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Posthumanism's Morality and ELCA Social Teaching

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Posthuman, transhumanism, posthumanism, cultural posthumanism, bio-liberals, philosophical posthumanism, technological posthumanism.[1] Like glancing into a rapidly shifting kaleidoscope, a glance into the public, academic, artistic, philosophical literature about the "posthuman" can give one vertigo. Imaginative fiction like *Blade Runner* [2] or *The Lunar Chronicles*[3] may be intriguing to the mental eye, but engaging discussions about the actual possibilities of a world with posthuman beings, whoa!

While many may not have peered into that posthuman lens, nearly everyone has experienced similar vertigo once in a while when noticing the rapidly shifting

[1]Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Religion," in *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*, ed. Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2014) 49f. While I have listed a kaleidoscope of terms and there is a great deal of confusion in the literature, it is possible to create meaningful distinctions. One of the most useful and accurate categorizings is provided by Tirosh-Samuelson cited here and available in a slightly different version as "Transhumanism as a Secularist Faith," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 47/4 (2012) 710–734. Readers of *Word & World* are likely to find her essay worth their attention because it sketches an overview of religious reflection, including Lutheran thinkers Phil Hefner and Ted Peters.

[2]A 1982 dystopian science fiction film (Warner Brothers, 1982).

[3]A series of young adult fantasy novels by Marissa Meyer (Felwell and Friends, 2012–2015).

While there should be openness to some of the intentions and outcomes conceived as posthuman, it is clear that the generally understood principles of posthuman morality are woefully inadequate at this time. Posthuman adherents need to think much more deeply and broadly toward a substantive, justifiable framework that could provide the necessary moral guidance for their unprecedented efforts.

kaleidoscope of contemporary technology. Cybernetics, social media, cryogenics, robotics, designer children, consciousness studies, synthetic biology, nuclear fission, life extension, Google algorithms—just to name a diverse and wildly incomplete list—can also make one dizzy. Some of these terms are familiar. Others seem like they belong only in science fiction. All of them, in fact, signal dramatic developments in human power that are already here or feasibly within reach. At some level and at some time each have already challenged or promise to challenge how we think about what it means to live and to be "human." While this is not necessarily obvious, the dizzy-making posthuman and the dizzy-making technological developments we live with daily are inherently connected.

Across the board, unprecedented technological power is establishing a new order of being. That is, there is a qualitative shift in the relationship between human power and life on this planet.

The common factor in discussions of the posthuman and the more everyday technology terms is, simply put, the unprecedented human power now being unleashed and applied by science and technology. Across the board, unprecedented technological power is establishing a new order of being. That is, there is a qualitative shift in the relationship between human power and life on this planet, as is evident in many ways. It is unprecedented that a human individual could carry a single device that can access on a moment's notice all global news and knowledge—but that is what smartphones do. It is unprecedented that genetic science gives the power to directly and quickly alter the underlying "instructions" (DNA) of biological (including human) beings—but that is happening. It is unprecedented that human activity should affect the globe so thoroughly (through the production of CO_2) that a momentous climatic shift is underway within the span of a hundred years—but the evidence is clear. It is unprecedented, likewise, that technological developments could erase, maybe already have, the solid lines assumed through millennia distinguishing humans, their tools, and animals. Despite significant continuity with the past, humans now live in a qualitatively unprecedented age of human power.

It is precisely this unprecedented human power that enables the possibilities of radically enhanced or "posthuman" beings. But the "could" (technologically possible) and the "should" (morally defensible) are not the same, and I was invited to reflect on the question: How has or how might the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) address these possibilities? That is, from my personal perspective, do ELCA documents have anything to contribute to discussions about the posthuman? In short, yes.

An affirmative answer may surprise many, and I cannot overstress that the ELCA has not spoken to themes of the posthuman directly in any official theologi-

cal or social teaching document. The ELCA's social statement *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, however, has directly addressed the fundamental engine—unprecedented human power.[4] Moreover, the body of the ELCA social teaching documents as a whole provides a cogent social ethic that can help us engage other questions entailed in these discussions such as economics, anthropology, the use of social resources, and others.[5] This essay, then, suggests from my perspective how preachers, church leaders, executives, scientists, and many others may draw on ethical material directly relevant to moral questions underlying talk about enhancement or the posthuman.

One of the difficulties in entering into discussions about the posthuman is identifying a manageable topic, especially in an essay of this length. Fortunately, excellent work has been done recently to sketch broad moral convergences among adherents who encourage developments toward the posthuman or transhuman. This sketch of posthuman morality creates a natural conversation point with the emerging evangelical Lutheran social ethic now evident in the documents of the ELCA. This essay proceeds, then, to provide a bird's-eye summation of posthuman morality and engage it with relevant material from ELCA social documents.

What Are We Talking About?

I believe it is possible and essential to provide a useful set of distinctions among the confusing and contradictory terms with which I began this essay, but that effort requires far too much space. I will simply use, therefore, the designation of "posthuman" here as a catchall. While I do so it is crucial for readers to be clear that there are fundamental differences between various posthuman thinkers that space does not allow me to unpack.[6] Yet, despite such differences—often contradictory—all the various flavors of post- and transhuman thinkers are thinking through the question of human coevolution with technology and all sometimes employ the motif of the "posthuman." Moreover, the common factor remains the unprecedented human power and the moral approach to the meaning and use of technology.

Robert Ranisch, from Tübingen, Germany, recently has sketched the moral convergences (for simplicity, we may call them "principles") from the admittedly

[4]Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility* (Chicago: ELCA, 2011) 1.

[5]I want to stress that I am *not* offering an official response on behalf of the ELCA. Only official statements of the ELCA should be represented to third parties as the position of the ELCA. This essay and this interpretation are my own. Likewise, it is my judgment, not an ELCA claim, that a cogent social ethics is emerging in ELCA social teaching documents. I have written about this claim elsewhere but the most readily available discussion, if brief, can be accessed at www.elca.org/jle *(Journal of Lutheran Ethics*). See the April 2014 issue of the journal and my essay "Community of Moral Deliberation and an Emerging Responsibility Ethic"; at http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/56 (accessed February 3, 2015).

[6]For instance, it is widely recognized that many transhumanist thinkers accept "Enlightenment humanism," while many posthumanist thinkers specifically critique those concepts. That is, posthumanism often conceptually serves as a label for a new narrative that seeks to replace contemporary views of the human, while transhumanism focuses instead on how to radically enhance human beings, accepting the outcome as a posthuman future. See Ranisch and Sorgner, *Post- and Transhumanism*, 8, for more.

disparate and often contradictory arguments in the posthuman literature.[7] He is clear that this list of principles does not apply to every posthuman thinker in its entirety[8] and should *not* be construed as the definitive summation. Nevertheless, he draws evenhandedly and broadly from the literature, and the principles he spots are readily evident in even a cursory reading in the literature. His list provides a useful sketch for thoughtful engagement. The ten "principles" here summarize his much lengthier sketch.[9]

Convergences in Posthuman Moral Thinking

1. Freedom: Individual freedom ranks high or at the top of the values underlying transhuman and posthuman reflections. This "freedom" is a negative freedom. That is, it seeks above all the absence of constraint or compulsion. Adherents champion the idea that individuals should be free to decide for themselves how to live and that social arrangements should be designed to guarantee such choice. In particular, adherents seek "morphological" freedom, a freedom to modify human form according to one's desire.

2. Harm principle: Many do hold, however, that freedom should be limited if and only if harm is caused to third parties. There are varied views about what constitutes harm and who or what qualifies as third parties. Nevertheless, this harm principle is the only moral constraint acknowledged that limits the principle of morphological freedom.

3. Procreative liberty: It should not be surprising that much of the literature avidly affirms enhancement and argues parents should be free to enhance their own offspring. The presumption is that law and policy must have compelling reasons for denying such choice and this is generally conceived as occasions where reproductive decisions clearly cause harm to offspring. Many of those who want to enhance also argue against seeking "specialized traits," for example, skills needed for a football star. Rather, this liberty is desired for aiming at "general-purpose" characteristics, that is, enhancements meant for carrying out nearly any life trajectory or human aim.

4. Promoting well-being and reducing suffering: This is a common and strong moral claim, although expressed with a great range of variation and meaning. The common point is the promotion of well-being and the increase of human potential by eliminating physical limitations through technology. This may be coupled, among many adherents, with a desire to reduce suffering, but the dominant consensus is clearly about the promotion of human well-being.

5. Rejecting anthropocentrism: There is a common rejection of the human being as the "measure of all things." The intent is to extend "the well-being of all

[7]Robert Ranisch, "Morality," in Ranisch and Sorgner, *Post- and Transhumanism*, 149ff. Ranisch entitles the critical section "Morality of Transhumanism," but the points he delineates appear across the literature when discussing technology and so I use "posthuman " here as throughout this essay.

[8]Ranisch is clear that some posthuman adherents explicitly reject some on his list.

[9]Ranisch, "Morality," 153.

sentience, including humans, nonhuman animals, and any future artificial intellects, modified life forms, or other intelligences to which technological and scientific advance may give rise."[10]

6. Rejecting the wisdom of nature: Nearly all adherents reject belief in "essential" human characteristics. They, likewise, object to granting inherent value to biological nature, human or otherwise. Posthumanists in particular object to placing value in or finding a guide from what is natural, that is, what is "the given." Beliefs about inherent value in what exists are considered either irrational, given human power, or an understandable prejudice. They commonly point out that human biological nature has been shaped by blind evolutionary forces that have not equipped the human species to adequately handle the needs of the technological future that is becoming feasible.

Many adherents of posthumanism in all its flavors share a belief in the ongoing and accelerating progress of science and technology. It is often claimed or assumed that technology and progress are morally neutral.

7. Progressivism: It is widely recognized that many adherents of posthumanism in all its flavors share a belief in the ongoing and accelerating progress of science and technology. Some thinkers consciously embrace the Enlightenment project of human control of nature while others explicitly reject such beliefs. Whatever the theoretical framework involved, it is often claimed or assumed that technology and progress are morally neutral.[11]

8. Obligation to support science: It goes without saying that such normative claims inherently support the practice of science. Sometimes these claims lead to the belief that advanced societies have an *obligation* to support all medical research to benefit humankind, including research into human enhancement.

9. Perfectionism: Most transhumanists and posthumanists would argue they claim simply a neutrality regarding conceptions of the good life. A careful reading, however, exposes the moral privilege accorded certain human capacities (intellectual, creative, etc.) and certain life forms they envision. The life forms advocated necessarily entail a conceptual view of the good life. Such capacities and life forms are to be sought because they are of superior value, and discussion borders on belief in near or actual human perfection.

10. Obligation to enhance: Following from the previous principle, it becomes clear that many argue for enhancement not only as permissible but as an obligation

[10]"Transhumanist Declaration," at http://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-declaration (accessed January 25, 2014).

[11]Ranisch rightly points out, and ELCA documents concur, that such neutrality is a false assumption since progressivism always has and will imply moral judgments about the use of technology. For instance, the choice of which research to pursue always entails normative claims for the distribution of scarce resources towards certain ends.

from what they consider is inherently good. Sometimes the moral reasons given are limited to the obligation to enhance offspring, a principle called "procreative beneficence." As a whole, posthuman writers have not argued a case for legal obligation, but often stress strongly that parents have a moral obligation to genetically select the best offspring. This claim implies a moral obligation for the enhancement project.

How Might ELCA Social Teaching Engage Such Moral Thinking?

Often the morality of posthuman thinkers is summarily rejected or attacked, and it is easy to do so when terms like "perfectionism," "progressivism," or "negative freedom" are used in such broad strokes. To do so, however, is unfair and counterproductive. A fair assessment finds a mix of affirmations, challenges, and objections when stacked up against what I believe is the more substantive ethical teaching of the ELCA.

We can begin the comparative conversation with a contemporary expression of the golden rule. As a golden rule it carries a universal character but one that I believe also operates within the various ELCA social teaching documents. Abstractly, this contemporary golden rule reads: In response to the gift of life, respect and promote the flourishing of the common good with justice and wisdom in all social relations and actions. In ELCA documents the specific content of the common good shifts with the topic of each social statement (education, health care, sexuality, etc.), but the moral principle for right choice (respect and promote) remains the same and there is a coherent theory of value to seek (flourishing of the common good) across ELCA documents. Generally, moral choice and value are specified with attention to what justice and wisdom means for that particular content whether education, health care, creation care, or something else.

Most importantly for this essay, this moral imperative is *explicitly* articulated in relation to unprecedented human technological power in the social statement *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility* that reads:[12]

> Accordingly, responsible people are called to practice the imperative of love for all that God has made, which today can be stated as: *Respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom.*
>
> This ethical imperative[13] provides a central value, basic directives and supporting principles as the means to evaluate policy and action. With this imperative, the ELCA articulates an ethic of universal human obligation to serve the flourishing of the created order.[14]

[12]Genetic "developments also *exemplify* how contemporary human knowledge and technology are creating a different relationship between human power and life on this planet" (emphasis added). ELCA, *Genetics*, 1.

[13]For reflection on imperatives of this kind, see William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Per Anderson's "Sufficient, Sustainable Lifespan for All: Responsible Biotechnology and ELCA Social Thought," in *Theological Foundations in an Age of Biological Intervention*, ed. David C. Ratke (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2008).

[14]ELCA, *Genetics*, 15

In short, it seems to me that ELCA teaching documents hold that the moral use of technology for posthuman ends (or for any human ends for that matter) must be able to justify the action according to this universal imperative.

In comparing posthuman morality and ELCA social teaching, each term of the imperative comes into play. The directive to "respect" raises grave concerns about what's missing or overlooked in the posthuman moral principles described above. The directive to "promote," though, evidences some common ground. The value entailed by "community of life" raises important questions. The rest of this essay will center on unpacking the comparison via these terms. The terms "justice and wisdom" in regard to technological developments require careful attention that space simply does not allow and so will be touched on only in passing.

To use a concrete point of departure from the list, the golden rule axiom in ELCA documents objects to Principle Six in its rejection of "the wisdom of nature." Principle Six explicitly, and posthuman morality generally, runs headlong into the directive for respect. Religiously, the directive to respect is placed first because it is grounded in the dignity and integrity of created life (Exod 20:11–17) following from God's regard for *all* life as precious, from the amoeba to the human being.

The golden rule axiom highlights respect as a priority or a moral baseline of all relationships, decisions, and actions. This insistence on the importance of respect does not necessarily reject all efforts to enhance but rather operates on the same logic as that of medical ethics, where the first principle is to "do no harm."

Philosophically—that is, arguing from common human experience and reason without religious presupposition—respect appears also as the first directive since *all* creatures across the multitude of living forms exhibit both purposiveness and interdependence.[15] That is, all living forms express some level of inherent integrity as a self in their action for self-survival or reproduction. The community of life is possible only because of each individual's purposive activity that is expressed in a mutual interdependence with the rest of nature. The posthuman rejection of *any* existing wisdom from "nature" is self-contradictory since it is only because of human powers and biological material—gifts of nature!—that human technology is even feasible.

The golden rule axiom highlights respect as a priority or a moral baseline of all relationships, decisions, and actions. (Since respect serves as such a baseline in everyday life regarding inherent human rights, for instance, why is it absent in the

[15]It is widely accepted in the philosophy of science that nature does not exhibit an inherent teleology or purpose. The complete absence of telos, however, is incorrect, since every living creature does express purposive effort on their own behalf in the sense of seeking nourishment, reacting to their environment, and reproducing. For more on how this purposive effort establishes a basis for respect, see Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) chapter 3.

posthuman moral project concerned about new life forms?) This insistence on the importance of respect does not necessarily reject all efforts to enhance but rather operates on the same logic as that of medical ethics, where the first principle is to "do no harm." Such precaution is much stronger than that conveyed by Principle Two and justifies more extensive constraints on human freedom than is found in Principle One. In short, "respect" is largely missing in the posthuman morality, and this is a basic failure.

Speaking again as a Lutheran, the priority of respect is evident in the *Small Catechism*'s explanation of the commandments, which places first the concern to restrain evil and protect from harm.[16] That understanding is grounded in the biblical recognition of the power of sin present even in the desire to seek the good (Rom 7:14–23). The human capacity for self-deception is immense and must be restrained.

Innovative stewardship includes a robust use of science and technology to order and imagine, nurture and invent. The ELCA affirms in principle the application of scientific knowledge as an intellectual and social good. In this sense, my speculative judgment is that, with precautions, there would be some openness to some of the intentions and outcomes conceived as posthuman.

The genetics statement illustrates how this directive to respect operates in its discussion of human reproductive cloning. The statement rejects the practice even if the technology were to become safe and economically feasible (the main legal reasons given for outlawing it at present). The directive to respect means a human child should not be brought into the world in order to satisfy a living person's desire to duplicate a valued genome, whatever the motive. Human reproductive cloning inevitably treats a potential offspring as a means to the living person's ends, no matter how loving the motive.

While the concern for respect gives priority to precaution in a way that posthumanist morality lacks, the simultaneous presence of the directive to "promote" in the ethical axiom does affirm some common ground. Promoting well-being and reducing suffering (Principle Four) are certainly good ends to seek! But "promote" in the social statement's axiom implies something more about human nature that is compatible in principle with many posthuman thinkers. The genetics statement illustrates this by citing Gen 2:18–20. In that passage, God brings every living creature to Adam and watches to see what Adam will name them. Biblically speaking, naming is a power-laden and highly creative act. The statement, then, recognizes that God created human beings to be innovative and inventive as they

[16]Luther is consistent in presenting the negative prohibition of each commandment first. The positive purpose is given second. See Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 352–354.

help God order, tend, and shape nature so that barrenness might abate and abundance reign in the creation.

The ELCA term in the genetics social statement capturing this insight is "innovative stewards" of creation.[17] The statement is clear that innovative stewardship includes a robust use of science and technology to order and imagine, nurture and invent. The ELCA affirms in principle the application of scientific knowledge as an intellectual and social good. In this sense, my speculative judgment is that, with precautions, there would be some openness to some of the intentions and outcomes conceived as posthuman.

It seems clear that the statement on genetics also shares common ground with Principle Five in rejecting anthropocentrism. In fact, the statement is more consistent in expanding the circle of moral value beyond the human species. Posthuman thinkers affirm the moral well-being of sentient and nonhuman animals but generally give little attention to how those beings are treated in terms of, say, research. The ELCA's ethic insists, however, that all living beings and even the inanimate earth now count, morally speaking, and should be factored into moral calculations:

> Today, the meaning of "common good" or "good of all" must include the community of all living creatures. The meaning also should extend beyond the present to include consideration for the future of the web of life. The sphere of moral consideration is no longer limited to human beings alone.[18]

Speculation

As should be clear, the ELCA's moral axiom regarding unprecedented human power is a mixed directive. What might the ELCA say, speaking speculatively, if it were to directly address the use of emerging, converging, or conceivable technologies for posthuman ends? (Some of these technologies are already in use for other purposes, by the way, such as nanotechnology, biotechnologies, artificial reproduction, robotics, information technologies, and cognitive sciences.)

Here is my speculation:

1. The directive to promote the community of life might morally entail a future with cyborgs and other posthuman creatures. The directive to promote might open such a moral door as a means of God's ongoing creative activity expressed through human power.

2. However, as the genetics social statement holds: "The human vocation as innovative stewards must be guided by the goal to respect and promote the earth's

[17]ELCA, *Genetics*, 10.

[18]Ibid., 15. The theme of creation-centered morality developed in *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility* makes explicit the direction initiated by the 1993 ELCA social statement *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (www.elca.org/socialstatements). Both reject "anthropocentrism"; that is, both reject the belief that the rest of creation simply provides resources intended to serve human well-being, and the 2011 statement explicitly extends moral standing to nonhuman creatures. At the same time both stress that since human beings have powers of agency that differentiate them from other life forms, they have unique responsibility to support the sustainability of all life on earth and to regard morally other living forms.

abundance for the sake of the community of life." Any intent or application of technology for posthuman ends must be guided by and done in a way that respects the existing wisdom of nature, recognizes the value of cautionary constraint, and promotes the flourishing of the community of life rather than just the well-being of some human beings.

Whether one accepts my speculation or not, it is clear from this assessment that posthuman morality is woefully inadequate at this time. Posthuman adherents need to think much more deeply and broadly toward a substantive, justifiable framework that could provide the necessary moral guidance for such unprecedented efforts. At the very minimum, posthuman proponents must take up the task to seek moral substance and, to that end, "the ELCA proposes for public consideration the ethic to respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom in the pursuit of unprecedented knowledge and its use. The ELCA contends that this ethic is essential for the web of life on earth to flourish."[19]

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[19]Ibid., 34.