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Volume 140 *Archive Feature*: James Herrick

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The stories transhumanists tell about humanity

Synopsis:

Rhetoric and communications professor James Herrick observes how our stories about the future of humanity influence the kinds of questions and solutions that scientists search for. If we think, for instance, that there is nothing fixed about the human body, but that it is one step along the way in an evolutionary and technological process, then humanity as such can be manipulated, or dispensed with altogether, resulting in various movements towards transhumanism and posthumanism. Herrick, author of *Visions of Technological Transcendence: Human Enhancement and the Rhetoric of the Future* (Parlor Press, 2017), discusses the "posthuman" aspirations of the transhumanist movement, and how its plausibility is established by stories.

Transcript

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Every Sunday, in my church, as in countless churches around the world, we recite the words of the Nicene Creed. The word *begotten* is used three times to describe the Second Person of the Trinity: "The Lord Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, begotten not made."

There are many theological claims made in the Creed that elude even the most attentive worshipper, including this distinction between a *begotten* thing and a *made* thing. In his 1984 book, *Begotten or Made*, an exploration of the ethical issues raised by in vitro fertilization, Oliver O'Donovan summarized what was at issue at the Council of Nicaea that led to this stark distinction made in the Creed. As O'Donovan points out, the Council was concerned with the language appropriate to describe the relationship of the Son of God to the Father. They used an analogy of human begetting to stress that the Second

Person of the Trinity had a common nature with the Father. As O'Donovan writes, "The eternal Son of God, who was not made, was of the Father's being, not his will."

By contrast with the act of begetting is the act of making. "That which we make is unlike ourselves. What we make, then, is alien from our humanity. In that it has a human maker, it has come to existence as a human project, its *being* at the disposal of mankind. It is not fit to take its place alongside mankind in fellowship, for it has no place beside him on which to stand. Man's will is the law of its being. That which we beget can be, and should be, our companion. But the product of our art, whatever immeasurable satisfaction and enjoyment there may be, both in making it and in cherishing it, can never have the independence to be that 'other I,' equal to us, and differentiated from us, which we acknowledge in those who are begotten of human seed."

O'Donovan regards this distinction between *begetting* and *making* as crucial in understanding the modern context for evaluating ethical choices. "We have to consider the position of this human begetting in a culture which has been overwhelmed by making, that is to say, in a technological culture."

O'Donovan invokes Jacques Ellul and George Parkin Grant at this point to make it clear that "what marks this culture most importantly is not anything that it does, but what it thinks. It is not technological because its instruments of making are extraordinarily sophisticated (though that is evidently the case), but because it thinks of everything it does as a form of instrumental making; there is no place for simply doing. The fate of a society which sees wherever it looks nothing but the products of human will, is that it fails, when it does see some human activity which is not a matter of construction, to recognize the significance of what it sees, and to think about it appropriately. This blindness in the realm of thought is at the heart of what it is to be a technological culture."

And the more ubiquitous and competent our devices become, the harder it is to overcome our blindness, to see some things as *made* things, while other things are *natural* things. A thoroughly technological society is not so much one in which devices occupy all of our attention, but a society that is collectively "incapable of acknowledging the inappropriateness of technical intervention in

certain types of activity. When every activity is understood as making then every situation into which we act is seen as a raw material, waiting to have something made out of it. If there is no category and thought for an action which is not artifactual — that is, not an artifact, not a made thing — then there is no restraint in action which can preserve phenomena which are not artificial.

This imperils not only, or even primarily, the *environment*, as we patronizingly describe the world of things which are not human, it imperils what it is to be human, for it deprives human existence itself of certain spontaneities of being and doing, spontaneities which depend upon the reality of a world which we have not made or imagined but which simply confronts us to evoke our love, fear, and worship. Human life, then, becomes mechanized because we cannot comprehend what it means that some human activity is natural."

Again, that's from the first chapter of Oliver O'Donovan's book *Begotten or Made*. The title of that chapter is "Medicine and the Liberal Revolution," and the liberation he has in mind is the modern understanding of freedom as "the abolition of limits which constrain and direct us. Technology derives its social significance from the fact that by it man has discovered new freedoms from necessity. The technological transformation of the modern age has gone hand in hand with the social and political quest of Western man to free himself from the necessities imposed upon him by religion, society, and nature. Without this social quest, the development of technology would have been unthinkable. Without technology, the liberal society, as we know it, would be unworkable."

There are in our time numerous social and political movements that advance agendas committed to the abolition of limits in the name of freedom. But it needs to be understood that the modern understanding of freedom is unprecedented and ultimately dehumanizing. As philosopher D. C. Schindler notes in his recent book *Freedom from Reality*, "The modern conception of freedom has an inherent, indeed logical, tendency to subvert itself."

The recovery within the Church of a more consistently Christian understanding of freedom is one of the most important acts of cultural faithfulness that I can imagine. It's conventionally assumed in our time that if freedom means anything, it means doing what one wants to do with one's body.

But this is to treat the human body as just another artifact rather than something natural. Oliver O'Donovan argues that true human freedom is achieved when we honor the givenness of our nature, not when we deny it with Promethean arrogance, and it is as incarnate beings that we can receive the gift of freedom. "The relation of human beings to their own bodies, we might say, is the last frontier of nature. However much we may surround ourselves with our artifacts, banish every bird from the sky and every fish from the river, tidy every blade of grass into a park with concrete paths and iron railings, however blind we may become to the givenness of the natural order on which our culture is erected, nevertheless, when we take off our clothes to have a bath we confront something as natural, as given, as completely non-artifactual as anything in the universe. We confront our own bodily existence. And we learn there, if nowhere else, that to enjoy any freedom of spirit, to realize our possibilities for action of any kind, we must cherish nature in this place where we encounter it. We must defer to its imminent laws, and we must plan our activities in cooperation with them.

"It was the office of medicine to teach us this lesson in ages when the limitations of techniques gave it virtually no other office. Human freedom has a natural substrate, a presupposition. Before we can evoke and create new beings which conform to the laws we lay down for them by our making, we have to accept this being according to its own laws, which we have not laid down. If, by refusing its laws and imposing our freedom wantonly upon it, we cause it to break down, our freedom breaks down with it. This is in fact the law of our relations with all nature, with the climate, the soil, the animal world. But in this particular case it is forced upon our attention, one might think inescapably. No man hates his own flesh, says Saint Paul, but nourishes it and cherishes it (Ephesians 5:29). To hate one's own flesh is the limit of self-contradiction to which our freedom tends. It is the point at which our assertion of ourselves against nature becomes an attack upon ourselves.

"And so it is equally true to say both that no man ever hates his own flesh, and that this self-hatred is the term to which our proud self-assertion is inevitably drawn, just as the worshippers of Baal on Mount Carmel, according to the prophetic history, were impelled to cut themselves with knives."

The modern conception of freedom, seeking to transcend all limits, to transgress all boundaries, logically invites and welcomes various forms of self-mutilation.

When St. Paul asserted that no man hates his own flesh, he hadn't lived long enough to meet people like Russian media magnate Dmitry Itskov, who seven years ago bankrolled the foundation of the 2045 Initiative. This nonprofit organization promotes the development of "technologies enabling the transfer of an individual's personality to a more advanced non-biological carrier, and extending life, including to the point of immortality." The 2045 Initiative is just one of dozens of organizations promoting a vision of the future that can be described as techno-progressivism, the human enhancement movement, techno-futurism, posthumanism, and transhumanism.

Many of these groups and their prophetic leaders are described in a recent book by James Herrick called *Visions of Technological Transcendence: Human Enhancement and the Rhetoric of the Future*. As Herrick writes, "Transhumanism is both an organized movement and a philosophical perspective that sees current humanity as a transitional state in evolution that will birth a new species, the posthuman." James Herrick.

James Herrick
The "trans" in *transhuman* is kind of the same "trans" [as] in *transitional*. The human being was never intended, to use that language, to be a permanent kind of fixture in the cosmos. We were always part of an evolutionary flow. And that evolutionary flow is now being assisted by technology. And in fact we can take hold of that technology and guide our evolution — "guided evolution," "enhanced evolution" is our catchphrase of the movement — and try and guess what the next steps might be and bring them about through genetic engineering, through artificial intelligence, through merging with our machines, through interplanetary colonization. There are all kinds of components to it. But the idea that the old-fashioned human being that we're all familiar with, because we all are those kinds of beings, is somehow going to stick around for another several thousand or hundred thousand years is treated as just naive, old-fashioned, almost religious thinking.

But what's interesting to me is, the new thinking is just as religious as the old.

KM
Since the term *posthuman* often pops up in the transhumanist literature, I asked Herrick whether this movement, or philosophical perspective, believed that there was a future for the human, or were humans destined for extinction, as they were made outdated by posthumans.

JH
Well, you get more than one point of view on this question within the group. One view is, "Well, we're kind of a mess anyway, so what are we holding on to?" — which is almost an admission of a kind of fallen nature of human beings, that human beings are not some kind of crown of creation. They're just a step along the way, and they're not a particularly attractive step, if you look at how we behave.

Then there are people in the transhumanist and human enhancement movement who are kind of reluctant to give up the idea of humanness. I think it's Ray Kurzweil who has said something like, "We may lose our biology, but we will not lose our humanity." So there are people in the movement who want to hold on to some conception of the human. There are a larger number, I believe, within this relatively small organized movement of transhumanism, who don't see that as a problem at all: holding on to human is like trying to hold evolution back. And if the posthuman is coming and the posthuman is going to be a whole lot smarter and live a lot longer and accomplish a lot more good than we ever did, then why do we proudly stand in its way?

So I think this is still, in the rhetoric of the movement, kind of being worked out. But if there is a majority position that I feel like I encounter more often than not, it's that there's an inevitability. This is evolution, after all. This is the principle that's driving the cosmos itself, as Teilhard de Chardin was fond of saying. We are puny agents in the face of a power of that scale.

So no matter how we conceive ourselves, we're going to be ushered off the scene pretty soon anyway in the posthuman age. So you can be a retreatist if you want, and go live in rural Vermont and have a commune, but eventually your type is going to vanish.

And this is another concern because as a Christian looking at the Creation account in Genesis and the idea of being made in the image of God, this is all very much being contested and seen as an impediment to the inevitable onset of a new era in which human beings *are* going to have to admit they're obsolete.

KM
In the subtitle to Herrick's book is the phrase "the rhetoric of the future." This reflects Herrick's goal of exploring, "the visionary narratives or myths of technological transcendence currently emerging around the central ideas of the human enhancement movement and techno-progressivism generally." Herrick makes it clear that the stories told about the future by scientists, screenwriters, philosophers, novelists, and others have inspired the policies of corporate and political bodies.

JH
The point I make in the book is that what I call *mythos* or *myth* precedes *logos* or precedes policy and research agendas — which I think is not widely understood, that a lot of times the storytelling is seen as a kind of enhancement of its own type or a kind of additional activity, a peripheral activity. But I think it's actually the foundational activity that actually leads to the kinds of policy decisions that lead to funding decisions. I think this is generally not recognized, not understood.

Later today I'm actually doing a talk here at Grand Valley on stories about space exploration. They've got a conference on space exploration running this weekend, and the same thing happens in that arena, that it's the stories that go back centuries that precede the development of space policy and space initiatives and space budgets.

KM
I think you cite Mary Midgley that says that stories or mythic accounts, visionary accounts, that rely on scientific imagery get a lot more authority in our culture. So if you can pepper your story with all sorts of allusions to technologies or to scientific theories, regardless of how unscientific the story might be, the story gains plausibility.

JH
Well, [a] good case in point is the account of evolution. You can incorporate the idea of evolution into almost any account of any developmental process or any process. And then you read figures like Teilhard de Chardin, in which pretty much his entire cosmology is based in a theory, a kind of retelling of the story of evolution. And I think a unique contribution of Mary Midgley is to identify that process and how that happens, that kind of borrowing of authority from science for the story; but it's a cyclical process, because then the story starts to influence subsequent science.

KM
Right. So the stories borrow from scientific imagery or ideas, in a sense, rather profligately. But then when the story becomes compelling, then that influences the kinds of questions or solutions scientists search for.

JH
Yes, and at the same time influences the shaping of the public imagination. So the story has various iterations. It shows up in maybe a science fiction novel, maybe a movie, maybe an interview with a famous scientist, maybe a television series, a conference — and the contest is not just over scientific attention but the public's endorsement of an idea.

Again, space exploration is an interesting example, where we move from a kind of skeptical public that doesn't even believe it's possible to launch a human being into space and get him back safely. [We] go through a number of calculated storytelling efforts to convince the public otherwise, including the development of a magazine series written by Werner von Braun on space exploration back in the fifties — movies that are very polemical and have a point. They have a tendentious kind of component to them. And within ten years public opinion shifts. And there's not only the belief that it's possible, but it's starting to sound inevitable and almost like our destiny.

KM
And hence anybody who gets in the way of it is really an enemy of progress, an enemy of humanity in a sense.

JH
Yeah, and that's a point C. S. Lewis made years ago, that when you combine the idea of a kind of all-powerful science with the inevitability of a kind of religious conviction, it's a dangerous combination. I don't want to overstate that, but I'm concerned that we're kind of stepping into that territory right now.

KM
I was intrigued — I hadn't heard of Luciano Floridi; he's an Oxford philosopher that you mentioned. Google hired him to address the question of what constitutes human identity. This is in your chapter on life as information. And Floridi, as a philosopher, believes that, as one journalist summarized, "You are your information." Floridi argues that developments in technology have brought about a shift in self-understanding that's as dramatic as the ones precipitated by Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud. Why would Google be interested in having a philosopher help them understand that sort of thing? What in their business plan necessitates having a philosopher give them an understanding of human identity?

JH
Well, I've got a cynical answer to that question, and then I've got a probably kind of corporate answer to that question. The corporate answer might be to reveal that we are being serious about the moral issues that we're creating. And so we are not just a bunch of techies sitting around here, somehow hiding in subterranean research labs, unaware of what goes on in the real world. We have hired a philosopher — and this isn't the only effort to do that kind of thing. And I'm not saying it's not earnest. I mean, I think they are making an earnest effort to try and figure some—

KM
Would they hire philosophers who have entirely different views of human identity? Or are they basically selecting people that confirm an understanding that's already underway in their ecosystem?

JH
Well, this gets to my cynical view. He becomes the resident storyteller, he becomes the resident mythologist. And so in a way it's a recognition of what

I'm arguing in the book, that the ones who craft the best stories are going to be out in front.

Now, to his credit, Ray Kurzweil, who currently works for Google, has said, "What we do is tell stories." I mean he recognizes this. And oftentimes Ray Kurzweil is actually the more kind of wise and perceptive voice of this movement and sort of recognizes some of the traps. He's a very engaging intellect. But when I read about Google hiring the philosopher — now I've also heard other people who work for a division of Google say, "We need more people from the humanities. We need more people who can help us understand what we're doing." And I think they were completely earnest.

At the same time, I think there is this sense that we better get out in front of the narrative before the religious conservatives do that, or the political conservatives do that, or some fringe group gets a hold of something, or somebody in another country does that. There is a recognition, I think, that the narrative actually doesn't just enhance or kind of embellish the process — in a lot of ways it *is* the process.

KM
Well, Ray Kurzweil tells one story about human life and the human good, but but there are conflicting stories. Wendell Berry tells a very different story about what a well-lived human life looks like. And so I think there is a certain sense [in which] I'm at least as cynical as you are: I don't think Google is going to hire Wendell Berry as a consultant, or other storytellers who tell stories that actually may constrict what their grand plans are.

JH
There may be — and there are — efforts to invite people kind of filing a minority report to some of these large conferences. But in the conferences I have attended — and I've attended several and I've got some more on the agenda — it hasn't been a serious effort, because a lot of this is actually seen as a kind of obscuring of the goals and slowing down of the process. And so again, it's not a uniform, universal view. There's not one particular story that wins out in all of these circles.

But there's a prevailing mythic story, there's a prevailing narrative line. And to say, well, why should we listen to an anti-technological voice from the past when in fact what we need is is a more enhanced envisioning of the future? So you may find techno-progressive people who would embrace somebody like Wendell Berry. But the people who are pushing the movement forward are not, in my estimation, not particularly interested in hearing that voice.

KM
And back to your main theme: there's a pre-scientific, mythic understanding of human life that animates this movement. By framing it that way it suggests that there's no arguing with that myth, that myths have a kind of self-insulating capacity to render any objections implausible.

JH
Well, you can pretend that the myth created itself, that it was just there. Or you can acknowledge that you had a role in crafting the myth. But at the same time, as I said at one point in the book, it becomes kind of story versus story. And one reason I think Christians need to think about — I mean, we have our heads in the sand collectively when it comes to a lot of this technology stuff. And we're also going to be divided over free market concerns and corporate concerns and national concerns. And you're going to see the church — even the evangelical, more conservative wing of the church — divided over some basic ideological questions that are going to be raised as we move into the next twenty years. But at the same time, we're not telling our story very well in response to this techno-progressive vision of [an] immortal posthuman future.

KM
James Herrick, the author of *Visions of Technological Transcendence: Human Enhancement and the Rhetoric of the Future*. Herrick's earlier books include *Scientific Mythologies: How Science and Science Fiction Forge New Religious Beliefs*, and *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition*. Herrick is the Guy Vanderjagt Professor of Communication at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, and he was a guest on Volume 63 and Volume 93 of the *Journal*.

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