

 Michael Dominic Taylor¹

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8866-866X>

THE THOMAS MORE COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

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Dante's Transhumanism, the True Horizon of Human Hope

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In its modern form, “transhumanism” means passing beyond the limits of human nature through the aggressive use of emerging technologies. According to some environmentalists, climate change requires that we seriously consider human engineering to prevent climate change. Their suggestions include genetically inducing intolerance for meat products; the “pharmacological enhancement” of empathy for other life forms through the use of antidepressants and hormone treatments; and, having children by in vitro fertilization, selecting for the smallest offspring, thus reducing their ecological footprint.²

But as the late Stratford Caldecott warned, the pursuit of technological and political power is fundamentally the wrong approach to solving any environmental problem. This way, environmentalists “will try to get their hands

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- 1 Doctor of Philosophy and Environmental Ethics, graduate of biology at Bowdoin College (USA), philosophy (Università Gregoriana, Roma) and bioethics at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid), involved in non-profit activities and social work in South America. He currently teaches at The Thomas More College of Liberal Arts (New Hampshire, USA).
 - 2 Cf. S. M. Liao, A. Sandberg, R. Roache, Human Engineering and Climate Change, *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 15:2, 2012, 206–221.

on the relevant levers of power and will be increasingly, and everlastingly frustrated, to discover that all their attempts come to nothing or even make things worse.”³

Because “moral questions... always turn out to be epistemological questions, which in turn are determined by... metaphysical realities...”, then before asking ourselves what we should do, “...it is first necessary to ask the more fundamental question what it *is*.”⁴ The climate-change transhumanists who make the above proposals have very specific visions of both anthropology and metaphysics, of what it means to be a human person, what our ultimate good and final telos is, and the nature and meaning of reality.

But rather than address the concerns of the transhumanists on their terms, we will take a step back and present a different vision, one that depends on a deeper (and older) meaning of the word “transhuman,” one that sees the human person not as a thing to be technologically manipulated but – to quote St. John Paul II – as one “called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God.”⁵ The essential questions here are: what is a full human life and what does the rest of Creation have to do with it?

The vision of God, the life of man

The core of the encyclical *Laudato si'*, from its very title, through to its hope-filled ending “Beyond the Sun,” encourages us to echo the praise Saint Francis gave God nearly eight centuries ago when he wrote the “Canticle of the Sun.” In order to do so, we must also see the world as Saint Francis did though, which may be harder than it seems as, incredibly, he composed this ode of praise while he was nearly blind with an eye disease and close to the end of his life. His vision was the spiritual fruit of his dogged pursuit of Christ Crucified and

3 S. Caldecott, *The Radiance of Being*, Angelico Press, 2013, 89.

4 D. C. Schindler, *Why Socrates Didn't Charge: Plato and the Metaphysics of Money*, “*Communio International Review*”, 36:3, 2009, 396. NB: The distinction between ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical questions is not meant to imply a strict division into theoretical areas of specialization which become the domain of “experts” in these fields, and which become abstract, intellectual theories divorced from life. Rather, the quotation reflects the deep interconnection between the way we live and act, what we believe, and how we think; they concern different aspects of one acting person.

5 John Paul II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 25.03.1995, 2.

his contemplation of all of Creation, including even “Our Sister Bodily Death,” whom he mentions by name. It’s no wonder G. K. Chesterton wrote that, after Francis’s conversion, it was as if he saw everything upside-down, as if hanging from the love of God. Francis saw God’s love through all things.

A thousand years before the appearance of Saint Francis, lived Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, Early Church Father and Martyr. He too speaks to us of the vision of God and its necessity for the life of man. In his most famous line, he says, “Life in man is the glory of God; the life of man is the vision of God.”⁶

Irenaeus is speaking of something that goes far beyond our contemporary conceptions of “human flourishing,” for it is the “vision of God” that makes man “fully alive”.

The Revelation of creation

For Irenaeus and all the Church Fathers, this vision of God is given to man through two sources: “through creation” and, most fully, “through the Word” who is Christ. Saint Paul describes the revelation offered us through Creation: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (Romans 1:20).

Even though Christ is the fullness of Revelation, there is still a role for Creation to play in bringing us to the vision of God. And so the roles of theology and metaphysics exist in a mutual yet hierarchical order, and our natural understanding of the world is intimately related to our supernatural understanding of God’s self-revelation. As Saint Thomas Aquinas explained: “The opinion of those who say... that it is a matter of complete indifference what one thinks about creation, as long as one has a true interpretation of God... is notoriously false. For an error about creation is reflected in a false opinion about God.”⁷

We will return to the metaphysical depths of Thomas in a moment, but let us first ask: what was Francis’s vision of Creation and who is man in this vision? “Brother Sun, Sister Moon...”: clearly it is a vision of a great family with one Father, which makes man most essentially a child, a son of God. It is not incorrect to say that, in order to share Francis’s vision, we must be born again,

6 Irenaeus of Lyons St, *Against Heresies*, IV, 20, 7.

7 Thomas Aquinas St, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 3. Quoted in Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St Thomas*, 36.

we must become like children again, as Christ also instructed us. I would like to share with you two stories that I think illustrate the importance of Creation in revealing to us the vision of God.

When I was a child, my most common experience was a trust and a wonder at the world around me, especially nature, and, unless I'm mistaken, this is a universal experience. I spent my days in the woods and streams that surrounded my neighborhood. I could spend hours exploring the seashore at my grandmother's house, with a horizon of infinite questions as a backdrop.

To wonder, which means both to be astonished and to question, was for Plato, and every true philosopher after him, the birthplace of philosophy. And it is also the birthplace of both science and religion, as we are driven by our longing for a unified understanding of reality to seek out the ultimate answers to our questions.

My childhood experience of wonder would follow me into the university where I dedicated myself to the study of ecology because I was fascinated by the interconnectedness of creation. In my final year, I won a scholarship which would allow me to study anywhere in the United States. It didn't take me long to decide on Alaska. Every day was an adventure. I was surrounded by a millennial forest, eagles, bears, salmon and the infinite Pacific Ocean... It was there that I was able to realize that even all of this was not enough, that I longed for something infinite, that all the beauties of this life were pointing me towards their Source, towards He who had made everything, and to give back, communicating that beauty to others with love.

This was my experience of Creation's revelation in my life. But it could have turned out differently. I often think of the experience of another seeker who also travelled to Alaska.

Some of you may already know this story. It is about a young man named Christopher McCandless. Like many young people today, he came from a broken home and was deeply dissatisfied with society and the evil he saw in it. But in nature he found something that called to him. When he finished college, he donated all his savings and cut ties with his old life. He set out for Alaska where he went, inspired by figures like Henry David Thoreau, deep into the wilderness, to try to suck the marrow out of life.

He was filled with idealism and desire but, by the end, he realized his mistake. He had set out seeking connection but he had left behind the people that he loved. We know from his diaries that the following line from the novel *Dr. Zhivago* struck a chord in him: "*Happiness is only real when shared.*" Soon after,

he packed his things and tried to return from where he had come. Tragically, the river which he had crossed easily just months before had swelled into a torrent. Not long after, he was found dead, apparently of starvation.

It seems like a modern parable, a terrible version of the prodigal son in which the son has gone so far that he can no longer return. We cannot know for sure but we can hope that he did reach his Father because, when he knew he was dying, he left a note that read, "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God Bless All!"

To this day, the abandoned bus where he spent his final days is now a site of pilgrimage for many young people who are seeking meaning in their lives and who identify with Christopher's longings. Just this summer, a 24-year-old woman from Belorussia drowned trying to cross the very same river, while on her honeymoon.

Today's youth, so disenchanting and cynical towards modern society, recognize something special in nature and are seeking, desperately at times, to find out what that is. Many are drowning on the shores of life without discovering the Creator in the midst of His Creation.

Longing for infinity

This longing for the infinite is an essential characteristic of the human person. It can be numbed and misguided, but it cannot be eliminated.

In many places in the world, like Spain – where I live – this attraction to nature is channeled into forms of New Age and Neopagan religiosity. There, the Neopagan religion Wicca has been an official religion since 2011 and I regularly see young people with tattoos of Wiccan symbols. However, this quest for meaning in Nature is far from the only manifestation of this longing.

The principle deviation of this longing in our world has become obsessive consumerism. Not simple market exchanges, but that sickly consumerism which tries to fill the God-sized hole in one's soul with material possessions. This phenomenon has taken on a new dimension with the dawn of Black Friday.

Then, there is the worship of the body, which is magnified through the advertising that feeds this consumerism and is put on display, for example, on Instagram. And it is consumed through the modern world's destructive hook-up culture.

Finally, we have the worship of technology, by which we live and move and have our being in the social networks that we have invited into every aspect of our lives. Modern man puts his trust and faith in its promise of unlimited power. Transhumanism is simply the final phase of this process of entrusting our lives to technology. It is the coalescence of the worship of technological power, of the human body and of possessions. But it was not always this way. Leaving Neopaganism aside for the moment, let us examine where these three mutually supporting materialisms originated.

This is explained clearly in *Laudato si'*. They are all fruit of the technological paradigm, which in turn was brought about by man's turning away from metaphysics and the immaterial dimension of Creation, and his turning towards the physical dimension exclusively.

Anytime you think about or do anything with a determined conception of reality, you are doing metaphysics. Our metaphysical outlook, what we take to be real, will affect everything, especially our understanding of ourselves, of human nature. Even the strictest materialistic belief is simply an unacknowledged metaphysical stance. If we believe that the universe is essentially chaotic, arbitrary and violent, our thoughts and actions will inevitably follow suit. But if we understand the heart of reality to be love, we will think and act very differently.

Technological mindset

In simplest terms, the technological paradigm, or mechanistic mindset, looks upon the natural world as a complex machine. It rejects the metaphysical dimension of reality outright because it only admits as *real* that which is empirically measurable. This mindset was born out of the thought of Galileo and Descartes, who proposed a dualism between the empirical world and everything else. Because "everything else" is not measurable physically, it falls into the category of the merely subjective and therefore, unimportant. All things are conceived as isolated, atomistic entities with no intrinsic relationship to anything else. In the words of Richard Dawkins, all living things are merely "gene-machines,"⁸ and their manifestation as unique individuals with

8 Cf. R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, 59.

individual dignity is an illusion. In this view, the value of a creature is merely instrumental, making everything a product to be bought and sold.

Ecophilosophies

Those who reject this clearly deficient outlook have sought to emphasize the unity of nature, its interconnectedness and the intrinsic value of all things, seeking to reaffirm man's place in nature as just another member of the biotic community. These are the people who are naturally most drawn to modern forms of paganism.

While some of their central notions are closer to the truth than the mechanistic mindset, the metaphysical character of their proposals betrays their own intentions. While their vocabulary is almost spiritual at times, their ontology is just as materialistic as the mechanistic mindset. The difference is in their holism. Rather than seeing all things as essentially separate atomistic entities, they see all things as essentially united, to the point of blurring all distinctions. "We are all stardust." They want to take the intrinsic value of the individual seriously, but ultimately fail because individuals are just momentary illusions of the cosmic flux of evolution. In the end, a materialistic ontology will always be incapable of comprehending the unique dignity of individual creatures.

Metaphysics of gift

An alternative to these two insufficient visions, which end up being like two sides of the same coin, is able to describe the essential relatedness of all things while valuing their inherent individual dignity. It is able to overcome the dichotomy between instrumental and intrinsic value because it reveals that the proper relationship of things is one of love and self-donation, within which the instrumental value of things is secondary to the recognition of all things as gifts, first to themselves, and then to others. What I am describing is the Catholic doctrine of Creation, expressed both in the poetry of Francis and in the metaphysics of Thomas. Every single thing that exists receives its existence from Being itself, as a gift. And so, all creatures are essentially united by their underlying participation in Being. It is the continuous donation of our being – the *Creatio Continua* of God – that constitutes our very existence. This means that we are inherently related to our Creator and to all other creatures

from the core of our being and that we will be *more ourselves, more fully alive*, the more we live out these relationships in love and self-donation.

The beautiful paradox of being, metaphysically speaking, is that it does not exist if it does not give itself away. Thomas explains that it is simple and perfect, yet non-subsistent.⁹ Being can only subsist in this world if it donates itself to us, to creatures. For this reason, throughout all of Creation, perfection consists in the act of complete gift of one's self. Each creature, radiant in the gift of their being, in their unique dignity, is caught up in a constant dynamic of reception and self-donation. Our dignity, as the most perfect reflection of our Creator, is nothing less than a call to the highest love and service.

Though they didn't always use the same language, Thomas and Francis shared this same vision of Creation, and through it, the vision of God.

The original transhumanism

From within this tradition, we find the solutions to all of man's misguided impulses. In the face of Neopaganism, we come back to the priority of the Creator over the creature. In the face of consumerism, we come back to the poverty of Francis and Thomas. In the face of the worship of the body, we come back to chastity. In the face of the power promised us by technology, we come back to obedience. Poverty, chastity and obedience, these are the three evangelical councils by which the monks and nuns transformed Europe and built a Catholic culture, while – at the same time – creating a thriving network of sustainable local communities. To this day, the areas around Catholic shrines and monasteries are considered hotspots of biodiversity of great interest for conservation.¹⁰

Also sharing this same vision was Dante Alighieri, who invented the word “transhuman” long before our contemporary transhumanists ever dreamed of putting computer chips in their brains. For Dante, to be transhuman-ed (in verb form) was not something we did to ourselves, and yet, it is the ultimate fulfillment of human nature. Dante uses the word in the very first canticle of his *Paradiso* to make reference to an experience he says he cannot describe.

⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* I, 1, ad 1.

¹⁰ See the publications of Fabrizio Frascaroli, for example: *Shepherds, Rituals, and the Sacred: A Biocultural View of the Non-Modern Ontologies of Folk Shrines and Devotions in Central Italy*, “Worldviews”, 20, 2016, 272–285.

It is the experience he has after passing through Purgatory, after purifying his soul of all that weighed it down, as he flies upwards, ever closer to God, and is divinized in the process.

What we have, in the vocabulary of Dante, is a spiritual transhumanism by which, as we are purified of sin, we are united to God. This is the divinization, the theosis of man that is referred to by the saying: "God became man, so that man might become God."¹¹ Our deepest longings are awaiting this final fulfillment. We can, however, experience a foretaste of it, and this is the vision of God that Irenaeus refers to: the knowing of God, both through creation and through Christ, that actualizes – makes real – our participation in Him.

Modern transhumanism, based firmly in the technological paradigm, particularly those proposals that require the destruction of countless human lives or that postulate manipulating the human genome, is not only absurd but diabolic self-destruction. The human being becomes the helpless product of his own technique. D. C. Schindler explains: "This is a kind of antiredemption, a diabolical inversion of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, who is at once priest and victim. Pure power and utter powerlessness now converge into one, and man becomes the abject servant of his own limitless freedom..."¹²

Conclusion

If the 20th century has taught us anything at all, it is that we cannot create a better world while killing the innocent. Those who would propose killing embryonic human beings deemed "unfit for life" can do so because their technocratic metaphysics contains no basis for concepts such as human dignity, no matter how they manipulate their words. David Bentley Hart comments, "The vision of the human that John Paul [II] articulates and the vision of the 'transhuman' ...are divided not by a difference in practical or ethical philosophy, but by an irreconcilable hostility between two religions, two metaphysics, two worlds—at the last, two gods."¹³

11 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 460. The phrase has been repeated by Saint Clement of Alexandria and Saint Athanasius, among others.

12 D. C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019, 275.

13 D. Bentley Hart, *John Paul II and the Ethics of the Body*, "The New Atlantis", Summer 2005, 71.

Transhumanists do not propose more radical methods for the simple reason that it has not yet been deemed socially acceptable to do so. Let us keep it that way, and pray, and work so that the apocalyptic panic they are striving to instill in society, through the technocratic presumptions of omniscience and prophecy, does not cause us to abandon our defense of human dignity, our vision of Creation, and through it, our vision of God. For, what does it profit a man to save the world if he loses his soul?

We have not addressed here whether or not human engineering might be technically or economically feasible or socially acceptable. What we have sought to do is to show that Creation itself can guide us to our rightful Source and vocation to love, service, and stewardship. Paul, Irenaeus, Francis, Thomas and Dante invite us to turn our gaze upwards with child-like wonder and contemplate God, through His Creation, so that we become fully alive in the fulfillment of our humanity.

But Dante's transhumanism is not for us alone, it is the way in which we are called to participate in God's gathering up - in the words of Dante - of "all things in a single volume bound by Love, of which the universe is the scattered leaves."¹⁴ It is our task, as the highest expression and microcosm of Creation, to lead the way. This is already taking place, every time a priest celebrates the Mass, when the work of our hands is transubstantiated into God Himself. This is why "all of Creation waits in eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Romans 8:19), until we are all united again by our Father's Love, "that Love that moves the sun and other stars."¹⁵



14 D. Alighieri, *Divine Comedy. Paradise*, transl. by John Ciardi, Penguin Books Ltd, London 2004, Canto 33, lines 86–87.

15 Ibidem, Canto 33, line 145.