

Playing God: Superhumanity

By Maria Wiering

mwiering@CatholicReview.org

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIN O'NEILL

This is the sixth part in a six-part series.

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

[Part 4](#)

[Part 5](#)

Todd Blatt is betting that Google Glass will benefit from a few accessories when it is released to the public next year. The first is a camera cap. Already, the 30-year-old 3-D designer has had people shield their face from him while he was wearing his pair of phonesyncing glasses, a sign they don't trust that he's not recording them.

Blatt, a Baltimorean who also lives in New York, used the crowd-funder Kickstarter to finance GlassKap, a plastic device that fits over the camera lens, and other Google Glass accessories. He scored a pair of the glasses as part of Google's prototype limited release in June. In addition to taking photos and video with the blink of an eye, they connect the user with smart phone capabilities, directed by one's voice and manifesting in one's peripheral vision.

Google Glass, and the GlassKap, are tools, as is the Internet to which they connect, but some scientists think society is on the verge of not only wearing technology but making it part of the human person, in the name of overcoming current biological limitations inherent in mankind. They are proponents of making humans hear better, run faster, know more and live longer – maybe even forever.

Pursuing immortality is as old as Adam, but in recent decades, it has assumed new forms under the umbrella of “transhumanism,” a philosophy that advocates controlling evolution to technologically enhance the human being, to the point of becoming something new, something “post-human.”

Ideas inherent in transhumanism have long been the fodder of science fiction, comprising core plot elements of films such as “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968), “Blade Runner” (1982), “Gattaca” (1997), “The Matrix” series (1999 and later). However, proponents and opponents alike say transhumanist ideas are moving beyond fiction and gaining wider acceptance.

More than man?

This concerns some bioethicists, including Catholics, who fear the movement – despite its promise of an improved quality of life – could actually succeed in upending humanity through eugenics, societal injustice and a rejection of the order

of creation.

"Most people look at this as so bizarre that it doesn't have to be taken seriously, and I think that's a mistake," said Wesley J. Smith, senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center on Human Exceptionalism and a consultant for the California-based Center for Bioethics and Culture. In 2004, *Foreign Policy* magazine asked Francis Fukuyama, a political scientist then at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and now at Stanford University in California, to describe the most dangerous idea on earth. His response? Transhumanism.

"If it were technologically possible, why wouldn't we want to transcend our current species?" he asked in his essay. "The seeming reasonableness of the project, particularly when considered in small increments, is part of the danger. Society is unlikely to fall suddenly under the spell of the transhumanist worldview. But it is very possible that we will nibble at biotechnology's tempting offerings without realizing that they come at a frightful moral cost."

Humanity+ (or h+) formed in 1998 to organize transhumanist groups and, according to founder and Oxford University philosophy professor Nick Bostrom, free the movement from "cultishness" that "had afflicted some of its earlier convocations." Its website quotes Max More, a transhumanist leader, to define its aim: "Transhumanism is a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values."

Transhumanists believe that mankind, in its current form, is in an "early phase" of evolution, and through bio-, info-, nanoand neurotechnologies, man can improve himself, "mov(ing) beyond what some would think of as 'human.'" Ray Kurzweil, Google's director of engineering and a transhumanist, envisions a world where man can upload his brain into a computer, and, according to a 2011 *Time* magazine story, hopes to achieve this with his own father, now deceased.

Others imagine a world where robotic prosthetics are preferable to human limbs, creating a race of bionics or cyborgs. Some promote drugs that dramatically improve senses, memory and youthfulness, ultimately eradicating the effects of aging and eliminating death.

If, after centuries or millennia, people get sick of living, some proponents suggest suicide as an option.

Transhumanists say technology is progressing so quickly it will soon hit a moment called "the singularity" – the tipping point after which technological capabilities will expand exponentially, turning their dreams into reality. In order to ensure they are around for it, some transhumanists invest in cryogenics – the freezing of their bodies after death, in hope of resurrection through anticipated technologies.

Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum is exploring the idea in its current exhibition, "Human, Soul and Machine: The Coming Singularity!" which asks, "Two billion personal computers later, post DNA-sequencing, are we on the road to becoming a better, healthier, happier, less warlike, human race?"

The future is here

One needn't look far for current human enhancements. Modern medicine has increased U.S. life expectancy from 47 years in 1900 to 78 in 2008.

Contact lenses, hearing aids, pacemakers, artificial limbs, Adderall, Viagra and a slew of other devices and pharmaceuticals are widely used. Neural implants treat Parkinson's disease and depression. Research is underway in a variety of neural prostheses to improve the senses, neuromuscular therapies to treat paralysis and genetic blockers to mitigate the effect of chromosomal disorders such as Down syndrome.

The difference between these and transhumanist enhancements is their therapeutic nature, said E. Christian Brugger, a senior fellow of ethics at the Washington, D.C.-based Culture of Life Foundation and a professor of moral theology at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, Colo. Ethical issues arise with therapeutic technology's application to non-therapeutic uses, he said.

Couldn't a soldier or neurosurgeon also benefit from neuro-implants designed to increase concentration or improve memory? What about memory erasure for crime or trauma victims? Should athletes such as Lance Armstrong be allowed to use ability-enhancing drugs, creating a new normal in sports? What about amputating healthy limbs in favor of prosthetics inspired by (now disgraced) Olympic runner Oscar Pistorius? The line between moral and immoral applications of enhancing technologies isn't always clear. At the Discovery Institute, Smith - the author of "Consumer's Guide to A Brave New World," which addresses transhumanism - isn't worried about whether transhumanism could come to fruition in the way its proponents hope. Instead, he's concerned that transhumanism's values will seep into the fabric of society, saying "What they try to do is conflate things that help restore function into enhancing function. The values will play out whether the technology gets developed or not."

In a 2011 Discover magazine blog post, transhumanist Kyle Munkittrick identified seven future indicators that transhumanism has been attained: prosthetics' abilities transcend those of ordinary limbs; brain cognition improves through drugs, genetic engineering or neuro-implants; artificial intelligence and augmented reality assist the thinking process; life expectancy dramatically increases; assisted reproductive technologies are the "preferred method of conception"; rights for a person to do whatever they want to their bodies expand; and concern for "human rights" shift to "personhood rights."

"You'd be amazed at how neatly current political struggles and technological progress point toward a transhuman future," Munkittrick wrote.

Transhumanist goals grate against what Smith calls "human exceptionalism": The principle that human beings have unique moral value and are the only species with moral obligations.

Transhumanism consciously rejects the unique value of human life in order to justify its manipulation, Smith said - "and that's what makes it dangerous. ... If we give up on unique human value, if we give up on intrinsic human dignity, there really is no such thing as human rights, and everything becomes power associated. Who matters, who has value, depends on who has the power to decide." Many Christian ethicists view widespread acceptance of assisted reproductive technologies, embryonic stem-cell research, abortion, cloning, body modification and assisted suicide as an assault on the dignity of the human person and natural law.

Chief among Smith's concerns is transhumanism's eugenic tendencies. The term "transhumanism" was coined by Julian Huxley, brother to "Brave New World" author Aldous Huxley and a past president of the British Eugenics Society. Like transhumanists, last century's early eugenicists were also university and political elites with cultural influence.

Eugenics are already pronounced within the realm of assisted reproductive technologies, where strong embryos are prized over weak ones, and selection for the baby's sex and screening for genetic defects may soon be the norm. "Designer babies" are being chosen for genetic traits to create "savior siblings," able to lend their healthy stem cells or organs to diseased older siblings.

Echoing Munkittrick's prediction, Stanford professor Hank Greely last year predicted "the end of sex," arguing that in 50 years, most children will be conceived via in vitro fertilization, and that insurance companies and governments will encourage the practice as a means to lower health care costs, since embryos could be rejected based on their predisposition to disease.

Smith thinks transhumanists have created a quasi-religion, and he parallels many of its key components with Christian beliefs, including the resurrection of the dead, eternal life and glorified bodies. They're motivated by fear of death and a search for meaning, he said.

"A lot of it has to do with a disdain for suffering," he said, noting that transhumanism primarily attracts materialists, people who reject a spiritual realm. "It seems to provide its adherents with the kind of hope, purpose and eschatology that people find in traditional faith."

However, transhumanist tendencies reject unconditional love, Smith said, through such aims as genetically predisposing children to certain talents or traits through assisted reproductive technology. Think helicopter parents are meddling?

Imagine them controlling their child before his implantation in the womb.

In transhumanist thought, the child “is forced to be what I want it to be, rather than what he or she would have been in finding life on their own,” Smith said. “It’s a real hubristic desire to manipulate life.”

Balancing good of technology

Brugger cautions Catholics not to throw out the baby with the bathwater when it comes to emerging scientific advancements. He thinks unrestricted transhumanist ideals are unethical, but that many of the medical advances they back are positive, if applied to therapeutic ends.

The ethical questions are complex, and extremes should be avoided, he said. The moral evil inherent in some new technologies, such as artificial reproduction, is clear, he said, but each new technology should be evaluated on its own merit – first on moral principles (does it in any way exploit people?), and second, on its therapeutic aims.

Ethicists also need to answer the question of why it might be immoral to use therapeutic advancements to enhance a human person’s current capacities to superhuman capacities, Brugger said. The answer is not so straightforward. Questions revolve around what it means to be a person, whether technology can affect a person’s identity, and whether some technologies reject mankind’s God-given nature through the order of creation and evolutionary process. “What does it do to our humanity if we start to covet transhumanist ideals?” he said. “What does it do to our patience with imperfection with ourselves, with our spouses, with our children?”

Overcoming imperfection at all costs, to the point of conquering death, most concerns Brugger. “That is theologically very problematic, and I think it’s morally very problematic,” he said. “We’re never going to conquer death except by attaching ourselves to the one who himself overcame and conquered it, Christ himself.”

Meanwhile, the impulse to eradicate imperfections can only lead to injustice and a disdain for the weak, Brugger said. Transhumanism’s view of human nature as “raw material to be overcome and to be conquered” is “one of the most insidious forms of God-playing that the scientific community can and has fallen into,” he added. “We’ve wanted to do away with this or that limitation, but now we look at fallenness as something science can conquer in a kind of global sense, and that’s savioristic.”

Recent church documents on biotechnology do not directly address transhumanism, or distinguish between human enhancement and therapy.

As Catholics wait on the Vatican, they can seek some answers – or at least the right questions – in “Beyond Therapy: Bioethics and the Pursuit of Happiness,” published in 2003 by the President’s Council on Bioethics, which Brugger said “vets the philosophical questions about ‘What are we going to become?’ better than anything

I've ever read on transhumanism."

As technologies advance, however, Christians shouldn't expect mainstream bioethicists to wave warning flags over transhumanist goals, cautioned the Discovery Center's Smith.

"So many people (of faith) assume that people accept the self-evident truths from their perspective of the importance, the sanctity, of human life," he said. "They find it hard to believe that people actually think the way transhumanists do. ... (but) anybody who says, 'It can't happen here' has been asleep for the past 50 years."