Posthumanism

The Future of Homo Sapiens

Michael Bess and Diana Walsh Pasulka
EDITORS
In his novel *Altered Carbon* (2002), Richard Morgan imagines one version of our posthuman future. In the novel, people can capture their experiences in an electronic “stack” that is implanted at the top of the spinal column and records electrical activity of the brain and nervous system. Recording this information enables people to be “resleeved” into a new, purpose-built or purpose-grown body, bringing their memories, experiences, and identity forward into a new physical embodiment. Resleeving is not without its challenges. But as an alternative to injury, death, and the long time a body needs to travel between planets, inserting a data stream into new biology has its merits.

Despite the obvious benefits of this technology, one group in Morgan’s novel opts out of resleeving: Catholics. God created humans for a “one-and-done” life cycle, where earthly existence serves as a precursor to meeting one’s eternal fate. Morgan’s narrator does not go so far as to suggest that this is a foolish viewpoint as much as simply strange: why would you want only one life when so many lives await us? Technology opens a host of doors for humankind, and it is our job to walk through them.

As it turns out, though, the Roman Catholic perspective on technology is more complicated than the novel portrays. It is true that the Catholic tradition has argued that some particular uses of specific technologies are morally questionable (e.g., some termination of human life before birth and targeting civilians with nuclear weapons). But this is rare. The Catholic tradition has been largely “pro-technology,” viewing invention as a constituent part of being human and the things we invent as helping make life on Earth better in substantial ways (Bergson 1911; Green 2017).

That said, while there have been a limited number of statements on particular technologies that can be used for posthuman purposes (i.e., cloning and stem cell techs), no significant church teaching has been articulated on most of these technologies, nor has there been a comprehensive assessment of posthumanism as a distinct system of thought akin to those written on such things as capitalism, communism, democracy, or atheism. This chapter, then, offers an “unofficial” Roman Catholic perspective on posthumanism
grounded in both long-standing commitments and explicit statements on particular technologies. Of necessity, it is neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. Catholicism is a 2,000-year global endeavor that encompasses a diversity of cultures, perspectives, traditions, and viewpoints. In practice, it is difficult to identify anything that each and every Roman Catholic would agree with. Clear lines of thought, however, do run through both doctrine and dissent, and those through-lines form the foundation of this chapter.

This chapter, then, first considers how the Catholic tradition understands human life, both in terms of the “big picture” of ultimate meaning and the specific moral values that flow from it. Next is an examination of the Catholic tradition’s approach to technology over the past century. Finally, all of this then informs a consideration of whether or not posthumanism ultimately coheres or fails to cohere with the fundamental commitments of Roman Catholicism.

A WORLD OF GOODNESS

When considering the Roman Catholic tradition, caricatures and stereotypes easily come to mind. Popular media often use Catholics as plot devices to quickly evoke a variety of tones and identities, from “cultural traditions” (e.g., Día de los Muertos [Day of the Dead]) and devotional practices (e.g., refraining from meat on Fridays during Lent) to misguided priorities (e.g., Mass attendance as more important than love) and outright antisocial behavior (e.g., sexual abuse, sadistic ritual practices, vigilante “avenging angels”). While such things make for good theater, they fail to offer a good sense of the fundamental commitments at the heart of the Roman Catholic tradition.

To start with something that might seem obvious but bears making explicit: the Catholic tradition finds its existential grounding—rather than historical or cultural origin—in the basic human experience of goodness. The world around us is a remarkable place, full of beauty, wonder, and goodness. But this goodness is not without origin. Goodness finds its origin in the work of a divine being who has created all things out of love and care and who continues to sustain them today. This is not a scientific claim about the mechanisms involved in creation, for the Catholic Church subscribes to the theory of evolution. Instead, it is a theological claim about the ultimate shape of reality, born of encounter with this divine being firsthand in daily experience and secondhand in scripture and history. Something as complex as the doctrine of the Trinity is, in a nutshell, merely a way to encapsulate this experience: a God whose entire beingness is characterized by love (1 John 4:7–21) that expresses itself by creation, by redemption, and by an ongoing sustaining presence.

God’s love, however, is only half the story. For what great love story leaves out the beloved? The Catholic approach to the world turns out to be as much about how creation—particularly humankind—responds to God’s offer of a loving relationship as it is about the one who offers. Christianity offers a variety of images and models for what it would mean to respond well to God (e.g., discipleship, divinization, obedience), but what they all share is the belief that the best way to respond to God’s love is “in kind,” with a love characterized by drawing close to God in thought, action, and affection. Scripture often portrays this closeness as a very personal union, using some of the most intimate relationships humans experience, such as lover, mother, and father. Contemporary Catholic theology has developed in this vein, understanding “heaven” not as an external reward to be earned but rather as a term to refer to the natural end point of a life devoted to becoming one with God.
Of course, this union with God is easier said than done. We like to say “it’s the thought that counts,” but anyone who has been in love knows that good intentions are not enough; loving well is deceptively complex. Sometimes we fall short of loving well—whether in loving God or loving our neighbors—for reasons beyond our control: we are ignorant of key pieces of data, we do things we think will be good that turn out harmful, other people intercede in destructive ways, or our plans simply “fall apart.” From the Catholic perspective, these are not considered moral failures, but simply sad consequences of the fact that we are human, not divine, beings. On the other hand, many of our failures to love are grounded in choices that are well within our control, such as tenacious placement of one’s own good before the good or dignity of others, willful ignorance of critical information, and persistent desires for fleeting, inconsequential, and even destructive pleasures rather than full, true, and lasting goods. Indeed, whether taken literally or symbolically, the term original sin is nothing more than the tradition’s way to refer to how very deeply rooted is our habit of choosing things other than union with God.

It is a consolation to Catholics, then, that the past 2,000 years have served as an ongoing development and beta-testing process to discover ways to promote and enhance human effort toward union with God. The sacraments, for instance, are ways to come into touch with God’s healing and uniting love. Worship and prayer are ways to express gratitude and devotion. Doctrine and moral teaching are ways to help people discern how to act in appropriate ways in complex times. The church itself is a way to find support among others with similar relationships and to be a witness to God’s love for those who do not.

In order to develop these strategies and structures, the Roman Catholic tradition draws on many sources of insight. But two key sources stand out. First, like all Christians, the Roman Catholic tradition turns to the Bible for insight into how to love well. Biblical texts are important because they relate experiences and ideas that the Christian tradition believes are true in a fundamental sense and that have been communicated in some way by God, no matter how counterintuitive or strange they may seem. Scripture always requires interpretation, but it also always deserves special consideration.

Second, unlike some other parts of the Christian tradition, Roman Catholicism also turns to the world around us as a way to discover what it means to love well. After all, God created the world as an expression of goodness, and so the facts of the world offer a small window into the mind of God that can teach us how to enhance our flourishing. Commonly known as “natural law,” this approach is not a simplistic physicalism that reduces goodness to bodily good and instinct following. Rather, human rationality is also a part of the created world. Thus, the things that reason discovers, when uncovered through robust and honest inquiry that is carried out in good conscience, can be regarded as true goods. From a narrowly physicalist perspective, open-heart surgery is surely “against nature”: it proceeds through injuring the bodily, and one rarely finds other animals wielding scalpels. This does not mean, however, that it harms human flourishing. Instead, through the use of God-given rational faculties, human beings have figured out how to better care for one another by going beyond the strict dictates of given physical realities.

Importantly, this recognition of the validity of using reason to discover ways to respond well to God’s call to love does not, in the Catholic view, run contrary to or demote scripture. Instead, it affirms the idea that all of God’s expressions are true, whether found in the words of scripture or in the material of the world. This is not to say, of course, that reason is perfect. There are many things that we do not yet fully understand, and we must always remain humble in the face of the provisionality of our knowledge, ready to revise our views in light of
new data (e.g., the shape of Earth). But despite this fact, nature itself retains God’s imprint. In the end, all truth is one, and so scripture and creation both help us understand how to return God’s love in our daily lives.

**BEING HUMAN WELL**

It is within this broad understanding of human life as a journey to return God’s love well that any Roman Catholic understanding of posthumanism will originate. Helpfully, over the centuries, the Catholic tradition has identified a variety of ideas that provide some direction in particular choices of action to assist people in finding ways to act that both embody love for God and support others in their efforts to do so. For the purposes of this chapter, four ideas are useful: human dignity, the person adequately considered, justice, and solidarity.

**HUMAN DIGNITY**

When evaluating courses of action, human dignity is often understood to be the fundamental category to consider. Within the Catholic tradition, human dignity refers to the view that all human life has inherent value, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. In part, dignity is a reflection of our origin. We are valuable not because of anything that we have done but because we are created by God in an act of love. This dignity, however, is also a result of the fundamental “condition of possibility” that life itself represents. Without life, no other human goods can exist, so human life is infinitely valuable.

Notably, this understanding of human dignity runs counter to the common notion that someone can be “robbed of their dignity.” Although situations may lead us to feel that we or others have been made worthless, human dignity, from the Catholic vantage point, is never actually lost. Instead, people are being treated in ways that fail to respect or uphold this basic value. This, then, is the fundamental task of the Christian life: to ensure that we and others consistently uphold everyone’s intrinsic worth.

**THE PERSON ADEQUATELY CONSIDERED**

At the most basic level, then, human action should always uphold dignity. But what helps or harms another’s ability to live with dignity? The understanding of the human person has changed greatly throughout history. But in the late twentieth century, Catholic moral theologians developed the category of the “person adequately considered” as a way to think about the human person, in light of philosophical reflection, social and natural sciences, and the theological commitments of the Second Vatican Council (Janssens 1980; Gula 1989).

This approach identified four realities that are central to what it means to be human. First, humans are social beings, conditioned both by our personal relationships—including our relationship with God—and the broad social structures we engage. Second, humans are embodied subjects whose personness is inextricably linked with our biological experiences, not just the inner lives of the mind. Our social relationships are conditioned by our biology, as people respond to us in light of our biological realities. We also express ourselves through our physicality as we act in the world, creating new versions of ourselves in each new endeavor. Third, humans are historical subjects, becoming who we are only over time through a succession of acts. In some senses, then, human life is always potential, never entirely actual. From the moment of conception until death, we are all “in process” of becoming our full selves, be it physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, socially, or...
professionally. Finally, humans are “fundamentally equal, but uniquely original” (Gula 1989, 71). While all people share these core realities, we are also distinct and diverse. Thus, humans should not be lumped together and regarded as interchangeable but rather enabled to flourish as the particular beings they are created to be.

JUSTICE
In its most basic meaning, justice is the virtue of giving others their due. More particularly, justice is a way of talking about how we should treat all members of our community. It is aimed at ensuring that, in our social structures, minimum standards of fairness exist so that all people are treated with dignity and afforded opportunities to develop fully. As a broad category, justice is used across many different religions and philosophical traditions. However, the standards used to identify exactly what is due to others vary greatly. The Catholic tradition shares with many philosophical traditions the view that societies should be orderly and based on standards that are rational and consistent. In this sense, “justice is blind”: all people should be treated the same way, no matter their individual merits or how we might feel about them. Traditions frequently use the language of rights because it is a helpful way to think about basic protections for all people as human beings.

However, the Catholic understanding of justice also draws from scripture a commitment to protecting the most vulnerable in society. It is not sufficient to say that all people have equal protection under the law because in many cases our laws set a woefully minimal standard for protecting one another from the ills that we seek to guard against. Instead, the Catholic view of justice requires that all people have reasonable access to the things that are necessary to uphold their basic human dignity.

SOLIDARITY
If blindness is the greatest strength of justice, it can also be its greatest weakness. In principle, justice does not depend on our knowing others to ensure they are treated fairly. When justice has not been achieved, however, the fact that the powerful do not know the experiences of those who experience injustice can stand in the way of change. This is precisely where solidarity enters the picture. Solidarity is the commitment of those with power or privilege to personally know and work with those who have been marginalized to increase justice in society (John Paul II 1987, para. 38–40; National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1986, para. 66). By connecting people across seemingly inevitable boundaries, such as class, race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or religion, solidarity opens our collective eyes to previously unseen gaps in fairness, increases personal commitment to ensuring treatment that upholds human dignity, and creates social networks for getting that done.

Together, these four moral principles—human dignity, the person adequately considered, justice, and solidarity—provide a useful framework for considering posthumanism from a Catholic perspective.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION
From the vantage point of the twenty-first century it would seem absurd to even try to conceive of a world in which being human well would not include technology. Indeed, innovation and invention seem to be part and parcel with being human. The Roman Catholic tradition would
agree with this sentiment. This view is, in part, grounded in observations of our rational nature. Yet it is certainly also grounded in scripture. One central theme of the first creation story in the book of Genesis is that human beings are said to be created in God’s “image” and “likeness” and are commanded to play the part of the master—have “dominion”—over all of creation. But what does it mean to be and act like God? Within the story, perhaps God’s most prevalent characteristic is creativity: God says, and things come into being. Indeed, what better definition of reason is there than coming up with a new idea?

To this appreciation for the foundational role of creativity, the Roman Catholic tradition adds a broad, explicit affirmation of the technologies that spring from it. As Pope John Paul II put it, “science and technology are wonderful products of a God-given human creativity” (quoted in Francis 2015, para. 102). At their best, technologies enable us to make real and substantial improvement in human life, increasing our ability to live well with one another in accord with our full human dignity. The Vatican has gone further, suggesting that communication technologies do this so powerfully that they have an “allotted place in the history of Creation, in the Incarnation and Redemption” (Pontifical Commission for Social Communications 1971, para. 15). Put simply, technology can be a way for us to respond to God’s love.

Unfortunately, this potential for good in technology is not always actualized. Thus, technologies cannot be considered in and of themselves. Instead, they can be understood only within the particular context of how they will be used, for what purposes, under what conditions, and in light of their actual outcomes. In theory, humble technologies could be used in inhumane ways, whereas, under certain conditions, even resleeving might be a great thing.

As a result, despite the predominantly positive view the Catholic tradition has taken toward technology, a certain hesitance can be seen in Vatican writings over the past century. For instance, during the Cold War, Pope John Paul II expressed concern that human dignity and personhood was “under threat” from the things we have created, both literally in the case of nuclear weapons and figuratively in the case of the consumer goods that we obsess over (1979, para. 15–16). More recently, Pope Francis has noted the power that technologies have to mask their true ability to “create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups” (2015, para. 107). While seemingly just innocuous instruments, our technologies often support networks of power (e.g., governments, corporations) that act counter to solidarity to negatively affect dignity and justice. Technology has a clear role to play in our work to complete creation by enabling all of creation to reach fullness. But care must be taken to ensure that our technologies uphold dignity, support development of full personhood, promote justice, and enable solidarity, so that we do not let a small segment of society determine the trajectory of our lives.

HUMANS CREATING HUMANLY

In considering whether or not posthumanism and the Catholic tradition cohere, it can be easy to become overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all. Nanotechnology, neural implants, genetic manipulation, and robotic body parts seem like wild fantasies that are far outside the bounds of what God intended for our humble nature. But while the specific technologies involved are cutting edge, the fundamental impulse at the core of posthumanism—to improve what it means to be human through technological means—is by no means new.
As Pope Francis put it, “The modification of nature for useful purposes has distinguished the human family from the beginning” (2015, para. 102). Hacking nature to extend life, abilities, intelligence, and experience is what humans do. And for its part, the Roman Catholic Church has been involved in many of these efforts.

Take, for instance, the posthuman goal of extending life and physical capabilities. Grounded in a desire to ease suffering and enhance our ability to become our fullest selves, the Catholic Church has been involved in health care for centuries. The Catholic tradition has affirmed numerous techniques and technologies aimed at promoting, enhancing, and restoring health, ranging from preventive care and routine pharmaceuticals to plastic surgery, fertility treatments, and even stem cell therapies (Green 2015). Catholic hospitals use technologies associated with posthumanism more often to restore capabilities that have been lost or were missing at birth (e.g., prosthetics, plastic surgery, cochlear implants) than to enhance human beings beyond “standard-issue” biology. But this is currently more a matter of practice than explicit restriction. If, however, bodily extension can be done in ways that uphold the dignity and wholeness of the human person—body, mind, and soul—then these techniques will likely find a home in the Catholic tradition.

Similarly, the Catholic tradition has played a significant role in efforts to extend human intelligence, albeit through existing extrabodily technologies. Throughout the European Middle Ages, the church preserved learning through duplication of classical texts and was the force behind the first European universities. It has promoted primary and secondary education around the world, frequently providing the only option for people on the margins of society. During the waves of media development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Catholic Church both ran media outlets and offered moral support for Catholics who wanted to spread information through newspaper, television, radio, and film. The Catholic tradition would likely embrace intelligence extension that continues to be done in ways that extend justice through solidarity.

The Catholic tradition has also long championed extending human experience using technology. A long-standing patron of the arts, the church believed that human beings can use tools to help people more deeply apprehend the truths of life through painting, frescoes, sculpture, architecture, and orchestral music. Likewise, the church promoted mass media and social media as ways to extend communion and love across boundaries, opening networks of solidarity in the process. Indeed, media and the arts are nothing more than technologically enabled processes of perception for coming to a deeper understanding of one another, ourselves, and the divine presence in our lives. If experience can continue to be technologically extended without impinging on autonomy and uniqueness, it would be consonant with the Catholic tradition.

In one sense, then, posthumanism is just a new name for the collection of technologies we expect to use to pursue the same goals we have been pursuing for centuries. From the Catholic perspective, technologies are wonderful things, and we are right to celebrate them. The fact that these technologies may have a greater impact on our physical bodies than those of past is not, in and of itself, determinative for their moral status. Thus, we would expect the Catholic tradition to maintain their open and optimistic approach when considering the technologies at the center of the changes that lie before us. At the very least, there is certainly no reason why posthuman technologies should be rejected out of hand as being antithetical to dignity, full personhood, justice, and solidarity.
HUMANS CREATING LESS THAN HUMANLY

Clearly posthuman technologies hold great promise as ways to respond to the call to loving relationships. In practice, however, not everything that we invent will live up to its promise. Take, for instance, one of the few technologies connected with posthuman aspirations that the church has formally evaluated: stem cell therapies. As noted previously, the use of stem cell therapies is understood within the Catholic tradition as having the potential to provide medical gains that will support development of full personhood. There is a hitch, however: this is true only of stem cells that are obtained from nonembryonic sources (i.e., adults or umbilical cords). Obtaining stem cells from early, living embryos (blastocysts) results in the destruction of the embryo, which the Catholic tradition considers the death of a very young human being (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2008, para. 4). This action fails to uphold the dignity of that life, transforming the person from an end into a means and rendering an undoubtedly good intention into an immoral action.

Unfortunately, this sort of practical analysis is unusual. Many posthuman technologies are still theoretical, making concrete moral determinations of specific-use cases impossible. In the absence of specific cases, then, we can note three general concerns that arise from the trajectory of posthumanism that would prove problematic from a Roman Catholic perspective.

First, posthumanism runs the risk of defining the human person too narrowly, setting aside the diversity of goods that are represented in the human community in pursuit of a narrowly construed perfected humanity. At first blush, this might seem at odds with the general aim of posthumanism to provide a greater range of options to people to tailor their makeup to suit their particular desires. However, one component in this process could very well be removing from human life a variety of natural conditions that we believe limit us. The human body is, after all, not as capable as something we could engineer.

As noted before, the Roman Catholic tradition affirms the desire to eliminate suffering from people afflicted with serious biological maladies. However, the tradition would also suggest that we need to be very careful when considering conditions that should be eliminated. History is rife with examples of attempts to eliminate entire categories of people, often on the basis of faulty or spurious scientific evidence. Examples include the medieval Western devaluation of females as “misbegotten males” and the large-scale infanticide of girls during the “one-child policy” period in modern China. Of course, there were also the millions of people killed by the Nazis in their attempt to eliminate everyone who did not measure up to the standards of the “master race.” And lest we in the United States forget our own guilt, between 1907 and 1983, the United States carried out the court-sanctioned sterilization of between 60,000 and 70,000 women who were deemed “not of good stock,” owing to ethnic background, poverty, or being “feebleminded.” Roman Catholics in the United States were the primary—and at times only—group working against the tide of explicit pro-eugenics legislation (Cohen 2016).

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, such programs are clearly barbaric. What our forebears believed should be eliminated we now view as wonderful and enriching diversity. It is clear, however, that we are not quite the staunch defenders of diversity that we might think. Jana Marguerite Bennett (2015) has discussed the tendency to redefine capability differences into medical conditions so that we can amass the moral support and technology needed to heal them. The debate within the deaf community about the morality of cochlear implants—biomechanical devices that replicate the inner ear and provide sound
data directly to the brain—is a perfect example: a nonlife-threatening physical condition that can be remedied, but need not be, yet brings with it differences in life experience, identity, and community. These differences, however, are often devalued because they do not confer the kind of measurable advantages that we look for today. The same can be said of a host of many other significant differences, in particular autism, learning differences, ADHD/ADD, and other types of neurodiversity.

From the posthuman perspective, the body is mere matter that ought to be reshaped in order to best support the flourishing of the mind. But to the extent that we reform biology to eliminate the things that make us different, we will fail to respect the uniqueness of all people, while also failing to help people participate in their own development. If Pope Francis has emphasized anything in his pontificate, it is the beauty and worth of all people, regardless of who they are and how they measure up to the standards of society. Responding well to God starts with embracing the fullness of humanity.

Second, posthumanism runs the risk of falling short of solidarity and justice by overlooking the potential negative consequences that might result from the fundamental human desire for gain. One idea that appears regularly is that future posthumans will no longer seek to make choices that prioritize the allocation of goods in ways that benefit themselves at the expense of others. This may be the result of eliminating, through genetic engineering, the natural drive to compete. It might also come as a result of the removal of the scarcity that can keep people from sharing. Through molecular fabrication, raw materials will become infinitely abundant, driving the cost of enhancement technologies. Competition and self-orientation will be obsolete, as they will no longer be necessary to obtain the good life.

From the vantage point of the Roman Catholic tradition, this perspective seems unrealistic in light of all we have learned from both scripture and reason. Competition is endemic to nature. But even if we eliminate scarcity of materials as a motivation, competition will likely continue because scarcity is not its origin. Some people seek opportunities for power, whereas others seek social capital. Some people seek achievement, whereas others simply enjoy the thrill of the game. And sometimes competition is driven by a scarcity of resources that cannot be infinitely expanded, such as the time and attention of those in one’s family or circle of friends. Indeed, as our lives are enhanced by relationships that foster cooperation, learning to prioritize where and with whom we will cooperate will become increasingly complex.

This is not to say that all acts that prioritize something are morally questionable. Making choices between courses of action always involves determining how to pursue the best of the various goods at stake. Our determinations become morally questionable only when we choose lesser goods over greater goods. Although religious and philosophical traditions offer guidance on how to prioritize our goals, there always seem to be, like the mythical snake in the Garden of Eden, parties willing to promote alternate value schemes in order to benefit themselves at the expense of others. After all, we currently have enough food production capacity to feed everyone on Earth, yet we choose not to do so. While goods may, strictly speaking, become cheap enough that all could have them, it is entirely likely that we will continue to allocate resources as unjustly as we do today. Instead of underfunded school districts, we could have underfunded implant programs. Instead of “food deserts,” we could have mod-shop-free zones. Indeed, the digital divide will no longer be a social reality but will be written into our bodies and minds. To the extent that we ignore the possibility that radical inequality results from the posthuman development process, we will fail to act in accordance with the demands of solidarity and not prevent an acceleration of the injustices that characterize our contemporary society.
Finally, from a Roman Catholic perspective, posthumanism runs the risk of falling short of supporting the historical character of the human person by not attending sufficiently to the potential for mistakes. The word mistakes is used here not in reference to catastrophic, life-ending sorts of technological mistakes. Those will always be possible and should be attended to. Instead, what is meant is the kinds of failures that happen each and every day when we make choices in good conscience that turn out simply to be wrong. Sometimes we misapprehend a situation or lack critical information. Sometimes we think an action will lead to one consequence but it turns out going in an unexpected direction. Sometimes we realize what we really want only after we have done something else. In short, these are the mistakes that happen simply because we are finite creatures.

Importantly, within the Roman Catholic tradition, finitude is not considered to be a bad thing. Indeed, it is considered part and parcel with being a part of the material world. As noted previously, we are historical beings, acting in time to become more fully ourselves. Like software, we are a product of iteration, constantly working to improve our capabilities and removing “bugs” from the system. But those bugs—those errors we introduce as we try to respond well—are not entirely avoidable. Our bodies wear out. We lack complete information. We have desires and interests that wax, wane, and change over time. Only by learning how things go wrong do we fully figure out how to deal with errors—and in the process become more and more adept at responding well to God’s call.

This perspective on mistakes contrasts with the fundamental posthuman optimism about the human ability to eliminate points of failure. This optimism sees what ails us and believes absolutely that we can fix those things, if only we put our minds to it. Yet, as long as we are even the least bit human, we will remain finite, so will need to make choices. Mechanical and electronic implants will wear out. With an infinite world of opportunities for experience, our desires and interests will wax, wane, and change over the centuries. And in our information-suffused environments, we may be awash in irrelevant and wrong data. To the extent that we do not allow for mistakes in the system, we will fail to support the historically grounded process of human becoming.

Summary

Posthumanism and the Roman Catholic tradition share a foundational commitment to using technology to improve the human condition by extending life, physical capabilities, intelligence, and experience. From the Catholic perspective, this work is grounded in the call to act in the world to continue God’s work of creation. If, however, it is to fit with the human task of responding well to God’s love, it must be carried out in ways that uphold dignity, support the development of full personhood, promote justice, and enable solidarity.

Given what is suggested in this chapter, posthumanism has great potential to do significant harm to human persons and communities. But it also has the potential to create significant benefits without impinging on the values dear to the Catholic tradition. Thus, it is not time to put up a red light. But a yellow light is certainly in order. Great care should be taken over the next century to ensure that moral guidance is present throughout the development process. That said, we all know that most people do not slow down when the traffic light turns yellow. All too often, the caution signal becomes the impetus to make haste before progress is stopped.
In the end, perhaps a better image to use would be hope. Hope is the virtue associated with looking with confidence to one’s ultimate end. Hope is what enables us to persevere, even under adversity. Hope also helps us maintain a focus on what the end requires, ignoring temptations that will ultimately frustrate our progress. And temptations will certainly abound in our posthuman future. Thus, we must become, as the prophet Zechariah (9:12) put it, “prisoners of hope” who forgo heaven on Earth to enter into union with God.

Bibliography


**NOVELS**