

Posthuman dignity and the problem of the body

Zachary R. Calo

Hamad bin Khalifa University, Qatar; University of Notre Dame, Australia.

Mail: zcalo@hbku.edu.qa

This essay examines the anthropology of transhumanist and posthumanist thought, especially its account of human dignity. Particular attention is given to the place of embodiment within its philosophical worldview. It is argued that posthumanism necessarily defines the body as a problem. The body represents a barrier to achieving dignity rather than a site of intrinsic dignity. To become more dignified requires moving beyond the natural inheritance of the body and even embodiment itself. The framing of dignity and embodiment within posthumanist thoughts illuminates, in turn, broader ethical considerations within contemporary biotechnology.

The meaning of transhumanism and posthumanism is subject to debate and confusion. They both concern broadly the ways in which technology can be used to change and improve the human body and even human nature. In an oft cited definition, The World Transhumanist Association has defined transhumanism as “The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.”¹ This project

might encompass a diverse range of ideas, aims, and technological projects ranging from synthetic biology, prosthetics, and genetic engineering, to more fantastical visions of the human future including the radical extension of life and even the realization of digital immortality. The end point of these enhancements is the posthuman condition, which might include an evolutionarily new species or disembodied forms of being. According to this formulation, transhumanism and posthumanism are connected in that transhumanism is the process by which the posthuman is realized. Of primary concern is the objective to move beyond the boundaries of human nature so that human beings can evolve from a biological inheritance to a machine-based future – that is, from homo sapiens to techno sapiens. This line of thought, however fantastical, reveals most clearly the anthropological assumptions that undergird the transhumanist project. It reveals the premises that shape posthumanist understanding of the body’s meaning and significance.

Posthuman dignity is a term most often associated with the work of Nick Bostrom, who has argued that making persons more intelligent, more self-controlled, more immune from debilitation or disease, more liberated from the drudgeries of labor, and even free from the grip of death itself is to make them more dignified. Bostrom argues that “it is possible that through enhancement we could become better able to appreciate and secure many forms of dignity that are overlooked or missing under current conditions.”² Technological enhancement, according to Bostrom, offers the promise of human betterment and a more dignified existence. In this

¹ N. BOSTROM, *Introduction – The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction*, in CALVIN MERCER, DEREK F. MAHER (eds.), *Transhumanism and the Body: The World Religions Speak*, New York, 2014, 1.

² N. BOSTROM, *Dignity and Enhancement*, <https://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity-enhancement.pdf> (last visited 23/04/2021)

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respect, human nature as bequeathed by the evolutionary process is a barrier to dignity. It is the role of humanity to arrogate to itself the work of overcoming the limits of nature in order to become more dignified. As Bostrom puts it, “Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways.”³

As framed by posthumanist thought, dignity is not a given characteristic of human nature. It is not an ontological status bestowed upon persons. Dignity is made and achieved. It emerges through a process, indeed an ongoing and endless process, and can be expanded by improving the human condition. In other words, nature as such has no normativity. The body is the site of pure possibility to be realized. As such, the path to dignification goes through, or perhaps around, the human inheritance and especially the body. Human life is enhanced most fully by overcoming the human. To be liberated from the limits of the human is to become more dignified. Bostrom’s account of dignity contrasts with the so-called bioconservative position. For bioconservatives, nature is normative. There are essential features of our humanness, bound up in the limits of nature, that should be preserved even when technology might permit moving beyond. There is a fixed givenness to the human inheritance that makes moral claims upon us. Changing the essential character of our personhood is an affront to the dignity unique to humans. The limits that define our nature - including the final limitations of suffering and death – are essential aspects of what it means to be human. Their presence within the scope of human life provides occasions of moral reflection about what it

means to live this human life with dignity. It is dangerous and hubristic to reject them.

The posthuman account of dignity informs its view of the body. The body is not itself a bearer of dignity and, in fact, might better be viewed as an obstacle. It is the site of vulnerability and suffering. To enhance the body is to diminish that which stains the human condition, and to move beyond the body is to overcome the risks endemic to life. To become less reliant on our bodies – to become, in this respect, less human – is to become more dignified. In a paradoxical way therefore, the achievement of ultimate mastery over human nature requires eviscerating the naturalness of the body.

It might be the case that even in an imagined technological future, persons will remain tethered in some ways to bodies and other forms of physicality. Yet, even if the body cannot be fully overcome then it should at least be mastered, remade, and improved. The human experience of embodiment is already undergoing a revolution. The line between human and cyborg is blurred. Sex dolls, social media, and virtual reality all point towards new ways of being human and of experiencing embodiment – and disembodiment. What it means to be an embodied creature is more complicated and pluralized than ever.

This emphasis on the malleability of the body explains the central role that transgenderism holds within the transhuman movement. Gender, like the body itself, is merely one expression of form. It is something that can be chosen, refashioned, and imposed upon the physical body. The capacity to remake one’s biological sex reveals a wider freedom of the self over the body. Transgenderism vests humans with autonomy over gender,

³ N. BOSTROM, *Transhumanist Values*, F. ADAMS (ed.), *Ethical Issues for the 21st Century*, Charlottesville, 2003, 4.



sexuality, and embodiment and illuminates the basic malleability of our inherited nature. It renders the body an accidental vessel that contains within it something more essential to be liberated. As Martine Rothblatt observes, “A basic transhumanist concept is that a human need not have a flesh body, just as a woman need not have a real vagina”.⁴ The body is simply a template for achieving authenticity.

There is a gnostic quality to posthuman thought. The decentering of the body is paired with the claim that essential personhood resides in the brain. We are thinking beings not embodied beings. The body thus has no definitive bearing on our identity as persons. The ultimate goal, in fact, is to download the contents of the brain so that thought and identity might continue in the form of digital immortality. Salvation comes not through the resurrection of the body but the resurrection of the mind in a supercomputer. This prioritizing of mind over body is itself hardly novel within the history of thought, but posthumanism vests it with a distinct technological gloss. Posthuman anthropology combines with technological sanguinity to envision a means by which persons might be freed from the limitations and indignities of the body and thereby achieve a higher more dignified form of existence.

This impulse to overcome the body is connected with the posthuman understanding of selfhood. Russell Blackford describes posthumanism as a philosophy of “self-transformation” and “self-overcoming”.⁵ This use of the language of self is revealing, for in transhumanism the self is both

subject and object. The self uses its autonomy to remake itself. Posthumanism is premised on the vision of an open future that has no end in a teleological sense. It is a future defined by autonomy and freedom from the strictures of nature and convention alike. It is not anthropology that limits possibility but only technological feasibility. Along these lines, Andy Clark proposes “that human minds and bodies are essentially open to episodes of deep and transformative restructuring”.⁶ This invites, in turn, the use of technology to enhance, transform, and ultimately overcome the human. In the end, everything is malleable. Everything is open to manipulation. Everything is the object of will and power.

The irony of posthumanism is that while it looks to the radical possibilities of the human future, it remains solidly wed to the cultural inheritance of modernity. Posthumanism is tethered to modernity’s project of domesticating and controlling nature. It represents a radical extension of faith in progress and the possibilities of improving the human condition, along with the attendant belief that such possibilities lie within the human prerogative. It is proposed that through technological mastery the ills of the human condition can be overcome, perhaps to the point of achieving a kind of perfection. Posthumanism extends the Enlightenment pursuit of mastery over nature to mastery over the human. It is, in this respect, the acceleration and fulfillment of modernity’s deepest moral ambitions.

In the end, the posthuman project is only secondarily a technological endeavor. It is in the first instance a moral project that seeks to give

⁴ M. ROTHBLATT, *Mind is Deeper Than Matter: Transgenderism, Transhumanism, and the Freedom of Form*, in M. MORE, N. VITA-MORE (eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader*, West Sussex, 2013, 318.

⁵ R. BLACKFORD, *The Great Transition: Ideas and Anxieties*, in M. MORE, N. VITA-MORE (eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader*, West Sussex, 2013, 422.

⁶ A. CLARK, *Re-Inventing Ourselves: The Plasticity of Embodiment, Sensing, and Mind*, in M. MORE, N. VITA-MORE (eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader*, West Sussex, 2013, 11.

expression to a normative account of dignity, happiness, and human flourishing. Posthumanism offers the purest encapsulation of “expressive individualism,” a term coined by the American sociologist Robert Bellah and recently appropriated by Carter Snead in his work on public bioethics. Snead summarizes the anthropology of expressive individualism as follows: “In its pristine form, expressive individualism takes the individual, atomized self to be the fundamental unit of human reality.”⁷ The expressive individualistic self is defined by an emphasis on choice and authenticity, autonomy as opposed to relationality, mind over body, and the evasion of vulnerability. This theoretical framework might well be applied towards evaluating issues raised by transhumanism and posthumanism. Indeed, examining the anthropology of transhumanism on these terms illuminates the outworking of deep entrenched cultural assumptions that might remain more occluded in other biotechnological contexts.

In Snead’s assessment, a central problem with expressive individualism is that it offers an account of the human person that “cannot make sense of the fully lived reality of human *embodiment*, with all that entails”.⁸ Encounters with risk, dependency, and relationality are all aspects of human experience mediated through bodies, yet an anthropology premised on expressive individualism cannot render such experiences sensible or meaningful. In fact, if anything, such experiences only inhibit the free expressive autonomy of persons. They are points of vulnerability that puncture autonomy. Posthumanism likewise cannot provide an account of the ways in which embodied experiences such as these, which carve into the freedom of life, might at the same time contribute to life’s moral density. In

the end, the body remains a problem. Reducing the body to a site for imposing will and achieving authenticity has led to the evisceration of its moral significance. This is not only the case with posthuman thought. The evasion of the body might be seen as endemic to late modern culture, especially its biotechnological aspirations. Within a moral universe informed by the anthropology of expressive individualism, the human person is characterized not by gratuity and vulnerability but the drama of being and becoming into an open future. What then does it mean to be a dignified human? No coherent answer can be provided.

⁷ C. SNEAD, *What It Means To Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*, Cambridge, 2020, 86.

⁸ *Ivi*, 124.