

“Embodied Living in the Age of Excarnation” By Joel Oesch

In 2013, a tourist was strolling down the beautiful St. Kilda’s pier in Melbourne, Australia, enjoying the evening air and the pleasant sound of locals in friendly conversation. The woman decided to check her smartphone as she walked, slowly absorbing herself in her Facebook feed. She was so engrossed with the tiny screen in her hand that she accidentally stepped off the pier and plunged into the water. While unable to swim, she fortunately knew how to float on her back until the local authorities arrived, who fished her out of the water to her great embarrassment. Yes, this is true. Yes, similar events to this have happened all over the world. And yes, it gets worse. When the woman was finally rescued, the authorities noticed that she was clutching the destroyed-by-water smartphone for dear life. Even the prospect of drowning was not enough for this woman to release the very thing that nearly killed her.¹

The point of this story is not to employ heavy-handed virtue-signaling as a declaration of moral superiority over those who enjoy their devices. These days, obsessed technophiles make for easy targets and piling on accomplishes little. The point is to illustrate the all-engrossing magnetism of social media, affecting vast portions of human life. Whether biologically, sociologically, or psychologically, these devices, in coordination with the applications they run, fundamentally transform the human person. Recent neurological research tells us that the Internet, and more broadly speaking, the digital screen, physiologically modifies the way a person’s brain functions. Nicholas Carr presses home the argument that the brain—even the adult brain—is considerably more plastic than once believed. Neural patterns are restructured in ways that better interpret the shallow, disjointed, image-based world that the Internet provides.²

Sociologically speaking, the utterly astonishing power of the smartphone has forever altered the way local communities function, how goods and information are exchanged in the marketplace, and how people form social bonds with each other in communities both local and global.³ This power extends to once-novel technologies, such as online social media and virtual reality. When taken together, the transformative effects of these social technologies are substantial, particularly as their use generates a withdrawal from traditional forms of community. Economist Edward Castronova suggests that the gravitational pull of the virtual life will “create a change in social climate that makes global warming look like a tempest in a teacup.”⁴

Perhaps the most substantial change is located at the level of human identity. The Digital Age, along with its retinue of devices, is primed to be the foremost shaper of human identity in the Western world, outpacing the more traditional influences of family, religion, political persuasion, or ethnicity. Technologies not only shape the way we think about the world around us, but, in an inward turn, these tools have taught us to think about ourselves—about human nature—in largely unfamiliar ways. The “tool as teacher” designation may be too benign. Perhaps we should start calling digital tools our *masters*. One visit to a baseball game, a

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25426263> (accessed Sept. 27, 2018).

² Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 17–35.

³ William H. Davidow, *Overconnected* (Harrison, NY: Delphinium, 2011).

⁴ Edward Castronova, *Exodus to the Virtual World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xiv–xv.

restaurant, or train station will show you who is in charge of whom. As the famous saying goes, "We shape our tools, and thereafter, our tools shape us."⁵

The young woman on the pier reminds us how blurry the distinctions between the virtual and real have become. Clay Shirky, author of *Cognitive Surplus*, argues that a user's digital world no longer remains distinct from the real life they inhabit. He explains,

The old view of online as a separate space, cyberspace, apart from the real world, was an accident of history. Back when the online population was tiny, most of the people you knew in your daily life weren't part of that population. Now that computers and increasingly computerlike phones have been broadly adopted, the whole notion of cyberspace is fading. Our social media tools aren't an alternative to real life, they are part of it.⁶

MIT Sociologist Sherry Turkle, sharing Shirky's sentiment, notes the ease by which Internet users fluidly move between various virtual and embodied identities by baldly stating, "We are all cyborgs now."⁷

The central reason why Christians should be paying attention to this tidal change is that ours is an Age of Excarnation. Roman Catholic philosopher, Charles Taylor, describes excarnation in this way: Excarnation is "the steady disembodying of spiritual life, so that it is less and less carried in deeply meaningful bodily forms, and lies more and more in the head."⁸ As Christian intellectualism potentially leaves the body behind, so the profound nature of the Incarnation and our collective witness as the living Body of Christ slowly recedes from our theological imagination, leaving us with a feeble form of Gnosticism. Excarnation directly threatens human embodiment and undercuts the uniquely incarnational claims of Christianity.

Moment by moment, the West is experiencing a transformation. Embodied expressions of culture, art, music, vocation, and community have now given way to digitally mediated living. It is just a matter of time before the cultural takeover of digital technologies is complete, invading our very bodies in pursuit of more knowledge, longer lifespan, and enhanced emotional capacities. I admit that I am rather pessimistic that our society will place clear boundaries on the human body as we proceed further into the present century. The distinction between man and technology will continue to blur, and so Christians, like the Apostle Paul, are going to have to "build tents in Corinth," living in a culture that largely despises scriptural declarations of human

⁵ Mistakenly attributed to sociologist Marshall McLuhan, this phrase was actually penned by his friend, Father John Culkin, a professor at Fordham University. The quote surfaced in 'A Schoolman's Guide to Marshall McLuhan' in *The Saturday Review* (March 18, 1967), 70. It has been modified and used in a variety of contexts since then, though it is no stretch to think that the central idea behind the quote is McLuhan's.

⁶ Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 37.

⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic, 2011), 152. Turkle's full quote: "Within a decade, what had seemed alien was close to becoming everyone's way of life, as compact smartphones replaced the cyborgs' more elaborate accoutrements. This is the experience of living full-time on the Net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked in others. We are all cyborgs now."

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2007), 771. While I use Taylor's term to aid in my thesis, excarnation is one small portion of his project in *The Secular Age*. My comments here should not be seen as an analysis of his incredibly complex and important work.

identity. Culture, in both its religious and non-religious forms, may lose the ability to articulate a holistic response to the question, “What makes humans, human?” because it lacks any solid footing with which to place the body as an essential component of human life.

The nature of technology, as it transforms our understanding of personal biology, sociology, and psychology, raises the timeless question, “Who am I?” Whether through circumstance or curiosity, self-reflective people are often drawn to consider the ontological nature of one’s existence and its necessary partner questions, “Why am I here?” and “To what end shall I live?” The purpose of this piece is to bring theology into the discussion as a conversation partner, drawing out the vitality of human embodiment vis-à-vis a culture that turns increasingly toward disembodied forms of identity. To be clear from the outset, my use of the term embodiment moving forward specifically refers to the God-given gift of human physicality, one’s actual enfleshed body—not simply a reference to materiality in the broad sense.

For the first third of this article, I will briefly outline several historical metaphors for human identity. I will note various images that Western thought has used as guiding principles in its pursuit to understand human distinctiveness. In that examination, I will, within each system, consider the nature of human flourishing that results from such a starting point. The second third will turn its gaze to contemporary models with particular attention given to the world of secular Transhumanism and its key doctrines. In the final third, I will offer a Christian corrective that will bind human identity to the great good of embodiment without resorting to the extreme position of neo-Luddism. This corrective will consist of a creedal Trinitarian framework for thinking about the human person built on the pillars of vocation, embodiment, and the church-community. This structure is not intended to be exhaustive but can serve as a pedagogical rallying point for identifying some essential features of human identity, useful for laity and professional theologians alike.

Ultimately, this is a discussion about human *telos*. It is reflection on the nature of our purpose, what we love, and how we pursue our deepest ends.⁹ And because we are complicated beings, the answers to these questions are often equally complex and require some balance. In our Lutheran expression of the Christian life, both the monastic *and* the scholastic, contemplation *and* disputation—heart, hands, *and* head—make for a healthy, holistic theology.¹⁰ Such theology rightly returns us to the profound importance of the body as it relates to our ultimate ends. In what follows, I hope to challenge the cultural turn toward disembodied views of human identity, to resurrect—to make alive again—a view of the person which includes our corporeal nature as an essential feature of our creatureliness, of our human-ness.

HOMO SAPIENS

⁹ James K. A. Smith, *You are What you Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016). Smith uses Augustine as an entry into discussions about *telos*. He moves away from a view of discipleship that is restricted to simply thinking the right things about God and toward a view that encourages a proper ordering of the heart’s desire for God through habituation and worship. “To be human is to be on the move, pursuing something, *after* something. We are like existential sharks: we have to move to live. We are not just static containers for ideas; we are dynamic creatures directed toward some *end* [author’s emphasis]” (8).

¹⁰ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 9–13.

Humans are imaginative, conceptual creatures. They are also flesh, bone, and sinew—experiencing the natural world through sense organs. When taken together, it seems natural that people take their experience of the world and braid it together with a broader, transcendent narrative.¹¹ Such a narrative, then, becomes a stable platform by which one can reflect on the fundamental nature of their own existence. Who am I? *Why* am I? If narrative is indeed an appropriate facilitator for answering such questions, which I believe it is, we are left with the conclusion that language operates as a mediating force: It provides us with certain imaginative tools to articulate more richly the human experience. Metaphor is one such tool—and a powerful one, indeed. By employing metaphors to the human condition, a person can draw together useful ways to communicate with one another, to learn from one another, and to build lasting communities under a common *mythos*.¹²

Some of the most effective ways for describing human nature and identity come in these picturesque packages. As years become decades and decades become centuries, philosophers identify particular anthropologies that have staying power, often because the models mirror discoveries about human nature in biology or sociology. Briefly, I would like to examine a few of these in full recognition that I cannot systematically treat any of them with the justice they deserve. I am simply attempting to trace the contours of human thinking on the subject, taking note of how these metaphors connect, and how they separate from one another.

Man as creature between gods and nature

For the ancient era, man was largely seen as a creature caught in a complex relationship between the gods and the natural world. In the case of pagan religions, the individual must master a balance between the Scylla of the gods, who send blessings in their benevolence as well as curses in their anger, and the Charybdis of the natural world, where thorns and thistles disrupt crops and wild animals encroach from the borderlands. Maintaining this balance required attention to deities both general and local, offering proper sacrifices and performing the necessary cultic rituals to invoke primordial powers that even the gods were required to obey.¹³ Only then could one turn his efforts towards taming the ground and the livestock.¹⁴ Noteworthy

¹¹ Michael Zeigler, *Christian Hope Among Rivals* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017). Zeigler traces the power of narrative or “life-organizing” stories as a tool to both understand evil and to ground the believer’s hope in an eschatology that ultimately overcomes such evil.

¹² Paul Ricoeur is a central figure in discussions about human identity and language. Ricoeur argued that one could only encounter the self through language, and therefore, a person’s self-understanding was essentially an act of interpretation grounded in story and metaphor. See Ricoeur’s, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 2003) and *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992).

¹³ The relationship between pagan gods and the natural world itself is a complex one. A key feature of pagan religiosity is the belief that a “primordial realm” of “darkness, water, spirit, earth, [and] sky” predates the emergence of deities and act as the fundamental conditions by which all being rely, human or divine. Gods, therefore, themselves were subjected to many humanlike aspirations: finding food and drink, sexual intercourse, dealing with fate, and so on. For a brief overview of the pagan worldview, see Yehzekel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1972), 21–59, and Henri Frankfort, H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, GB: Penguin, 1949), 11–36.

¹⁴ Many ancient pagan religions believed that work itself was humanity’s ultimate purpose. For example, in Sumerian and Akkadian accounts, humans were created to do the work of the gods, to take on the gods’ burdens which they themselves had tired of performing. See John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 214–15.

events were interpreted in this lens: bumper crops were the result of proper devotion to the deities, prompting their favor. Floods and pestilence could be signs of their displeasure. To be sure, the result was “interpreted as an outside power which infus[ed] itself into a man’s doings.”¹⁵

The ancient Greeks, too, believed that man was neither divine nor animal, though features of each would reveal themselves in a person’s constitution. From the bottom, the appetitive desires of sex, food, and comfort were largely identified as animalistic. They were the lower instincts that, though necessary, could overpower a man and make him a slave to base desire. From the top, the Greeks understood the life of mindful rationality and the practice of virtue to be the goal of human activity. The contemplative life reflects the divine.¹⁶

Contrast these positions with biblical anthropology. Whereas the pagan divine-man relationship is born in tension and discord, the biblical witness takes great pains to describe the creation of man as originally good, being uniquely made in God’s own image. Human beings are given the divine mandate to be both priests and stewards; to offer to God their bodies as living sacrifices and to exercise dominion over the whole of God’s creation.¹⁷ Whereas the Greeks emphasize the rational life of the mind and relegate the body as a secondary consideration, Judeo-Christian thought takes care to acknowledge the profound role of embodiment as the context for procreation, cultivation, and holy living. For the Christian, the physical is the centerpiece of the Christian creed. Indeed, a physical *body*. As Paul remarks in 1 Corinthians 15:17, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”¹⁸

Man as evolved animal

As the Church’s authority withered over time in academic and scientific disciplines, so too, its explanatory power waned with the rise of the European Enlightenment. A second powerful metaphor offered a counter-narrative to the Christian claims of humanity’s special or dignified status in the natural world. The metaphor identified man as the latest product of the evolutionary chain and nothing more. Darwin’s work, in large part, cemented humanity’s status as animal, a product of purely natural processes.¹⁹ Lost is the “porous man,” where external cosmic forces—both good and evil—penetrate the person and give broader meaning to his situation in life.²⁰

Darwin’s discoveries in the natural world leaked steadily into the realms of religion, philosophy and ethics. Nietzsche, as an unflinching torch bearer of Darwinian theory, drew upon

¹⁵ Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson, and Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy*, 219.

¹⁶ Plato’s tripartite division of the soul is laid bare in *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. The former outlines the three components as reason, spiritedness, and appetite. The latter describes the faculty of reason as a charioteer guiding the two lesser portions of the soul toward truth and goodness. See Plato’s *Republic* (419a–445e), and *Phaedrus* (246a–254e).

¹⁷ Gilbert Meilander, *Faith and Faithfulness* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1991), 38.

¹⁸ 1 Cor 15:17 (New International Version).

¹⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: D. Appleton, 1898), 1–209. This portion of the text explores the commonality in physical and mental traits between humans and other animals such as monkeys and dogs. Later on, Darwin concludes that “man is descended from some less highly organized form” (620).

²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 35–41.

the naturalist to construct his own philosophy of will and power. If the strong are fit enough to survive and reproduce, then they also have the ability to mold the world in their favor, using other creatures—indeed, even other men and women—as instruments for their own achievement. Nietzsche’s rejection of Christianity, in large part, stemmed from his desire to strip away Christian virtue from the might-makes-right natural order of things. Faith, hope, and charity were despised by Nietzsche as anathema, preventing humanity from unlocking its full potential.²¹

The “Man as Evolved Animal” model continues to enjoy longevity in contemporary ethical discussions. Princeton philosopher Peter Singer, for one, presses home a view of nature that makes almost no distinction in moral status between a human infant and a chicken.²² And why should he, if he labels anything that favors human dignity over-and-against other animals as evidence of speciesism?

Man as Machine

The third and final metaphor I wish to invoke is Man as Machine. This will have particular value for the later conversation on Transhumanism, but for the present, let me offer a simple summary. Man as Machine first emerged from the writings of Julian Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751) and was built on the back of strict materialism. De la Mettrie’s work noted the similarities of animal and human functioning, effectively dismissing man’s elevated status and reducing the soul to pure physical processes. This metaphor folds in nicely with the man as evolved animal, for the strictly materialist de la Mettrie argues, “Man is not moulded from a more precious clay; nature has only used one and the same dough, merely changing the yeast.”²³ Humanity is simply a complicated automaton that mechanically and predictably responds to stimuli like a machine that uses inputs to manufacture outputs.²⁴

The metaphor is certainly useful in the natural sciences. It prompts the scientist to probe in the structures of matter and locate the relationship between the discrete pieces and the whole. After all, altering one tiny spark plug makes the difference between a pleasant Sunday drive and sitting in a parking lot with an angry expression on your face. The stakes are considerably higher if one ignores the magnificent machinery of the human genome.

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Each metaphor sends humanity toward a particular fate; it indicates a *telos* or ultimate end to which a person strives. If man is a being caught between divine forces from above and

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Deithe (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2017), 3–36. Nietzsche rejected the biblical moral framework as a “slave morality.” Essentially, slave morality was created in response to the values created by those in power; it esteems behaviors which those in power ignore or despise (e.g., humility, altruism, care for the poor). See also, Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1974), 351–71.

²² Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993), 181–91.

²³ Julian Offray de la Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, trans. Ann Thomson (New York: Cambridge University, 1996), 20.

²⁴ The first century Greek poet, Lucretius, offered similar views centuries before de la Mettrie. Expounding on the ideas of Epicurus, Lucretius held to an atomistic view of nature where the world acts in accordance with physical laws apart from divine influence. See his *On the Nature of Things*, particularly Books 1–2.

unruly nature below, then the flourishing life is one that avoids the wrath of the gods and finds a certain harmony with the natural world. The pagan, then, would harness what power was available to him through spells, shamans, and sacrifice to minimize the curses and maximize the blessings for one's family, crops, and social relations.

If man is only an evolved animal, then ultimate flourishing is to adapt, survive, and spread one's genes. Strength and vigor become the operating virtues, and human communities are either reduced to arenas by which strong individuals subdue the weak or serve as entities of power unto themselves to rule other groups.

And, finally, if man is a machine as de la Mettrie suggests, then flourishing can be equated with optimum efficiency, where all the parts that make up a person's body and mind operate seamlessly without deferring to outside or transcendent sources of meaning.

These metaphors make claims about the human person—who the person *is*—and they suggest particular forms of flourishing. Yet each of the above models lacks the incarnational impulse of human nature—by that I mean an inherent bodily dignity given to man and woman by God as gift and as essential to a person's human-ness.

Models and frameworks only work insofar as they explain fixed targets, in this case, human nature. What happens if *that* given is called into question, as in the case of the rising Transhumanist movement?

HOMO TECHNOLOGICUS?

Imagine, for a moment, that you go to your eye doctor. After twenty minutes of assorted tests, she tells you what you already know. You need stronger lenses. Then, much to your surprise, she tells you about some recent innovations in ophthalmology. She says, "Our office is a part of a beta program that can surgically remove one of your eyes, replacing it with a robotic replica that is absolutely identical in look and feel. This new eye will give you perfect vision at a hundred yards." Before you can catalogue any objections, she continues, "The procedure is only two hours long, financially covered by government subsidies, and pain-free." Your potential objection list just shrank by three right there. Would you consider the surgery?

Let's play out the thought experiment. If you were, in theory, okay with a robotic eye, would you value a potential upgrade that would provide perfect vision at a thousand yards? Would you order a version of the eye that would allow you to have zoom capabilities, see with night vision, and/or have x-ray toggles? Would it make a difference if you were the only person in the world with access to this type of enhancement?

I have used this thought experiment in parish and university contexts for some time now. While a few adventurous souls would say yes to the entire package, most have deep reservations about the proposed surgery in at least one if not all of its permutations. The hesitation usually manifests itself in two distinct forms. The first objection is individual in nature and requires the theological assumption that man is sinful by nature. If a person is given a power that exceeds normal human abilities, resisting the temptation to abuse such power may also prove to be super-

human. Remarkable eyesight with zoom or night-vision, for example, would inevitably lead to seeing things that should not be seen. Privacy would be violated, and the beneficiary of the surgery is transformed over time into a voyeur *par excellence*. The self-aware person, then, declines precisely because he knows he is human—and as such, he is predictably fallible and susceptible to evil actions.

The second objection has broader-based, communal concerns. Many participants in the thought experiment question to what degree human enhancement (as opposed to therapeutic uses of technology) leads to a devaluation of humanity. In other words, if I add a robotic eye or two, will this make me less human? What about adding a robotic arm, as well? This is a version of the sorites paradox. Rather than asking how many grains of sand are required to make a heap, we are asking how many robotic modifications are required before a person is something other than human.

Both concerns are quite profound and useful to our time here because they speak to this fundamental anxiety about what it means to be human in a technologically advanced society. Ironically, the resistance to such a surgery implies a certain discomfort with the belief that a person can actually be thought of *as a machine*. To put this another way, it appears that an individual is a machine right up until we allow actual machines to penetrate one’s body with increasing regularity. Then, we find ourselves disoriented in the human-but-not-quite-human terrain of the “uncanny valley” and are left with the intuition that our nature can and should remain appropriately distanced from the strict determinism implied in the Man as Machine metaphor.

Presently, the term “machine” has an anachronistic quality to it. Perhaps the more suitable metaphor is a slight augmentation of Man as Machine to Man as Computer, the flesh-and-bones hardware facilitating the software of the mind. For anyone who has ever bought a new computer online, the available customization options are nearly endless. Processors, graphics cards, power supplies, memory—all powerful tools to help a user run the type of programs they need to be successful. This is the story of Transhumanism, a story when man takes hold of his evolutionary destiny and crafts for himself a world of unlimited freedom and possibility. It is a tale that has but one use for the body: to protect the program of the mind, the *person’s true identity*.

Transhumanism is a constellation of beliefs that reject any static view of human nature. Rather, it suggests that humans can and should modify their physical and mental processes with any and all technology at their disposal.²⁵ Practically speaking, this can take a variety of forms: surgically placed microchip security implants, mind-machine interfaces for amputees, and yes, eye, ear, and limb enhancements. An overwhelmingly secular movement, Transhumanism simply carries evolutionary theory to its endgame. Humanity, for the first time in its history, can bring about favorable “mutations” through applied technology, alterations that carry a person past therapeutic technologies into the realm of super-human enhancement. Some thinkers, including Yuval Noah Harari, believe that this species-wide transformation will be so total, so beneficial, that the term *Homo sapiens* will fail to communicate the “god-like control” that

²⁵ Max More, “The Philosophy of Transhumanism,” in *The Transhumanist Reader*, edited by Max More and Natasha Vita-More (Chickchester: Wiley, 2013), 3–17.

humans have over “their own biological substratum.”²⁶ Harari’s *Homo deus* designation may be a bit hyperbolic, but *Homo technologicus* just might hit the nail on the head: the technologically-reliant person situated in the digitally-mediated life.

The transhumanist movement has three central struts: super-longevity, super-intelligence, and super-wellbeing. Super-longevity is the scientific pursuit to reverse the aging process. Aubrey de Gray, a noted leader in this field, bemoans the fatalism that is present in current discussions about death. His work at SENS Research Foundation and AgeX Therapeutics focuses on regenerative medicine, therapies that halt or reverse normal cellular decay, prompting widespread optimism for a future where death is chosen, not inevitable.²⁷

Super-intelligence is the second super. Oxford philosopher and transhumanist thinker, Nick Bostrom, lays out three forms of super-intelligence, two of which are useful for my purposes: “speed” superintelligence and “quality” superintelligence. The former refers to any system that can do what a human intellect can do, only “multiple orders of magnitude” faster. The latter identifies systems that are as fast as the human mind but “vastly qualitatively smarter.”²⁸ In either case, the age is approaching when computer speeds (or the speed of human thinking augmented directly by digital technologies) will create new rules on what is humanly possible.

If the above targets are largely fulfilled, neural procedures in the future could dramatically increase abilities such as calculation, memory, comprehension, and/or creativity. Imagine, if you will, the ability to receive knowledge uploads where you can perfectly and completely recall the entire contents of the Library of Congress or Wikipedia. In the broad sense, one can accurately refer to an age of super-intelligence when computers exceed human abilities across a variety of fields (general intelligence). More than brute force calculation in which computers are already far superior, true artificial super-intelligence will be able to master the nuances of speech, art, music, and philosophy at alarming rates, ever-improving by recursive self-learning.

The final super is super-wellbeing. If a person is technologically enhanced to live two hundred years and has the brain power of a thousand geniuses yet is unhappy, what’s ultimately the point? Super-wellbeing seeks to modify your affective brain states. Philosopher David Pearce argues that humans have the moral obligation to remove all forms of anxiety, depression, fear, and unhappiness through advanced gene therapies. His paper, “The Hedonistic Imperative,” suggests that manufactured eternal bliss—first through drugs, then through gene therapies—is not only possible, but the most preferable of post-human futures.²⁹ He styles himself a leader in the Abolitionist Project, a movement designed to phase out involuntary suffering in sentient beings.

You will undoubtedly note the religious tenor of the three supers. In fact, there are some, though few, Christians who argue that Christianity is at its very core a transhumanist movement.

²⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 43–49.

²⁷ Aubrey de Grey, *Ending Aging* (New York: St. Martins, 2007).

²⁸ Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014), 52–61.

²⁹ <https://www.hedweb.com> (accessed Sept 27, 2018).

It does, after all, seek to impart unlimited life to its adherents. Christians experience a form of super-intelligence when all things are made clear at the end of time. In addition, one of the enduring images of Christian eschatology is a world without tears, anxiety, or fear, strikingly akin to the transhumanist value of super-wellbeing. Yet Lutherans, as well as other Christian denominations, should be quick to make two distinctions here. First, transhumanist *telos* cannot escape the immanent; there is no ultimate, transcendent ends to which it can aspire. The movement merely offers the means. Why should we be transhumanist? The surprisingly limited (and ultimately, unsatisfying) answer is: To be *better*. Second, eschatology is not fundamentally an “adding on” of abilities at the end of time, but rather it is the restoration of man’s original being—free, good, and in properly ordered relationships with God, neighbor, and nature.

I suspect that Transhumanism’s popularity will wax brightly as people: 1) regularly witness the remarkable magic of technological advances that have real impact on their day-to-day living, and 2) increasingly rely on digital technologies for their physical and mental maintenance. The Digital Age has fueled the utopian dreams of many transhumanists as the widespread availability of information has led to stunning degrees of social change. Yet central to my thesis, the digital life necessarily causes embodiment to fall into eclipse. Humans have exchanged real worlds for virtual ones, incarnation for excarnation.

This eclipse can happen in two distinct ways. On the one hand, tamer versions of transhumanist thought believe that the human body is a necessary, yet flawed, piece of hardware. This is the view of futurists Max More and Natasha Vita-More. Technology is used to overcome specific bodily limitations, such as the size of human brains or the lack of wings.³⁰ On the other hand, the most famous of all transhumanists, Google’s Ray Kurzweil, has far grander visions of future human existence. He is convinced that the pace of technological advance in the near future will be so remarkable that a “singularity” will take place. In this new age, men and women will be able to live indefinitely by uploading their consciousness into computer substrates or exist in ethereal digital clouds.³¹

Neither view treats the human body in way I have been promoting by my particular employment of the term “embodiment”: as an essential, God-gifted component of human identity. This is an important point. It is here that Man as Machine models begin to fail. What’s left is a view of man that essentially regards human identity as *software*, as *mind*. The person is never wholly immaterial, *per se*, since consciousness may in the future run from silicon-based platforms. But he loses his incarnational character; the human body no longer has a proper role to play in terms of identity.

When the body is lost for the promise of a transhumanist utopia, the person inevitably loses other goods. Procreation becomes a hassle and no longer represents a central human expression of hope for the future. Courage and sacrifice no longer serve as virtues, becoming nostalgic afterthoughts of a bliss-saturated generation unaccustomed to the uncomfortable idea of death. Since the object of all transhumanist technologies is to empower the individual with

³⁰ Max More, “A Letter to Mother Nature” in *The Transhumanist Reader*, 449–50.

³¹ Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Penguin, 2005). The “technological singularity” is a term used to describe ultra-rapid, exponential technological progress fueled by ever-increasing computer processing speeds.

abilities far beyond current levels, deep and unsettling questions linger about the individual’s responsibility to the whole. What happens to embodied community in an age of gods?

The Age of Excarnation is upon us. It is an age in which we choose data over people, screen over skin-and-bones, and connectivity over community. For a generation of young people, the concept of community has taken an utterly strange turn. Many believe that online social networks serve as an adequate medium for participating in all affairs of communal life. Paradoxically, but also predictably, researchers are finding this generation to be lonelier than ever.³² Young men and women exercise ever-increasing controls on their friendship groups yet find that online discussions quickly turn into shouting matches and *ad hominem* attacks. Whereas “third places” like bars and bowling alleys traditionally used to facilitate full spectrum communication and community bonding, now one receives a text message and an emoji.³³ Even sexuality is no longer assumed to be an embodied experience. In fact, the term “digisexual” has emerged as a description of those whose only sexual experiences come mediated by digital or virtual environments.³⁴

Earlier, I quoted Charles Taylor from his work, *A Secular Age*. His comment on excarnation articulated a movement within faith communities—a movement away from embodied, physical expressions of religious faith in favor of private contemplation and individualistic spirituality. I would venture to add two small phrases to expand the quote’s reach, to read: Excarnation is, “the steady disembodiment of spiritual [and communal] life, so that it is less and less carried in deeply meaningful bodily forms, and lies more and more in the head [and in the device.]” My expansion of the definition allows us to consider the deep influence of digital media on the person regardless if they are participants in traditional faith communities or not.

Ultimately, this term can and must be set in opposition to incarnation. Whereas incarnation is image made flesh, excarnation seeks the reverse: flesh made image. Man become software. Excarnation is the reducing of the rich complexity of human life, identity, and experience to quantifiable data; it is the intentional ‘captioning’ of the human person. An obvious example of excarnation is pornography, where the profound depths of embodied human sexuality are cast aside for superficial images designed to reduce the subject to an easy-to-discard sex object. To use a lighter example, boys’ high school sports are changing dramatically. With the rise of popular video games, such as the Madden franchise, fewer and fewer boys are trying out for the team. Boys feel like they “know” football because they can play a video game with expertise, leaving behind the experiential knowledge that only comes with the embodied participation on the field.³⁵ An irreducibly physical activity like tackle football has been reduced to something a 16-year old boy can play while drinking a Coke on the family couch.

³² See the Cigna’s U.S. Loneliness Index (2018). https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf (Accessed Sept 25, 2018). It should be noted that social media use is but one of many related factors to the increase in loneliness among young people.

³³ For more on the decline of third places and corresponding decline in social capital, see Robert Putnam’s classic, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

³⁴ For a unique (and somewhat alarming) look at the future of human sexuality, I suggest David Levy’s *Love+Sex+Robots* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

³⁵ Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift* (New York: Basic, 2016), 86–87. Video games might offer an alternative way to preserve a boy’s perceived masculinity when they shun the demanding physical activity of the school sport. A boy can still “participate” in the football or basketball culture, even learn basic terminology or nuanced techniques in

The Age of Excarnation presents a deep, utterly gnostic challenge to theological anthropology. If parishes ignore this threat or remain blind to its subtle effects, they risk becoming a church-community that no longer visits the hurt, binds the broken, shelters the homeless, and reconciles the imprisoned. Instead, they remain distant from their obligations to the physical neighborhoods to which they belong, choosing instead to inhabit virtual (i.e., online) worlds with virtual (i.e., not *real*) acts of love and pastoral care. Can the Church counter this tidal shift toward excarnate living?

HOMO CHRISTIANUS

In his wildly popular book, *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari claims that man’s only unique distinction among other animals is that man can “cooperate in very flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers.”³⁶ Is this the last surviving tale of human identity? If true, this surely is music to the ears of Mark Zuckerberg and other tech giants, since by pinning human identity to cooperation, they can justify massive data grabs that produce greater levels of connectivity and near-unlimited cash flow. And yet, this approach leaves substantial gaps. Harari’s statement, like de la Mettrie’s *Man a Machine*, fails to produce any resource by which one can claim intrinsic dignity for the human body, strong or weak. What’s left is a fragile accord between individuals for the sake of survival, akin to one member of a community pleading with another, “If you don’t hurt me, I won’t hurt you.”

I suggest that if one gets human identity wrong, then the resulting model of human flourishing risks minimizing or ignoring the crucial role of the body.³⁷ Solid theological anthropology must include a space for the person’s physical constitution. Therefore, I believe that the Church’s first and most pressing step is to lay out a straightforward case for human identity that incorporates enfleshed living and properly accounts for the necessity of physical communities of grace. This approach need not be Luddite in any way, as the Lutheran articulation of freedom allows us to engage culture in all of its forms.

I suggest a model that binds human identity directly to the life of the Trinity. Human distinctness is borne out of the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying purposes of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, respectively. What does that look like, exactly?

Telos (Vocation)

From the instant of his creation, man has been given purpose. In the broad sense, Adam and Eve are created to bring glory to God, to participate in the life of God made immediate to them in the Garden. God the Father bestows man and woman with the gift of *telos*, a reason for

theory. Sax’s research, however, highlights the great gap between *Wissenschaft* (knowledge about something) and *Kenntnis* (knowledge through direct experience).

³⁶ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 133.

³⁷ This dynamic works in the reverse, to an extent. A healthy understanding of our collective past can help us better understand our individual identities in the present. Charles Taylor notes this by saying, “Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can’t do justice to where we come from.” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29).

being that reflects his very own nature.³⁸ In the narrow sense, man and woman exist to work the ground, to exercise care *for* and dominion *over* the animals, and to be fruitful and multiply. God’s design for humanity is brought to fullness in Revelation 21–22, where the Tree of Life, crops, and rivers again move and produce in harmony, and all of humankind is caught up in the glorious praise of God in song, worship, and community.

Christian engagement with the world operates between these two idyllic states, doing the works that the Father prepared in advance for the Body of Christ to do. The Christian *telos* is to make disciples, to baptize, and teach the present and coming kingdom of God, while at the same time, praising God by serving in the kingdom of the left in the everyday matters of vocation *and* avocation. To be without vocation is to be without purpose. It should serve as no surprise, then, that unemployment affects a person so profoundly, for the loss of a job strips away a crucial feature of one’s very humanity. Vocations not tied to employment are just as central to our identity; they enliven us with reasons for being, for doing.

Notice how this wing of theological anthropology opens the door for those in the technology industry. Christians do not have to take a Luddite stand here, but instead they can encourage the faithful research and implementation of digital and robotic technologies with a heart of discernment to love one’s neighbor. This is not too dissimilar from the vocation of soldier, who must from time to time wield his or her weapon against the enemy. The discipline and training it takes to do such difficult tasks is necessary for a peaceful society, just as the same is necessary for those who wield other dangerous things, like the Internet. The Church can, in these instances, offer goodness and beauty to a fallen world by shining brightly into the far reaches of culture.

Embodiment (Incarnation)

In his remarkable text, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stresses the importance of bodily presence in Christian communities, stating:

The believer feels no shame, as though he were still living too much in the flesh, when he yearns for the physical presence of other Christians. Man was created a body, the Son of God appeared on earth in the body, he was raised in the body, in the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected fellowship of God’s spiritual-physical creatures.³⁹

For Bonhoeffer and for us, the incarnate life of the Christian is experienced in multiple ways. Not only is the human life understood solely through the context of one’s physical existence, but the character of history can be understood solely through Jesus, and seen through the lens of his

³⁸ The *telos* of humanity reverberates in discussions of philosophy and theology, from Aristotle’s treatment of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), to Aquinas’ teleological emphasis in the fifth of his Five Forms, to Luther’s “new obedience” borne out of faith and directed toward neighbor. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1095a15–1102a); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925), Ia, q. 2, art 3; and Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 245–50.

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 19–20.

real body broken and real blood shed to impart real forgiveness. The second person of the Trinity is God’s complete endorsement of physical embodiment.⁴⁰

As Lutherans, we confess the following realities in this light:

- One, *we are embodied* creatures. God, in his goodness and wisdom, formed man from the dirt of the ground and woman from the flesh of Adam. The organic material is unapologetically used by God as a designation of 1) man’s origin in Genesis 2, and 2) his temporal destiny, made clear in God’s tragic pronouncement in the very next chapter, declaring to Adam “for dust you are, and to dust you will return.”⁴¹ In his wisdom, God chose for man a material body, an “inactive clod” that God forms into a “most beautiful creature which has a share of immortality.”⁴²
- Two, *we follow the Incarnation*. Jesus represents God’s great Yes to humanity, and by extension, his Yes to the created order. In order to accomplish the reconciliation promised to man, God in Jesus descends and becomes flesh, to live among us. The blood he sheds on the cross is actual blood; the flesh that is broken for us at Calvary is actual flesh. Because Jesus dies, we can follow him to the cross. Because he rises, we can endure the experience of death to rise yet again.
- Three, *we are sacramental*. The embodied character of the Gospel shines through Baptism and Holy Communion, the means of grace, by which God offers his very self in the material elements of water, bread, and wine. The sacraments are neither disembodied nor theoretical; by God’s command they require physical means. Christians encounter the real and living God first at the font, then as a member of God’s own body at the table.
- Finally, *we are eschatological beings*. The hope of the Christian is not the dying, then subsequent ascension of the soul for eternal bliss in heaven. Rather, the hope is in the physical resurrection of the dead as Jesus himself experienced. Our physical selves are neither annihilated nor left behind. The Christian seeks to take part in the new heavens and new earth with the fully redeemed same-but-not-quite-the-same bodies that were gifted to us at life’s beginning.

Church-Community

All of the aforementioned arguments about embodiment are incomplete without the community. We experience community in our creatureliness, as Eve’s introduction to Adam was borne out of God’s declaration that “it is not good for the man to be alone.”⁴³ Luther adds that Adam, while “beautiful” and “provided for,” nevertheless lacks the “gift of the increase and the

⁴⁰ Discussions about “the body” and how it may be referenced accurately are not without complexity, particularly in light of recent discussions on sex and gender. For a relatively brief introduction into some of these issues, see Caroline Bynum, “Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective” in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, eds. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999), 241–80.

⁴¹ Genesis 3:19b (NIV).

⁴² *LW* 1:84.

⁴³ Gen 2:18 (NIV).

blessing—because he is alone.”⁴⁴ Our experience of the embodied life is necessarily communal, as we bear our creaturely limitations to live lives of service and consolation to the brethren. Even more than that, our bodies bear unique witness in and amongst the communities we live in, as the apostle Paul reminds the church at Corinth, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”⁴⁵

Our sacramental identity is overwhelmingly communal in nature, for we neither baptize ourselves nor commune ourselves in isolation. Rather, the absolving word of God from pulpit, font, or table is always spoken upon us externally, communicating God’s Word to us in the confidence of God’s promises. “[The Christian] needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother’s is sure.”⁴⁶

It is here in community that we find the abiding and sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit animates the Church with passion and vigor, first demonstrated at Pentecost, to the good of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The very same Spirit fills the Body of Christ today. In the Large Catechism, Luther sums up the community of saints in this way:

I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, and yet it is united in love without sect or schism. Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought into it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God’s Word, which is the beginning point for entering it.⁴⁷

Here one ought to notice that the Christian *telos* is never far from the experience of community, as the Christian man’s presence among other Christians is described as partnership in a common task and is authenticated by the ongoing invitation to hear God’s word. Yet also present in Luther’s statement is an implicit understanding that the church-community is not bound in a single historical context; it is the collection of believers under the headship of Christ, only to be brought together in the end times. This is not insignificant, as the Christian Church will have to grapple with digital communities within her flock and discern whether an authentic communication of God’s Word can be proclaimed (and heard) in such virtual spaces.

Conclusion

⁴⁴ LW 1:116.

⁴⁵ 2 Cor 4:10–12 (NIV).

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

⁴⁷ LC II, 51–52. From Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

What is lost if there are two of the above, but not all three? Vocation and embodiment without community leaves the Christian without the full word of grace, isolated from his opportunity to hear *and* proclaim the great hope that exists for the Christian. Embodiment and community without vocation leads to the deep depression of being disconnected from God's purposes on earth. It is the actor in search of a story in which to play a part. Vocation and community without embodiment leads to gnostic forms of Christianity, where the physical is reviled, creation is ignored or despised, and the fundamental good of being gifted with flesh-and-blood bodies is cast aside for utopian visions of perfect thinking, perfect religiosity, *perfect folly*.

As the Age of Excarnation continues to hypnotize us with shiny new toys and grand promises of pixel-induced bliss, the Christian confession can offer a narrative on human identity that actually addresses the whole person. Our neighbors are not simply minds. They are much more than complicated computers that produce outputs.

Human beings require the features of vocation, embodiment, and community grounded in the mutual love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With these non-negotiables set in stone, the Christian can boldly interact with the world of technology and Transhumanism with discerning hearts and clear eyes. Every topic, every conversation, every new innovation is open to the gaze of the free Christian, knowing that such matters do not put his justification at risk. Yet in this exploration, the Christian need not fret when hopes of a technologically-driven utopia never come to pass; Christian hope was never placed in the hands of men in the first place.

In this day of miracle and wonder, a Christian need not cry, "Crucify!" at each new technological advance, for he has a vocation to perform, a body to enjoy, and a church-community to participate in. His efforts can be more fruitfully directed by boldly identifying what it means to be human, especially in light of the over-promising, under-delivering (and ultimately, de-humanizing) promises of Transhumanism. Christian eschatology, after all, offers *all* good things to those whose identity is found in the risen Christ—a new heaven, a new earth, and a redeemed body. And that is truly super.

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