

Chapter 116

Redefining the Boundaries of Humanity and the Human Body: From Homo Sapiens to Homo Technicus

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ABSTRACT

What are the boundaries of humanity and the human body within our evolving technological society? Within the field of technoethics, inquiry into the origins of the species is both a biological and ethical question as scholars attempt to grapple with conflicting views of what it means to be human and what attributes are core to human beings within the era of human enhancement technologies. Based on a historical and conceptual analysis, this chapter uses a technoethical lens to discuss defining characteristics of the human species as homo technicus. Under this framework, both symbolic capacity and technical ability are assumed to be grounded within the free and ethical nature of human beings. Ideas derived from Modernity and Postmodernity are drawn upon to provide a more encompassing view of humans that accommodates both its technical and ethical dimensions as homo technicus.

OLD WINE NEW BOTTLES? TRANSHUMANISM AND THE POST-HUMAN DREAM

In recent years, new advances in human enhancement technologies have stimulated academic interest about the future of human-technology relationships. Transhumanist scholarship is one major area where the transformation of the human

condition through technological enhancement is being discussed. However, the transformation of humanity proposed within popular transhumanist writing is not a new notion and harkens back to the story of the Great Flood found in the Book of Genesis. In this story God provides Noah with the tools to survive a great flood that will wipe out everything and provide opportunity for a re-birth (or transformation) of humanity:

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And God said to Noah, “ have decided to put an end to all mortals on earth; the earth is full of lawlessness because of them. So I will destroy them and all life on earth. Make yourself an ark of gopherwood, put various compartments in it, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you shall build it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and finish the ark a cubit above it. Put an entrance in the side of the ark, which you shall make with bottom, second and third decks. I, on my part, am about to bring the flood (waters) on the earth, to destroy everywhere all creatures in which there is the breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. But with you I will establish my covenant; you and your sons, your wife and your sons’ wives, shall go into the ark.”(Genesis 6:13-18)

Common to both transhumanist speculations and the story of the Great Flood was the idea of human longevity beyond normal human parameters. In the story of the Great Flood, human lifespan prior to the Great Flood was much longer than within contemporary society. Noah was noted to have lived nine hundred and fifty years, an unfathomable lifespan for humans today.

What is unique about the current context of human transformation focused on by the transhumanists is that the means of this transformation are not viewed in terms of divine intervention or concrete historical terms of post-industrial advances in technology that have allowed humans to survive and harness control over the environment. Rather, within the current context of human transformation there is a focus on the advancement of human enhancement technologies that directly affect the human body and mind. This “inward turn of technology”(Luppicini, 2010) presents new ethical challenges to address that humans have never had to deal with in real life circumstances at any other point in human history. Prior to this inward turn, such considerations were restricted to the arts and

entertainment domain where science fiction writing and film sparked the imagination without the social responsibility to worry about any real life implications. However, the inward turn of technology has closed the gap between the imagination and the real as we struggle to grapple with new technologies that could potentially threaten how human beings are conceptualized and (de)valued. This is the problematic with which this article is concerned. To this end, a technoethical framing is offered which attempts to provide a conceptualization of human beings that accommodates the complexity of human, technological, and ethical relations present within a technological society.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE BODY AS TECHNOETHICAL MATTER

In the past decade, the discussion of the nature of the human body has been the basis of bioethical debate, conditioning the form of judging many of the emerging biotechnologies, both in medical and surgical fields. Bioethics has lost the body (Meilaender, 1995). One of the most significant examples is a book by Campbell (2009), in which the need “to re-establish the importance of the human body in bioethics”(p. 1) is indicated. The author shows the need for such a rediscovery in the biomedical sciences and the humanities and social sciences to combat possible risks of reducing the body of the person to a mere instrument, “branded body”(p. 75). The risk does not concern the alternation or elimination of the human body but rather a substantial loss of its anthropological significance as a result of inappropriately applying new human altering technologies. But what does this mean and how could this alter the anthropological significance of the human body?

One must recognize that within the technological society we live, the human body is not only subject to alteration through one type of technology that alters one aspect of the human

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