, Francis. 2000. *The New Organon*. Edited by Lisa Jardine. Translated by Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Balthasar, Hans Urs von. 2003. *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*. Translated by Brian E. Daley. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Blackwell, Ben C. 2016. *Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters*, Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Blowers, Paul M. 1992. Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress'. *Vigiliae Christianae* 46: 151–71. [CrossRef]

Blowers, Paul M. 2016. *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Burtt, Edwin A. 2003. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*. Mineola: Dover Publications.

Cole-Turner, Ron. 2018. Theosis and Human Enhancement. *Theology and Science* 16: 330–42. [CrossRef]

Cole-Turner, Ron. 2022. Techne and Teleios: A Christian Perspective on the Incarnation and Human Enhancement Technology. *Christian Bioethics* 28: 175–84. [CrossRef]

Cole-Turner, Ronald. 2015. Going Beyond the Human: Christians and Other Transhumanists. *Theology and Science* 13: 150–61. [CrossRef]

Cooper, Adam G. 2015. Spiritual Anthropology in Ambiguum 7. In *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*. Edited by Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 360–77.

Danielou, Jean. 1997. *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*. Translated by Herbert Musurillo. Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Ferguson, Everett. 1973. God's Infinity and Man's Mutability: Perpetual Progress according to Gregory of Nyssa. *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18: 59–78.

Funkenstein, Amos. 1986. *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gorman, Michael J. 2009. *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Gregory of Nyssa. 1978. *The Life of Moses*. Translated by Abraham Malherbe, and Everett Ferguson. New York: Paulist Press.

Gregory of Nyssa. 2013. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Translated by Richard A. Norris, Jr. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press.

Harris, John. 2010. *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Harrison, Peter. 2015. *The Territories of Science and Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1977. The Question Concerning Technology. In *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 3–35.

Holoubek, Joe E., and Alice B. Holoubek. 1996. Blood, Sweat and Fear: 'A Classification of Hematidrosis'. *Journal of Medicine* 27: 115–33. [PubMed]

Kornu, Kimbell. 2022. Transfiguration, Not Transhumanism: Suffering as Human Enhancement. *The Heythrop Journal* 63: 926–39. [CrossRef]

Kotva, Simone. 2020. *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Leshem, Dotan. 2016. *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modeling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Maximus the Confessor. 1985. *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*. Translated by George C. Berthold. Classics of Western Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press.

Maximus the Confessor. 1996. *Maximus the Confessor*. Translated by Andrew Louth. New York: Routledge.

Maximos the Confessor. 2014. *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*. Translated by Nicholas Constas. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, vol. 2.

Maximos the Confessor. 2018. *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*. Translated by Maximos Constas. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

McKenny, Gerald P. 1997. *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

More, Max. 2013. The Philosophy of Transhumanism. In *The Transhumanist Reader*. Edited by Max More and Natasha Vita-More. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 3–17.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2001. *Nietzsche: The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff, and Adrian Del Caro. New York: Cambridge University Press.

O'Donovan, Oliver. 2015. Pride's Progress. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28: 59–69. [CrossRef]

Oliver, Simon. 2013. Teleology Revived? Cooperation and the Ends of Nature. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26: 158–65. [CrossRef]

Peters, Ted. 2015. Theologians Testing Transhumanism. *Theology and Science* 13: 130–49. [CrossRef]

Richardson, John. 2004. *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tuncel, Yunus, ed. 2017. *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Weil, Simone. 2009. *Waiting for God*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

Wolyniak, Joseph. 2015. "The Relief of Man's Estate": Transhumanism, the Baconian Project, and the Theological Impetus for Material Salvation. In *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*. Edited by Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen. Santa Barbara: Praeger, pp. 53–70.