Talking about Life in the Public Square

A Review of Podcasts: Transhumanism

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Welcome to our new essay series about life in the public square. *Verba Vitae* seeks to inform and transform the conversation about life and its significance through rigorous, thoughtful, academic theological research. We must acknowledge, however, that that conversation is already occurring, and so it is important that we understand and address what is being discussed in the public square. *Verba Vitae* does this already through its articles and book reviews, but is only able to offer a sampling of what is fully being discussed publicly. It is important to note that this discussion is not confined merely to the pages of academic publications; in the myriad of perspectives in the public square, implications for how society thinks about life and its significance run far and wide. This new essay series seeks to engage with the conversation about life in the public square by exploring the medium of podcast. Long form podcasts allow for serious conversation between experts and the public that is both timely and immediately accessible. The essays in *Verba Vitae* always explore and critique the conversations about the theme of the issue in which they appear, and so in this series we will provide references to other *Verba Vitae* articles on a variety of topics that will help the reader more seriously and critically engage in this conversation about life in the public square.

In the modern-day public square—the medium of the podcast—Christian conversation about transhumanism is a bit muted. Many conversations occur in this medium, including Christian conversations, about topics related to transhumanism, like Artificial Intelligence, but far fewer are willing to take on transhumanism directly. This may be because a thorough examination of transhumanism requires the Christian to ask critical, introspective questions. These questions include not only the anthropological question of what does it mean to be human, but also the question of what does it mean for the human to adopt technologies. The adoption of technologies invariably changes the human experience, transforming the human body in direct and indirect ways. This is the key question in the transhumanism

conversation: what does it mean for the human to adopt technologies that transform the human experience?

For the most part, human beings—and especially Christians in the global north—use some sort of transformative technology. Eyeglasses, insulin pumps, hearing aids, pacemakers, smartwatches and smart glasses are all technologies that have been widely adopted and, in their own way, transform the human body and the human experience. This fact indicates to some degree a minimum assumption that many Christians are bringing to the conversation about transhumanism, albeit perhaps only tacitly. If this is the case, the assumption presupposes that these transformations are in the direction of some standard that currently exceeds the human experience. What that is then demands a standard for what is considered to be "good" for any human being.

These are the hard questions and challenging assumptions with which the Christian must wrestle, especially if one is to enter the conversation in the public square. Fortunately, many other Christian thinkers are engaging in this conversation publicly. To that end, this essay will explore five Christian thinkers who are participating in this conversation in the public square, that is, podcasts: the Rev. Dr. John Pless on *Lead Time*, Professor Steven Jensen on the *Thomistic Institute Podcast*, Dr. Marc Cortez on *Thinking Christian*, Dr. Anna Puzio on *The Dissenter*, and Micah Redding on the *AI & Faith Podcast*. These thinkers span the Christian spectrum from conservative professional academics in seminary study to a lay computer scientist and public advocate, but they are all engaging in the conversation on transhumanism from a Christian perspective.

Professor Jensen, speaking to the Thomistic Institute, a Roman Catholic organization, introduces the listener to the classical, conservative Christian approach to distinguishing what is good, or what is the standard by which the Christian can apply technology to transform the human experience. This is the distinction between treatment and enhancements, or between technologies that restore human function and technologies that augment human performance. Jensen also frames this within the distinction between transformations of the human body that are natural versus unnatural. This distinction is a widely accepted standard within Christian thought, but just because it is accepted does not mean that it is without problems. Even in the cases of treatment, or curative applications of technology, the assumption is made that something is considered undesirable and therefore needs to be transformed instead into something considered desirable.

Dr. Puzio cautions that such distinctions are inherently discriminatory. She argues that what are considered desirable characteristics assume some standard that inherently rejects other standards. As a result, characteristics associated with women, disabilities, and aging are often considered undesirable and subject to

improvement or transformation. This is where medical technologies, including genetic screenings and genetic engineering, demand critical analysis, as is discussed by both Micah Redding and Professor Jensen. For example, Iceland reports that it has almost eliminated Down Syndrome in its population through the use of genetic screening and elective abortion.[1] Such uses of technology assume that Down Syndrome is an undesirable human characteristic in need of transformation or elimination. This basic assumption casts doubt on the validity of any prescriptive measure that follows. Bracketing that critique, the methods that Icelanders followed to achieve this result was a combination of two technologies: genetic screening and abortion are a form of what Jensen calls "liberal eugenics." In liberal eugenics enhancements are offered, not forced, but can be adopted at such a scale as to transform the human characteristics of a population, as seen in Iceland. Puzio shares this concern that transhumanism is rebranded eugenics. Furthermore, she makes the compelling argument that while transhumanism is presented as scientific, good/bad distinctions are, by their very nature, non-scientific. That is, no scientific measure can determine that aging is either good or bad, or that a disability is either good or bad. Those are subjective assessments. Such an inconsistency indicates that significant flaws in the treatment/enhancement distinction exist in the attempt to clearly distinguish what is medicine and what is transhumanism.

If the convention used to make the distinction between treatment and enhancement is insufficient, a new standard is needed. Dr. Cortez and Mr. Redding are two voices who are expressing that need for a new standard in adopting technologies that promise to transform the human experience. Dr. Cortez recognizes that the promise of the resurrection naturally draws the Christian mind to the idea of the transformed human body. However, he stresses that this promise pushes back against the need to transform the human body *now*. Rather, he argues that we need to slow down and consider setting boundaries for adopting technologies that might, at first glance, appear to be "good." As an example, he cites David laying down King Saul's armor in 1 Samuel 17 as an example. Redding offers a more tangible recommendation, suggesting that the standard for adopting technologies should not focus so much on how the body will be transformed, but rather that it should focus on how that transformation will either build up human relationships or break down human relationships. He argues for a relational standard for adopting technologies. He applies this both to medical technologies such as genetic engineering as well as to other forms of technology like Artificial Intelligence and social media.

Redding is arguing from a Christian transhumanist perspective and is in fact an advocate of transhumanism. He largely sees the development of technologies as inevitable and part of the created nature of human beings. He argues from Genesis 1 that human beings were created to be creators, and creating new technologies is part of what it is to be human. Furthermore, he also argues that human beings are

created to be adaptive, both physically and mentally. When he combines these two premises, he concludes that human beings are designed such that they will create new technologies that will transform both the human mind and body. Thus, Redding is not critical of transhumanism *per se*. But where he differs from transhumanism as an ideology, as Puzio would present it, or through its incarnations in radical humanism, radical individualism, or radical environmentalism, all of which Redding himself critiques, is that he does not desire to transform the body to escape the limitations of the body. Rather he wants to optimize the human body toward the *telos* of relationship.

Redding offers a unique perspective on Christian transhumanism, one which itself is flawed and subject to theological critique, but he makes an interesting contribution to the public forum on transhumanism. The focus on relationality as central to the human experience takes us from one end of the spectrum of the conversation to another, highlighting Dr. Pless' interpretation of the *imago Dei* and Christian anthropology to turn one's attention to the *telos* of the gifted body. He argues, like Redding, that "recognizing your embodiment focuses you on what your body is for: serving others." The liberal Redding and the conservative Pless both take the Christian to the same place in their analysis of transhumanism, that the body is a gift given for service (or relationship, or love) for the neighbor. In these conversations in the public square, we find a common standard that the Christian can access when thinking about what it is to be human and what it means for the human to adopt technologies: that to be human, whether one's characteristics are judged by the world to be good or bad, is to be an embodied gift given in love to those with whom you are in relationship.

As is the case in any public conversation (and, of course, recognizing that these thinkers were not directly in conversation with each other), much can be both admired and critiqued. To fully critique one of these conversations, let alone all five, is beyond the limitations of this essay. But it is vital that Christians are engaging in this conversation. As Redding notes, if the Christian does not engage in this conversation, they forgo the opportunity to shape the conversation and risk instead being shaped by the conversation.

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Note

1. See Sarah Klucznik and Holly Slepian, "Iceland's Abortion Policy concerning Children with Down Syndrome: An Ethical Analysis," *The Journal of Healthcare Ethics and Administration* 4, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 45-48, https://doi.org/10.22461/jhea.10.7164. See also the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe story "Declining birth rates of children with Downs Syndrome in the Nordic countries," at https://unric.org/en/declining-birth-rates-of-children-with-downs-syndrome-in-the-nordic-countries/.

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