

Book Reviews

this book is an interesting and perhaps frightening exploration, written by a person who has been inside one of them. In this reviewer's opinion, though, it is marred by what seems to me to be overly long and sometimes irrelevant digressions.

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TRANSHUMANISM

TRANSHUMANISM AND THE IMAGE OF GOD: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship by Jacob Shatzer. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019. 192 pages. Paperback; \$22.00. ISBN: 9780830852505.

Most people have thought about how they would like to change themselves—get more sleep, read more, eat healthier, learn a new programming language, or master combinatorial proofs. A growing number of people have radical ideas about improvement: grow a tail; replace their eyes with optics that have zoom capabilities and can capture the infrared and ultraviolet spectrums in addition to what humans normally see; integrate memory chips and internet connectivity directly with their brain; or copy/transfer their mind to a computer or android body.

The book *Transhumanism and the Image of God* examines these more extreme ideas about human improvement. The author, Jacob Shatzer, is a theology professor at Union University in Tennessee. Shatzer's footnotes provide a rich collection of other documents that the interested reader can explore. He defines the related notions of "transhuman" and "posthuman" and carefully introduces the main ideas behind these terms—using the words of their proponents. He also provides the reader with ideas to help consider these topics from a biblical perspective. Here are some brief definitions:

Posthumanism argues that there is a next stage in human evolution. In this stage, humans will become posthuman because of our interaction with and connection to technology. Transhumanism, on the other hand, promotes values that contribute to this change. ... In a way, transhumanism provides the thinking and method for moving toward posthumanism. ... Transhumanism is the process, posthumanism the goal. They share a common value system ... (pp. 12, 16)

The first half of the book explores, in some depth, the major components of the transhumanist vision. After a chapter that sets forth the basic concepts of transhumanism, there are three chapters that consider "morphological freedom" (using technology to modify and enhance the human body), "augmented

reality" (using technology to modify and enhance the human brain or the mind), and "artificial intelligence (AI) and mind uploading" (creating intelligent nonhuman beings and moving the human mind to a different medium).

The second half of the book examines where we are now. Those chapters look at ways in which our current technologies and habits contribute to a willingness to embrace the transhumanist agenda. He also introduces practices that would counter those inclinations.

Two concepts are foundational to the entire book. First, Shatzer asserts that there are two ideas that are essential to all the variants of transhumanism. He summarizes these two ideas in the following sentence:

If we had to boil transhumanism down to two features, they would be an optimism regarding the possibility of radically altering human nature via technology and belief in a fundamental right of an individual to use technologies for that purpose. (p. 53)

The belief in a fundamental right to use technology to change oneself places the individual at the center of the transhumanist value system. Shatzer presents statements by transhumanists that indicate a responsibility toward others. The following two extracts from the Transhumanist Declaration indicate the direction of that concern:

Policy making ought to be guided by responsible and inclusive moral vision, taking seriously both opportunities and risks, respecting autonomy and individual rights, and showing solidarity with and concern for the interests and dignity of all people around the globe. We must also consider our moral responsibility towards generations that will exist in the future. (p. 51)

We favor allowing individuals wide personal choice over how they enable their lives. This includes use of techniques that may be developed to assist memory, concentration, and mental energy; life extension therapies; reproductive choice technologies; cryonics procedures; and many other possible human modification and enhancement technologies. (p. 53)

But Shatzer argues that ultimately "this final statement in the Transhumanist Declaration makes the primary element in decision making clear: individual choice" (p. 53).

The second foundational idea that underlies the book is that tools are not neutral. Referencing Richard R. Gaillardetz, Shatzer says, "Tools aren't neutral; rather, they encourage us and shape us toward certain goals, and they often do so in hidden ways" (p. 8). This is an assertion that a majority

of my students disagree with upon first encounter. Here are some of the examples that Shatzer uses to reinforce his claim.

- As we play video games, we perform actions, resulting in learning new skills and reflexes (p. 67).
- “Creating a self in a virtual world can lead one to value certain ways of creating the self in the real world. In this way, virtual worlds induce us to be more open to the values of transhumanism” (p. 68).
- Our use of current weak AI predisposes us to value convenience and ease over human interactions (pp. 106, 147). (As I was reading this page of the book, my Roomba was cleaning the floor in an adjacent room.) If it is easier to have an AI respond to my voice commands, why not extend this to having a robot or android personal assistant? We can avoid the messiness of human interactions by using a technological replacement that never has a bad day and never argues with me.
- People are already sharing much about themselves on social media. It may not be too large a leap to consider creating a “mind file” that may eventually be copied onto a computer, thus creating a replica of oneself (p. 107).
- Social media and virtual worlds appear to be providing us with a richer variety of interpersonal contacts. But the reality is often the opposite—we choose a group of people to interact with who are almost identical to ourselves. We select by age, by interests, by shared views, and by income level. This predisposes us to eventually welcome reality filters: for example, a brain enhancement that could filter undesired objects and people from our perception in the same manner that a spam filter hides unwanted email (pp. 148, 79).
- Quoting Naomi Baron, Shatzer writes, “Computers, and now portable digital devices, coax us to skim rather than read in depth, search rather than traverse continuous prose” (p. 160).
- “The internet has led to shorter attention spans and difficulty processing longer written arguments” (p. 162).
- Spending time on internet-connected devices is a way of selling (cheaply) our attention. The point of social media sites such as Facebook is not to connect us to friends; it is to capture detailed information about ourselves that can be sold to marketers. “What we pay attention to shapes who we are, and our technology offers some very immersive ways to pay attention to who others want us to be, and then it provides us with ways to shape ourselves and present ourselves in that vein” (p. 167).

These changes are already shifting our perceptions of reality in dramatic ways. In a recent conversation, my friend said, “Homosexual used to be a behavior; now it is an identity.” The implication is that sexual orientation is a fluid construct that a person chooses and can change at any time. This is in line with the transhumanist value of humans having a fundamental right to shape themselves, often using technology, into whatever form they desire.

How does God fit into this? Shatzer introduces a number of key ideas on how we might apply our understanding of and relationship to God to attitudes and practices promoted by transhumanism. One idea that is foundational is to recall that Christians are no longer the central, autonomous decision makers—they owe allegiance to God. His call on our lives takes precedence. We have a calling to fulfil (pp. 29, 30, 97).

In the second half of the book, Shatzer suggests various ancient practices that help center us in the reality that God has created and that help us form genuine communities. He discusses such practices as storytelling, gardening, homemaking/hospitality, communion and shared meals, and attention to friends.

This book is worth a serious read. I chose to read just one chapter per day in order to have time to reflect on the rich collection of ideas in each chapter. If transhumanism is a topic that is unfamiliar to you, this book is a great place to start building a solid understanding.

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