

Guest Editorial: Theological Reflections on Human Biotechnological Enhancement

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The prospect of radically altering human existence through technological enhancement—from increasing longevity, to cognitive enhancement, and even moral enhancement—no longer requires lengthy justification as a subject for theological engagement.¹ Popular media is inundated with promises of biotechnological enhancement, from the enthusiasm over the potential applications of CRISPR-*Cas9* gene-editing technology to the miracle ‘anti-ageing’ molecules produced by geneticist David Sinclair in one of Harvard Medical School’s laboratories.²

While a growing number of theologians are turning their attention to human enhancement, the majority have tended to be scholars already working broadly within the field of science and religion. The project out of which the articles in this issue arose is concerned with developing a robust theological anthropology for engagement with the biotechnological enhancement debates, and has sought to listen to the breadth of the theological tradition in constructing such an anthropology.

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2. Sinclair explains the rationale behind his research in an editorial co-written with David Le Couteur, ‘A Blueprint for Developing Therapeutic Approaches that Increase Healthspan and Delay Death’, *The Journals of Gerontology* 65A, 7 (2010), pp. 693–94. His research is highlighted to a wider audience by Ceridwen Dovey, ‘Can David Sinclair Cure Old Age?’, *The Monthly*, September 2018.

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In search of a balanced theological anthropology, this project also begins with the conviction that creaturehood and deification are two necessary poles of human existence, even if they are sometimes construed in opposition to one another. Often, theologians engaging human enhancement questions tend to emphasise either creaturehood or deification to the neglect or detriment of the other.³ The tension between these poles is not easily resolved, yet a full understanding of the human must encompass the limitations that attach to creaturely finitude as well as the hope of transcendence promised in Christian theology (including a renewed interest in the doctrine of deification) if it is to speak into a culture of increasing technological enhancement.

The scholars in this issue met in Oxford in July 2017 to consider specifically the implications of creaturehood and deification for issues relating to human enhancement. The goal was to bring ecumenical specialists in the areas of creaturehood and deification unaccustomed to working on questions of human enhancement alongside scientists and theologians with experience in the science and religion dialogue, to promote conversation from a theologically-rich starting position. The articles in this issue reflect the fruitfulness of the discussion that was achieved in this particular environment.⁴

Grant Macaskill begins the issue with a careful exploration of the biblical themes of creation and providence, drawing out comprehensively the distinctions between divine action and creaturely imitations of God's creativity. On the foundation of this rich biblical analysis of creaturehood, Macaskill turns to the question of whether biotechnological enhancement is capable of reflecting divine values in creation. The effects of sin on the ability to participate in divine creative work is discussed in conjunction with the growing scholarship on deification.

Philip Ziegler also gives due consideration to the reality of sin as he interrogates the tension between creaturehood and deification from a Reformed theological perspective. Drawing on a comprehensive range of classic Reformed texts, Ziegler develops the central notion of humans as *homo foederis*, sketching a theological anthropology in which humans strive toward perfection as a covenantal task. Ziegler's engagement with transhumanism is premised upon this vocational and teleological understanding of human being.

Eugenia Torrance focuses specifically on Maximus the Confessor's account of *theosis*, putting it in dialogue with contemporary transhumanist accounts of technological transformation of the human being. She argues there are several resonances between Maximian deification and the transhumanist account of transformation: death being a final enemy, a hoped-for transcendence and even a more open-ended account of human nature than other Patristic authors. Ultimately, however, Maximus argues it is precisely through the transformation and upholding of the integrity of human nature (including our material embodiment) in Christ that deification is possible and, hence, transhumanists that seek to abandon human nature on the way to transcendence are misguided. Instead, Maximus teaches that God uses both positive and negative aspects of our present natures to lead us to incorruptibility and deification.

3. This argument is developed in the article in this issue by Burdett and Lorrimar.

4. Other scholars from the symposium contributed to a special issue of the journal *Theology and Science* 16.3 (2018). For an introduction to the relevant contributions, and to the project more generally, see Michael Burdett and Victoria Lorrimar, 'Deification and Creaturehood in an Age of Enhancement', *Theology and Science* 16.3 (2018), pp. 247–50.

Andrew Pinsent and Sean Biggins bring human biotechnological enhancement into dialogue with Roman Catholic theology, highlighting that transhumanists and Roman Catholics share a desire for transcendence. They sound a cautionary note, in light of the moral response required by the supernatural gift of grace; nevertheless they consider how certain enhancements might supplement the work of supernatural grace in bringing us to 'joint attention' with God. Furthermore, the relationship of enhancement technologies to the idea of 'play', and the pursuit of penultimate goods, offers material for reflection.

Brandon Gallaher's article draws on the thought of several Orthodox Russian theologians from the past century to argue that transhumanist aspirations for technological enhancement are best labelled Mangodhood and diabolical in their seeking of autodivinisation without reference to divine grace and using means that ultimately undermine genuine human transcendence. Godmanhood, on the other hand, begins with gratitude for creation and views it as a sacrament to be celebrated rather than manipulated as with transhumanism. Gallaher lays out the Orthodox position on *theosis* where human beings were made to participate in the divine energies in the person of Christ through grace and adoption. This way up through Christ is cruciform in nature such that it is only through living death in Christ can we be divinised.

Simeon Zahl considers the dogmatic import of biotechnological enhancement as salient to the Christian faith beyond just its ethical significance. Zahl argues that affective and bodily changes are not tangentially related to key doctrinal areas like sin, salvation and sanctification but are important and central components of it. Because biotechnological enhancements are increasingly impacting our embodied and affective lives they then have doctrinal significance and it could be argued, on these grounds, that bioenhancements could impact things like sin, salvation and our experience of it and even our conformity to Christ (sanctification).

Gerald McKenny has written extensively on transhumanism and human enhancement, and focuses his experienced attention particularly on the creaturehood aspect of the symposium. Establishing a certain malleability and indeterminacy inherent in human biological nature, McKenny systematically investigates the possible responses to biotechnological enhancement that rely on various understandings of human nature. Can goods be grounded in human nature, and what does this mean for the enhancement debate?

In the final piece arising from this project, the authors of this editorial examine the ideas of human flourishing that underpin various positions in the human enhancement debate. Transhumanist, secular humanist and critical posthumanist notions of what constitutes a good life are explored, before turning to a theological representation of humans as *creatures bound for glory*.

We are grateful to the contributors for the quality of their reflections, and we trust that you will find the variety of theological terrains traversed useful in this engagement with human biotechnological enhancement within the context of both human creatureliness and the movement toward deification.