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The artifice of eternity: transhumanism and theosis

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Abstract

The Christian doctrine of *theosis* teaches that the natural end of creatures is union with the Holy Trinity, the supernatural end of nature – both human and non-human. However, through certain developments in modernity, there occurred a separation of the natural and the supernatural, and later a dualism between nature and culture. In this essay, I argue, one the one side, that a secularised transhumanism can be seen as a parody of *theosis*, now reframed within this modern bifurcation between nature and supernature, replacing teleology with technical efficiency and the beatific vision with an immanentized eschatology. However, on the other side, I also wager that the figure of the transhuman or posthuman does nevertheless challenge the separation of nature and artifice, the human and non-human, and that rather than continuing this unsustainable division we should resource alternative theological traditions that have blended nature and artifice with the aim of articulating a Christian vision of theandric humanism.

Keywords

transhumanism, deification, nature, culture, technology

> *If nature is unjust, change nature!* – Laboria Cuboniks[1]
>
> *Does God exist? I would say, Not yet* – Ray Kurzweil[2]

I

In his seminal and heavily anthologised poem "Sailing to Byzantium",[3] William Butler Yeats imagines a story of an aged man, who while contemplating the ephemerality of things fantasises of being transformed into a golden bird; this fabricated creature, "Of hammered gold and gold enamelling" dwells amongst the Byzantine aristocracy, performing the song of ages: "Of what is past, or passing, or to come". He speaks of a "country" of the young and fertile, of those caught up in that "sensual music", those "dying generations" who ultimately "all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect"; in such a land, ultimately, he feels no longer at home and so he longs for another country, and a form more enduring and aureate in its construction, which – like the poem itself – will outlive the mortal destiny of the poet.

It is probably not particularly surprising, given Yeats's open affiliation with perennialism and the occult, that his poem is a heady bricolage of esoteric metaphysics;[4] but the conceit I want to focus on is the connection between creative artifice and human transformation: the subject of the poem imagines that art itself – the world of music, of painting, architecture, and sculpture – forms a mediation between the immanent and the transcendent, the earthly and the immortal. Here specifically, the poet has in mind the "holy city of Byzantium" and the sacred halls of the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, with its famed mosaics of Christian saints and martyrs. In the poem, he imagines a process of mystical forging and union with the ancient "sages standing in God's holy fire", eliciting them to be "the singing-

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1   *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2018), 93.

2   *Transcendent Man: The Life and Ideas of Ray Kurzweil*, dir. Barry Ptolemy (Film: Ptolemaic Productions, 2009).

3   W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium" from T*he Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition,* ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1933)

4   See Michael Genung, "Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium': The 'Esoteric' Four-Stanza Structure." *Orbis Litterarum* 65, no. 1 (2010): 22–56.

masters of my soul". In this way, the old man imagines a release from his senescence ("Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal"), projecting a union with "the artifice of eternity", so that through such an ordeal his otiose frame and unquenchable longing will find repose within the infinite.

In composing this poetic fable, Yeats is of course alluding to one of the ancient dreams of technology: that through human artifice and ingenuity our species will be able to tap into sources of immortality and preternatural longevity; but as is well-known, and pertinent for our discussion, this is also the imaginary of modern transhumanism, namely, that through scientific and biological enhancement – genetic engineering, nano-/ neurotechnology, the digitalisation of consciousness, radical life extension, etc. – we will be able to overcome the effects of aging, the limitations of organic existence, and eventually death itself. Transhumanism indeed has a redemptive arc and an eschatology;[5] it is a vision dependent upon a religious metanarrative, even as it largely rejects any religious affiliation, and sees itself as an issuance of secular humanism. Several theologians in recent times have remarked upon the formal similarity between transhumanism and theosis.[6] There is a growing body of literature surrounding this, even as there is a concurrent recognition of significant differences between Christian accounts and transhumanism. Some in my local context, such as Kotzé,[7] and others elsewhere, like Gallaher,[8] have written about the "Promethean" and "Satanic" tendencies of "transhumanism", and I agree with their critique of "autodivinisation" and its aversion to finitude and

5   See Michael Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future* (London: Routledge, 2015), 80–109; Brent Waters, "Whose Salvation? Which Eschatology? Transhumanism and Christianity as Contending Salvific Religions," in Ronald Cole-Turner (ed.), *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement* (Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2011), 163–175.

6   For a sample, see Ron Cole-Turner, "Theosis and Human Enhancement." *Theology and Science* 16, no. 3 (2018): 330–342; Eugenia Torrance, "Acquiring Incorruption: Maximian Theosis and Scientific Transhumanism." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no, 2 (2019): 177–186; Todd T. W. Daly, "Chasing Methuselah: Transhumanism and Christian Theosis in Critical Perspective," in *Transhumanism and Transcendence*, 131–144.

7   Manitza Kotzé, "A Christian Doctrine of Sin and Transhumanism in the Public Sphere: The Promethean Concern of Pride." *Scriptura* 119 (2020): 1–13.

8   Brandon Gallaher, "Godmanhood vs Mangodhood: An Eastern Orthodox Response to Transhumanism." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2019): 200–215

vulnerability – as well as its eugenicist logic.[9] My own inevitably schematic argument concerns how the discourse of transhumanism interfaces with the so-called nature/culture distinction and how this connects furthermore to the nature/grace debate within theology. In this essay, I argue, on the one side, that a secularised transhumanism can be seen as a parody of *theosis*, now reframed within a modern bifurcation between nature and supernature, replacing teleology with technical efficiency and the beatific vision with an immanentised eschatology. From the perspective of Christian theology, transhumanism can be read as a secular parody of divinisation: the reduction of "intrinsic" ends with "extrinsic" means, of teleology to efficiency, of organic life to technic.[10] The imaginary of transhumanism betokens an immanentized eschaton[11] and an acceleration of technology and humanity towards their eventual merging in the Singularity.[12] However, on the other side, I wager that the figure of the transhuman or posthuman does nevertheless challenge the separation of nature and artifice, the human and non-human, and that rather than continuing this unsustainable division we should resource theological traditions that have blended nature and artifice with the aim of articulating a Christian vision of *theandric humanism*. But more should be said now about what I mean by the nature/culture interconnection.

II

The interpenetration of the cultural and natural is exemplified today in the Anthropocene and the ecological crisis. In this essay, I centre on the relation between the cultural and the natural as it impinges on the figure of "the transhuman" or "the posthuman". Transhumanism can be seen as one more variation of a nature-culture hybridity, as a technological intervention into biology for the purposes of enhancement. In contesting

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9   David Bentley Hart, "The Anti-Theology of the Body." *The New Atlantis* 9 (Summer 2005): 65–73.

10   Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

11   Cf. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 119–120, here commenting on Joachim of Fiore.

12   There are affinities of style between transhumanism and accelerationist philosophies, but this interrelation will not be the subject of this essay.

transhumanism, I argue that theologising should be weary of a reactionary gesture of constructing an essentialised nature over-against the cultural, the artificial, and the technological. Christian theology, to my mind, can no longer sustain a dualism of the natural and the artificial – by which I mean, in general, that which is *made* or *constructed*. And so I agree, by and large, with those anthropologists and theorists who argue that this division, between nature and culture, is a conceit of late modernity, and therefore should be contextualised and not presupposed as a matter of course. Bruno Latour has argued famously that we have never been modern: we continue to create hybrids of the natural and the cultural,[13] a view seconded by Phillipe Descola[14] and Marshall Sahlins.[15] Latour argued that modernity was constructed through an unstable stratification in which the non-human and human were bifurcated through processes of "translation" and "purification". "Purification" relates to the parsing of nature from culture, while "translation" relates to the creation of hybrids between nature and culture. What Latour calls "the Modern Constitution" was invented on the basis of this purified humanism, the division of the natural world of non-humans from the social worlds of human beings. Nature and culture were shuffled between the orders of transcendence and immanence, objective reality and the socially-constructed, thus continuing a mixture of nature and culture despite their presumed separation. Descola sees this bifurcation as part of a Eurocentric, colonialist imposition, being the product of a nineteenth-century division between the science of nature and the science of culture; moreover, it is predicated on a dualistic cosmology that fluctuates between materialist reductionism and linguistic idealism. Such a methodological and metaphysical reflexivity within anthropology also finds resonance with Bernard Stiegler's account of technicity as the configuration of space and time through what he calls "inorganic organized

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13   Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

14   Philippe Descola, *The Ecology of Others*, trans. Genevieve Godbout and Benjamin P. Luley (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2013).

15   Marshall Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2008).

beings",[16] as well as in the recent "ontological turn" of anthropology,[17] which articulates the permeation of signification throughout the human and non-human worlds – once again demonstrating that the domains of the natural and cultural cannot be parsed into any hardened separation. The cultural production of meaning and sign-making, the relation between matter and mattering, should be seen more as a continuum through differing striations of being rather than as a disjunction.[18] And one may add here the deliverances of quantum theory and entanglement, and their percolating effects on the humanities, as in Karen Barad[19] and Vicky Kirby.[20]

So for philosophical, theological, and practical reasons, this nature/culture dualism appears no longer a viable option – practically because the separation of the natural and cultural is not really achievable, philosophically because it is untenably dualist, and theologically because we are inspired to transcend this bifurcation by the Christian tradition already,[21] by figures like Maximus the Confessor, John Scotus Eriugena, Nicholas Cusanus, and Giambattista Vico, amongst others. In differing ways, these figures have blended the natural and the artificial, and envisioned creativity and "artifice" as always-already a part of the meaning of being itself, since the Trinity is a self-subsistent and self-generating agency of Father, Son, and Spirit.[22] Moreover, there are other more recent figures particularly within

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16   Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time I: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

17   Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

18   This has also been taken up in recent times by theologians like Willie Jennings in his contributions towards a renewed theology of creation – especially in its decolonial and de-anthropocentric movements; Willie James Jennings, "Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (2019): 388–407.

19   Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half-Way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)

20   Vicky Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 68–88.

21   On the metaphysics of this question more generally, see Nathan Lyons, *Signs in the Dust: A Theory of Natural Culture and Cultural Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

22   See Robert C. Miner, *Truth in the Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003); John Milbank, "Religion, Science and Magic: Rewriting the Agenda," in Peter Harrison, John Milbank, Paul Tyson (eds.), *After*

the Catholic tradition – such as Karl Rahner and Teilhard de Chardin – who provide a metaphysical model for engaging questions of the interrelations between human nature, evolutionary development, and technicity in ways comparable though profoundly different from transhumanism.[23]

In this essay, I argue that Christian theology should articulate a reimagined vision of divinisation as the natural and final causality of creation – here in distinction from a postmodern and secular transhumanism that subordinates the body to the machinations of technological "enframing",[24] thus denying supernatural grace as the natural end of all organic beings. On the one hand, I agree with those who say that Christian theology must resist a technologization of being and grace, insofar as it reduces action to a form of instrumentalism and efficiency.[25] However, on the other, I also would like to resist technophobic sentiments as dependent upon a late modern division of the natural and cultural, and that nature, both human and non-human, is always-already imbued with cultural imprints, and that the borders between humanity, non-humanity, and technicity are porous, intersectional, and entangled.[26] Overall, I agree with the conclusion of Celia Deane-Drummond that "Nature-cultures challenge the binary between nature and culture, and by implication, nature and technology,

Science and Religion: Fresh Perspectives from Philosophy and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 75–143.

23   Cf. Ronald Cole-Turner, "Going beyond the Human: Christians and Other Transhumanists." *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2015): 20–26.

24   Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1977), 3–35.

25   See King-Ho Leung, "The Technologisation of Grace and Theology: Metatheological Insights from Transhumanism." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33, no. 4 (2020): 479–495.

26   As Gilbert Simondon says: "there is continuity between the technical and the natural"; *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017), 249. In a commentary on Simondon, Stiegler writes "If one can speak of a *natural* technical evolution, this is because the technical object, in becoming concretized, is in the process of *naturalization*: the concretization of the abstract technical object is its progress toward a naturalness that allows it as well to escape being known, its filiation improbably engendering its becoming beyond the "intellectual system" that gives birth to it. The difference between *phusis* and *tekhnē* thus fades, as if the industrial technical object had engendered a *third milieu* …"; Stiegler, *Technics and Time I*, 77. More generally on this question, see Guglielmo Papagni, "Transhumanism and Philosophy of Technology," in Wolfgang Hofkirchner & Hans-Jörg Kreowski (eds.), *Transhumanism: The Proper Guide to a Posthuman Condition or a Dangerous Idea?* (Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 49–64.

or even nature and the Divine."[27] So instead of sustaining an unworkable spiritual and cosmological dualism between the natural and cultural, the spiritual and the technological, I argue that these entanglements should be rightly ordered and sanctified within a more encompassing theological and spiritual vision, in which the interpenetrations of the social and natural are ordered to a vision of the Holy Trinity and the divinisation of creatures as final causality. Hereby, Christian theology and ethics might recover some of the original Christian impulses within transhumanism or posthumanism, while contesting many of its theoretical assumptions, repurposing for a postmodern age something akin to Dante's Paradiso, which imagined the transhuman or the beyond-the-human as a poetic image for the glorification of creatures: a *theandric humanism*.[28]

III

Nouvelle theologie alerted theologians to how a dualism between nature and supernature is not characteristic of Christian thought throughout history, but rather of early modern developments within scholastic Thomism and nominalism. These traditions led to the invention of *natura pura* (pure nature), the idea that supernatural grace must be an "extrinsic" addition to nature in order for it to remain the free donation of God, and therefore not a "natural" achievement or endowment. However, as Henri de Lubac and others have indicated,[29] this innovation is a departure from the tendencies of early Christianity and the High Middle Ages – exemplified in Aquinas. The tendency of this tradition understood creation's natural orientation as *divinisation*, as being orientated towards a union with the Trinity. Creation so understood and combined with an ontological participation of the finite in the infinite undermines any conceptual dualism or opposition between God and nature, as seen in Eriugena. To quote Aquinas:

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27 Celia Deane-Drummond, "The Technologisation of Life: Theology and the Trans-Human and Trans-Animal Narratives of the Post-Animal," in Celia Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, Bronislaw Szerszynski (eds.), *Technofutures, Nature and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 155.

28 Cf. Hart, "The Anti-Theology of the Body," 71.

29 Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946); John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

> … every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found
> in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it
> belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire. Now … God is
> the essentially self-subsisting Being … [and] subsisting being must be
> one … Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being
> but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things
> which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be
> more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses
> being most perfectly (*Summa theologiae*, I.44.1).[30]

In other words, everything exists only insofar as it exists within God, and
creation has its existence only insofar as God exists, so to speak, "outside"
of Godself as created being, so that the act of creation forms a kind of self-
diffusion of divine goodness. As Pseudo-Dionysius somewhat famously
says:

> … the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good
> superabundance of his benign yearning for all is also carried outside
> of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were,
> beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away
> from his transcendent dwelling place: and comes to abide within
> all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic
> capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself (*The Divine Names*
> 712A-12B).[31]

It is within this context that the doctrine of incarnation becomes more
intelligible, for now creation is seen as the unfolding of God's eternal
procession out of the Unbegotten Source as Word and Spirit, a descent
that finds its echo in the ascent of humanity to God as incarnation,
cross, and resurrection. The incarnation, according to the famous maxim
of Athanasius, was the event of God becoming human so that human
beings might become God (*theosis*); in the terminology of Aristotelian
metaphysics, supernature and divinity was seen as the final causality and

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30   Translation taken from https://isidore.co/aquinas/
31   *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist
     Press, 1987).

goal of created nature, and therefore the "natural" end of all creatures.[32] The theology of Chalcedon and Constantinople III, with its formulations of the one person of Christ and a non-competitive duality of the divine and human wills, points towards what has been called a *theandric humanism*, here adapting the terminology of Pseudo-Dionysius, exposited later by Thomas Aquinas.[33] It teaches that in Christ both nature and will, human and divine, exist within a synergy of divine action that energises rather than competes with the human action of Christ. In the incarnation there is no human nature that exists apart from or separate from divine nature: the human nature only has its being within God. The divine nature is not some kind of finite quanta which exists "alongside" the quanta of human nature; God is not a "thing" or "agent" operating within the same universe as other agents. This would be to reduce God to the creature. Rather, Christology and a theandric humanism teaches that human nature is only "natural" when it is united with God, that is, only insofar as it is "graced" through "supernature". The theandric action of Christ is, however, not a human achievement, as if human beings could achieve their end without grace. Supernature is the final cause of all nature, so that nature achieves its goal in being brought to its end, namely a communion with Trihypostatic Being. However, it cannot achieve its own potential without the operation of grace and divine action, and so cannot be read in a Promethean or Pelagian manner. Building on this, Maximus the Confessor argues that the *logos* of "nature", that is those principles or meanings that define each created thing, are guided through the discipline of a *tropos*, a mode of existence, a specific way of life aimed towards an end. If this is so, it undermines not only any dualism between grace and nature, but also the division between nature and culture, since now the deployment of spiritual and cultural practices may be seen as intrinsic to the teleological fulfilment of one's nature and eternal well-being.[34] Later, in the early modern period,

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32   David Bentley Hart, *You are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 1–20.

33   See Aaron Riches, "Theandric Humanism: Constantinople III in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas." *Pro Ecclesia* 23, no. 2 (2014): 195-218; *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

34   Andrew Louth, "St. Maximos' Distinction Between λόγος and τρόπος and the Ontology of the Person," in Sotiris Mitralexis et al (eds.), *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher* (Eugene: Cascade, 2017), 157–164

Christian theologians and thinkers such as Cusanus and Vico developed a more robust account of creativity as itself a participation in God's own creative action and the knowledge of truth.[35]

This tendency is distinguished from certain ideas that arose in Baroque scholasticism: whereas the pre-modern understanding of "nature" ontologically blended the material and the immaterial, the modern asseveration of divinity and nature stimulated the invention of *theologia naturalis* as a regional science,[36] and a secularising metaphysics of nature after Suárez.[37] Nominalists and advocates of *natura pura*, in their attempt to guarantee a libertarian account of freedom and the unelicited donation of grace, denied that nature had an "intrinsic" orientation towards supernature, grace, and the beatific vision. On their reading, if grace was intrinsic to nature, then "nature" could not be spoken apart from its teleological orientation towards grace, and, for them, this resulted in a denial of the freedom to choose or refuse grace – here presupposing a libertarian concept of freedom as the ability to choose *otherwise*.[38] The nominalists and protagonists of *natura pura* thus invented a reading of "nature" that laid the foundation later for an account of immanence that could be understood purely in its own terms, without reference to transcendence or the final causality of grace. This framing conceit was cognate with a dualistic polarisation of "disenchanted transcendence" and a "disenchanted immanence", which was predicated on a metaphysics that reduces the divine to an essentially ontic being, quantitatively separated and distinguished from the material world, but still existing in a qualitative sense as a finite actor amongst other created agencies.[39] Such

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35 Cf. Miner, *Truth in the Making.*

36 Olivier Boulnois, *Métaphysique rebelles: genèse et structures d'une science au Moyen Age* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 313–341.

37 Costantino Esposito, "Suárez and the Baroque Matrix of Modern Thought" in Victor M. Salas and Robert L. Fastiggi (eds.), in *A Companion to Francisco Suárez*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 53 (Leiden and Boston : Brill, 2015), 124–147.

38 This is part of Ockham's argument against Scotus as regards the natural desire to see God; see Laurence Renault, "William of Ockham and the Distinction Between Nature and Supernature," in Serge Thomas-Bonino (ed.), *Surnatural: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth Century Thomistic Thought* (Florida: Sapienta Press of Ave Maria University, 2009), 190-202.

39 Cf. Milbank, "Religion, Science and Magic," 79–85.

a conceit produces a quasi-physicalist picture of the divine, since God now is conceptually subordinated to the contingencies and constraints of the material world, and so may be intellectually carved out and excluded from its resulting world-image – since God is rendered, in effect, inessential for grasping the totality or meaning of being. If God is merely transcendent while also existing within the same ontological and logical "space" as every other existent, then God is no longer a necessary being upon whom all other existents depend, but rather just another existent within the great chain of being. The supernatural telos of creatures is no longer seen as a natural imprint and destiny of all things, but rather something that needs to be "added on" to natural constitution.

One result of the regionalisation of nature was the construct that "nature" and "life" were considered as ends in themselves to be preserved for their own sake; life became the domain of biopolitics, whereby "nature" was conceived as existing simultaneously outside of culture (as biology) and within it (as politics) – especially as regards the medicalization of the body.[40] Sacredness and the sublime, on the secular and disenchanted paradigm, were translated from the realm of divinity onto the natural world or to the products of human culture. Technological advancements of modernity became sites of sacred investment, a vision cultivated in the science-fiction that began dissemination in the nineteenth century and flourished thereafter.[41] Transhumanism, with its technical approach to the resolving the problem of death, can be seen as a part of this sacred investment of technology, which becomes a cultural site for sublime experience apart from divine revelation or transcendence – a matter which I turn to in more detail now.

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40   Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology, and the Sacred* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31–64.

41   Science-fiction routinely operates within a theological imaginary, though usually of a heterodox variety, influenced by Burkean and Kantian invocations of sublimity in which the aesthetically pleasing and the metaphysically transportive are separated; Alan P. R. Gregory, *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015).

IV

"Transhumanism", according to the recounting of transhumanists themselves,[42] was a term first hinted at by Dante in *Paradiso*, Canto I.70. In the Italian, the line reads "Trasumanar significar *per verba* non si poria," and in Singleton's translation: "[the] passing beyond humanity may not be set forth in words."[43] The use of *trasumanar* or "transhumanizing" is connected to Dante's allusion to Glaucus, a figure from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who after consuming a magical herb is transformed into a sea god by Oceanus and Tethys. Dante's appropriation of this myth configures his experience of cosmic transportation and grace as mediated by Beatrice, in his journey to the *Primum Mobile*, the Holy Trinity, the light and love which illuminates and moves everything.[44] The connection in this canto between "transhumanizing" and deification is therefore at least implied.[45] And if this genealogy is accurate, then a Christian origin for the language of "transhumanizing" seems at least plausible; moreover, such is subsidised further by the likelihood that Julian Huxley – recognised as the first to use the term *transhumanism*[46] – was influenced by his friend Pierre

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42   Cf. Max More, "The Philosophy of Transhumanism," in Max More and Natasha Vita-More (eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (West Sussex, John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 8.

43   Dante Alighieri and Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy – Paradiso I: Italian Text and Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 6–7.

44   Dante Alighieri and Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy – Paradiso 2: Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 17–18.

45   Christian Moevs states that for Dante "there can be no "transhumanizing" or "inGoding" (*trasumanar, indiare*) if God is not "Creator" and the universe is not "creation," if determinate identity is not a sharing in, not in a profound sense one with, self-subsistent being. The Christian religion calls the bridge or union between finite being and sheer unqualified existence "Christ" or Logos, names that designate the identity/continuity between spatiotemporal reality and conscious self-subsistence"; Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of the Divine Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 34.

46   Julian Huxley, "Transhumanism," in *New Bottles for New Wine* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), 13–17. His definition of the term is rather more milquetoast than his contemporary heirs; for him "transhumanism" may simply describe "man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature" (17).

Teilhard de Chardin,[47] who uses cognate terms in relation to his ideas of Christogenesis, the noosphere, and the Omega Point. Teilhard is often seen as a precursor to modern transhumanism, even as others contest this compatibility, since his vision does not concern the technical abolition of death but rather the use of technology to deepen and stimulate the spheres of the personal, co-consciousness, and the emergence of a spiritualised body of Christ.[48]

For its part, contemporary transhumanism, also known as Humanity+ or simply H+, is a capacious and loosely defined set of philosophical approaches or practices that aims to transcend the limitations of human biology. In this sense one might say that despite its mostly scientistic and secular proclivities, modern transhumanism can be classified as a quasi-religious or even post-secular phenomenon. The analogies between transhumanist philosophy and religious accounts of transcendence are recognised in the commentary surrounding transhumanism. In particular, its aversion to death and suffering, and its proposed solution via the intervention of technology and the re-directing of biological evolution is akin to a narrative of salvation – even as the transhumanism of the late 1980s and 90s exuded (and still does to a large degree) an anti-religious and materialist reflex.[49] According to the *Transhumanist Declaration*, transhumanism imagines "the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth."[50] Within this intellectual broad-church, there is a motley coterie of philosophers, Californian ideologists, cryogenic entrepreneurs,

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47   Cf. David Grumett, "Transformation and the End of Enhancement: Insights from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin," in *Transcendence and Transhumanism*, 38.

48   See Ilia Delio, OSF, "Transhumanism or Ultrahumanism? Teilhard de Chardin on Technology, Religion and Evolution." *Theology and Science* 10, No. 2 (2012): 153–166.

49   Early transhumanists, such as Max More, experimented with the language of "extropy" or "extropianism" (as opposed to "entropy"), and proposed such language as an explicit countermeasure to what they saw as the stifling anthropology of traditional religion; cf. Max More, "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy." *Extropy* 6 (1990): 6–12. However, the decades since More's summation of transhumanist philosophy have evidenced an expansion of the movement beyond its nascent "underground" status towards an international collective that it includes different religious persuasions.

50   "Transhumanist Declaration (2012)," in *The Transhumanist Reader*, 54.

biohackers, techno-futurists, libertarians, and aspiring cyborgs,[51] even as it remains a predominantly white, male, and North Atlantic phenomenon.[52] At the core of transhumanist theory is the transcendence of the limits of the material body as well as the exercise of *morphological freedom*, that is, "the right to modify and enhance one's body, cognition, and emotions."[53] In this sense, transhumanism is an outgrowth of a libertarian and utilitarian approach, insofar as it emphasises the primacy of negative liberty, the freedom *from* external interference, and the maximalisation of happiness, exemplified in its aspiration for the amelioration of bodily limitation, suffering, and death. Anders Sandberg, a transhumanist and philosopher, defines "morphological freedom" in essentially liberal and individualist terms, as "an extension of one's right to one's body, not just self-ownership but also the right to modify oneself according to one's desires".[54] Indeed, the intellectual genealogy of transhumanism, as another transhumanist Nick Bostrom has suggested,[55] might owe much more to the liberal and utilitarian theory of John Stuart Mill than any other philosophical source – even as the Nietzschean "overman" remains something of its titular spirit.

However, behind utilitarian morality is Enlightenment humanism[56] and Locke's theory of freedom which, in distinction from ancient philosophical and theological accounts, does not operate from the assumption of the transcendent good as its first and final cause. Freedom on this model begins with a formal emptiness or openness, for the purposes of securing individual liberty and non-interference; this libertarian concept of the will, because of its fundamentally negative conception and orientation, denies any ontological predetermination of freedom by the good, because

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51   For a contemporary and entertaining recounting of the movement, see Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (London: Granta, 2017).

52   The racial and racialising dynamics of transhumanism are discussed in Syed Mustafa Ali, "Transhumanism and/as Whiteness," in *Transhumanism: The Proper Guide to a Posthuman Condition or a Dangerous Idea*, 169–183.

53   "Transhumanist Declaration (2012)," 55.

54   Anders Sandberg, "Morphological Freedom – Why We Not Just Want It, but Need It," in *The Transhumanist Reader*, 56.

55   Cf. Nick Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought." *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14, no 1 (April 2005), 4.

56   Cf. More, "The Philosophy of Transhumanism," 4.

any prior ordering would constitute, to its mind, a modal diminishment of choice and freedom. It implies a reversal of the priority of actuality over possibility, and therefore tends to sunder possibility or potency from positive and antecedent determination.[57] One could probably trace this concept back to the voluntarism of Scotus and Ockham – a history I will not get into here. Overall, I think the transhumanist account of freedom can be placed within this genealogy, even as it is refracted through a postmodern assemblage of cybernetic theory and cyborg prosthetics. A lot could be said regarding transhumanism's highly contestable accounts of consciousness and information theory, along with its apparent revulsion to biological finitude and limitation. Here I am going to focus on one area: what seems apparent to me is that even as morphological freedom articulates a strong account of libertarian freedom, one which shuns ontological or biological heteronomy, it simultaneously inscribes another heteronomy of a very particular, technologized variety. At this point, there appears to be something of a tension within transhumanist metaphysics, maybe even constituting an immanent critique: on the one hand, there is morphological freedom which says that human beings should allowed to "optimise" or "change" their bodies in whatever fashion they can desire or actualise – without interference. This much seems clear from likes of Sandberg and the early Bostrom. However, on the other hand, there is also a trajectory in transhumanist thought, as in the seminal writings of Ray Kurzweil,[58] which says that Moore's Law of technical innovation necessitates the speeding-up of technological evolution via the Law of Accelerating Returns. The eschatological imaginary of transhumanism is encapsulated in its conceit of the Singularity, which concerns the accelerating speed of technical evolution towards a merging of humanity with superhuman intelligence and machinic consciousness. Vernor Vinge, a doyen of transhumanism, that the Posthuman Era of technologised Singularity is "an inevitable

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57   For D.C. Schindler, on this account "there is no original fullness of being; to the contrary, we have an effort to clear space, to excise as radically as possible whatever is already given a priori, precisely in order that the individual might have the power to make choices, to determine himself, to acquire property and pursue his own happiness, to have his own voice in political matters, and so forth"; D.C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Nature of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 2017), 360.

58   See Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future*, 82–91.

consequence of humans' natural competitiveness and the possibilities inherent in technology"[59] Similar ideas may also be found again in Kurzweil,[60] and more generally among purveyors of the "Californian ideology".[61] If one takes this at face value then it suggests that transhumanism is both anarchic and determinist, and maybe even pathologically so: it demeans biological and natural constraint and adopts a rather invasive account of organic intervention and libertarian self-invention, only to have necessity return within the domain of technological innovation, which now develops according to the purported laws of acceleration. But it is worth asking whether these proposed "laws of innovation" are not actually dogmatic metaphysical constructs themselves dependent upon an unsustainable division of the natural and cultural, which in rejecting any prior and determining taxis of human nature now adopts a framing conceit of technique and efficiency to which all organic life is subordinated. For instance, can one say that humans are "naturally" competitive, or this itself not the product of contingent arrangements within post-industrial society which are by-no-means necessary in a stringent metaphysical sense?[62] Are these laws of technology "inevitable", or have we *made* them so? These are questions worth asking.

For our purposes, one can also add that this vision – despite somewhat superficial similarities – does not cohere with a Christian account of theosis, at least in its orthodox recension. For in distinction from someone like Maximus the Confessor who understood the *natural* will as an ordering of created nature towards its divinisation, and the *gnomic* will as the freedom to exercise choice in relation to its end,[63] transhumanism

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59   Vernor Vinge, "Technological Singularity," in *The Transhumanist Reader*, 367; 369.

60   For instance, "Nanotechnology is simply the inevitable end result of the persistent trend towards miniaturization that pervades all of technology"; Kurweil, "Progress and Relinquishment," in *The Transhumanist Reader*, 452.

61   On this, see Richard Barbrook & Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology." *Science as Culture* 6, no. 1 (1996): 44–72.

62   For an evolutionary account that questions this projection of "natural" competitiveness, see Peter M. Kappeler, "A Comparative and Evolutionary Perspective on Sacrifice and Cooperation," in Marcia Pally (ed.), in *Mimesis and Sacrifice: Applying Girard's Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 37–50.

63   David Bradshaw, "St. Maximus the Confessor on the Will," in Maxim Vasiljević (ed.), *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through Resurrection: Proceedings of the Symposium*

ultimately denies any ultimate horizon of intentionality, even as it advocates a specific teleology of technical enhancement and bodily transcendence. It imagines an extrinsic intervention to nature and biology with the end of circumventing the limitations of organic existence and denies any eschatological horizon of meaning or created intentionality insofar as they may be "naturally" orientated to the Holy Trinity and the divinisation of created being. Its denial of something like an intrinsic teleology of grace and goodness is replaced with a form of biological anarchism and interventionism. Effective causality becomes separated from final causality, and in its place is an immanent eschatology subtended to a vision of bodily optimalisation, or even an escape from its entrapments, in a cybernetic fever-dream of disembodied cognition.

So in short, transhumanism replaces a determinism of nature with a determinism of technic. The technological framing of reality, the reduction of the sensual and physical manifold to the realm of efficacy, calculation, and data, is evident in its encapsulation of organic life. Embodiment in this picture is reduced to "wetware" or "meat sacks" while consciousness and intentionality are reduced to information and data capture – a Cartesian dualism for techno-utopians. The digitalised and cybernetic abridgment of complexity is one of the products of this world-image. To my mind, it is incumbent on Christian theology and ethics to resist this image, not merely through moralizing denunciations, but through providing an alternative way of imagining and reading the world. As I have been stating throughout, Christian theology should provide a robust and expansive account of creation, self-creation, and technological enhancement. I have been saying that Christian theology can no longer operate within the nature/culture divide, and that this is a metaphysical truth as well as a moral one. There is no dualism between human beings and non-human, nature and culture, nature, and technology; we are *techno sapiens* and *homo faber*. We are what we are, in part, because of what have *made* and what we have *made of ourselves*.[64] Of course this is not the whole story, but

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on St. Maximus the Confessor, Belgrade October 18–21, 2012 (Belgrade: Sebastian, 2013), 143–157.

64   Cf. "There is no more need for fixed and solid relations coming from the outset, but a recursive and reflexive, perpetually in(ter)ventional movement of concretization/ formation through differing…that is aimed to enlighten the ontological force of

it is certainly part of it. Nature bears the imprints of culture and culture of nature: nature is cultural and culture natural. Christian theology, building upon and repeating differently the insights of its tradition, will have to engage and reimagine theological *loci* after the demise of dualisms between nature, culture, and technology. We will probably have to "resource" for our own time some of the Christian thinkers already mentioned taking them at their word, while also taking them beyond themselves. Outlining what such a vision might look like is already starting to be sketched by contemporary theologians,[65] but it will need to be enlarged. If we can see that the blending of the natural and cultural is not merely an existential necessity but a theological truth, then it is an agenda for Christian thought in our contemporary setting. Here I have been arguing that a Christian account of nature, culture, and technology will need to centre teleology and final causality, because this is the eschatological horizon by which Christians make adjudications in the present. In this essay, I have been centring the Christian doctrine of theosis and theandric humanism as a counterfoil to secular transhumanism, saying that while the aspiration for divinisation is a natural trait of creation, the transhumanist vision of autodivinisation is incompatible with a Christian imaginary. The question remains as to what a Christian theology of nature-cultures will look like once we have moved away from these dualisms, and in the space here one can only give the barest sketch of what such a theology and metaphysics will look like – but I am going try anyway.

At the centre of Christian belief is the Holy Trinity, the self-subsistent and self-generating being of Father, Son, and Spirit. In the generation of the Eternal Son, as begotten and uncreated Word and Image, the Father brings forth another who is identical but different, and in the breathing of the Spirit as Love and Gift the Father and Son give forth to another who is both different and the same. God is self-identical but also self-differentiated being, three distinct persons but perichoretically one. From the plenitude and perfection of God, from the fecundity of divine filiation, love and goodness, God creates a finite other *ex nihilo*, an act that unfolds from the eternal

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technicity, and to become a real alternative to both substantialist and subject-centred accounts"; Papagni, "Transhumanism and Philosophy of Technology," 62–63.

65   For example, see Simon Oliver, "The Eucharist Before Nature and Culture." *Modern Theology* 15, no. 3 (1999): 331–353; cf. Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*.

logic of generation and incarnation. There is no metaphysical necessity to creation, however, echoing Aquinas and Cusanus, creation, incarnation, and redemption can be imagined as a fitting act of the trinitarian life, as an aesthetic complement and overflow of divine goodness and love. Here the Son is the Image of both the Father and creation because he is both God and a generated other; and it is the generation of the Son which is the ontological ground of created life. As the Greek fathers and mothers said, the Λόγος is the one through whom the world is made and whose imprint is reflected in the meanings and natures of every created thing, the λόγοι of creation. The Word is the Sign and Image of the Father by nature; creation is the Image of the Son by grace. The archetypal descent of the Son through eternal generation and kenosis is the logic of creation, even as the "ascent" and resurrection of the Son is the paradigm of creation's redemption and deification: the beatific vision and union with the Trinity.

Everything, all being and becoming, exists in the self-identical and self-differentiation of Father, Son, and Spirit. The whole of creation participates in the relationality, intelligence, and differentiation of the divine life; and as it participates within the energy of the Trinity, it also reflects analogically that pattern of identity, difference, generation, and self-generation in finite form. The poem and artifice of the universe images its own createdness and is reflected within the creative and meaning-making actions of human and non-human agencies. Intelligence, meaning, and creativity are not extrinsic or epiphenomenal to the material world, but part of its very "substance". The Book of Nature is interleaved with the Book of Scripture. Nature, human and non-human, organic and non-organic life, are placed within this "text" and "con-text" of signification and meaning. Nature indeed creates signs that can be read and interpreted, giving forth to the domain of social meanings and culture; we respond to our environment and our environment responds to us. Indeed, one might say that it is relationality and entanglement all the way down. Nature creates culture and culture gives forth to nature; no ontological dualism of nature and culture is required here. Our technical engagement with the world forms one aspect of this picture; it provides capacities for world-creating and the enhancement of human life and may even promote virtue if it is so conceived, appropriated, and ordered. It can be artful and poetic since creative activity itself relies on technicity and technique. It may even create

alterations to human nature and the natural world, and not necessarily to their detriment. It may be genuinely creative or destructive. Indeed, due to human sin and vapidity, we will probably have to engage continually in realistic evaluations regarding the effects of technology on our common life and the common good, as we all know too well. Because of this, I think that the affective regimes of techno-pessimism or techno-optimism should not be totalised; the horizons of expectation presumed by these options are neither "inevitable" nor "necessary" outcomes of technicity but are once again evaluations of nature and culture which require supplementation by Christian apocalyptic. Rather, they suggest a metaphysics akin to other grand narratives of "progress" or "decline". Neither of these narratives are incumbent for Christians, for the theological imagination is informed by other sources. For Christians, an imaginary regarding technology is ordered by a theological vision centred on the trinitarian life, as we are formed into the image of the Son through the Spirit, mediated by the techniques of spiritual practice, sacraments, and liturgy. Through such practices, as for instance in the Eucharist, the domains of nature, bread and wine, are transformed in their significance by their appropriation into the life of the church as both food and sacrament, both of which are ordered to the supernaturalising and deifying process of divine grace.[66]

Overall, any theology of personal "enhancement" through technical means or otherwise will have to be ordered by Christian values of virtue and sanctification. In distinction from secular transhumanism and techno-futurism, a Christian account of enhancement is disciplined by the saving action of the Holy Trinity and our gifted participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Any transhumanisation of selfhood must be chastened by

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66   "The participation in the liturgy is not a figure of that which is taking place elsewhere, and thus it is not mere theatre. Rather, because the liturgy, and fundamentally the natural elements of bread and wine and the cultural activities of the people, are gathered around the real supernaturalising event of transubstantiation in which Christ is made corporeally present, and in which participants in the Eucharist partake of that which is most fully itself in being sustained by being-itself, we find a refiguring of the natural and cultural in relation to their origin in Christ himself. There is no perpetual play of transcendence and immanence, only a supernaturalising event that preserves the integrity of the natural and cultural in making both fully themselves. Neither are a purely immanent nature and culture played off against each other, for they participate together in the transcending event of a participation in being-as-such"; Oliver, "The Eucharist Before Nature and Culture," 346.

cross and resurrection, where creaturely existence is liturgically and ascetically transformed into the image of Son in his prayerful response to the Father through the Spirit. Any Christian account and ethics of personal enhancement, insofar as it has integrity with the claims of the gospel, is governed by not by aspirations of invulnerability but by costly discipleship, love, and interpersonal care, since it is not through technical means that death will be overcome, but rather through participating in that eternal and undying love that moves the sun and other stars; for, in the end, it is only love that is stronger than death (Song of Songs 8:6).

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In this essay, I have not sought to enter the heady waters of consciousness studies, cybernetics, information theory, or bioethics. Here my focus has been on the implicit metaphysical vision of transhumanism, and particularly its central conceit of morphological freedom. On the one hand, I have argued – along with several other contemporary analysts – that transhumanism operates within a secularised metaphysics comparable to Christian accounts of theosis, and so articulates a specific teleological imaginary. As a result, the phenomenon of transhumanism raises questions for theologians, particularly regarding the similarity and differences between their accounts, and here especially a theological account of creation and its ends. I have argued, however, that transhumanism is secular parody of the gospel, forming a reduction of grace to the unrestricted sway of technological enhancement and efficiency. On the other hand, I have been saying that we should not jettison the idea of "transhumanisation" insofar as it raises questions about the complicated relations of human and non-human assemblages, as well as the untenability of any nature-culture dualism. I just think that these realities can be better met through a Christian account of theandric humanism, even as we will probably also have to move beyond carapaced repristinations of tradition or any theological ghetto of technophobia. Indeed, human beings always have existed through technological prosthetics and exteriorisation, and contemporary reflection on Christian doctrine, to my mind, will need to produce a theological imagination adequate to these entanglements. But if we are to take the deliverances of Christian tradition seriously, then

this suggests that the collapse of the nature-culture division was already anticipated within Christian theology through its accounts of gifted existence and created grace. The *imago dei* gives forth to *homo faber*, and in this sense, to echo Bruno Latour once again, we have never been "modern" because we always have been, and always will be, quite simply, creatures.

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