

identity. Culture, in both its religious and non-religious forms, may lose the ability to articulate a holistic response to the question, "What makes humans, human?" because it lacks any solid footing with which to place the body as an essential component of human life.

The nature of technology, as it transforms our understanding of personal biology, sociology, and psychology, raises the timeless question, "Who am I?" Whether through circumstance or curiosity, self-reflective people are often drawn to consider the ontological nature of one's existence and its necessary partner questions, "Why am I here?" and "To what end shall I live?" The purpose of this piece is to bring theology into the discussion as a conversation partner

Humans are imaginative, conceptual creatures. They are also flesh, bone, and sinew—experiencing the natural world through sense organs. When taken together, it seems natural that people take their experience of the world and braid it together with a broader, transcendent narrative.¹¹

events were interpreted in this lens: bumper crops were the result of proper devotion to the deities, prompting their favor. Floods and pestilence could be signs of their displeasure. To be sure, the result was "interpreted as an outside power which infus[ed] itself into a man's doings."¹⁵

unruly nature below, then the flourishing life is one that avoids the wrath of the gods and finds a certain harmony with the natural world. The pagan, then, would harness what power was available to him through spells, shamans, and sacrifice to minimize the curses and maximize the blessings for one's family, crops, and social relations.

If man is only an evolved animal, then ultimate flourishing is to adapt, survive, and spread one's genes. Strength and vigor become the operating virtues, and human communities are either reduced to arenas by which strong individuals subdue the weak or serve as entities of power unto themselves to rule other groups.

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human. Remarkable eyesight with zoom or night-vision, for example, would inevitably lead to seeing things that should not be seen. Privacy would be violated, and the beneficiary of the surgery is transformed over time into a voyeur *par excellence*. The self-aware person, then, declines precisely because he knows he is human—and as such, he is predictably fallible and susceptible to evil actions.

The second objection has broader-based, communal concerns. Many participants in the thought experiment question to what degree human enhancement (as opposed to therapeutic uses of technology) leads to a devaluation of humanity. In other words, if I add a robotic eye or two, will this make me less human? What about adding a robotic arm, as well? This is a version of the sorites paradox. Rather than asking how many grains of sand are required to make a heap, we are asking how many robotic modifications are required before a person is something other than human.

Both concerns are quite profound and useful to our time here because they speak to this fundamental anxiety about what it means to be human in a technologically advanced society. Ironically, the resistance to such a surgery implies a certain discomfort with the belief that a person can actually be thought of *as a machine*. To put this another way, it appears that an individual is a machine right up until we allow actual machines to penetrate one’s body with increasing regularity. Then, we find ourselves disoriented in the human-but-not-quite-human terrain of the “uncanny valley” and are left with the intuition that our nature can and should remain appropriately distanced from the strict determinism implied in the Man as Machine metaphor.

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humans have over “their own biological substratum.”

abilities far beyond current levels, deep and unsettling questions linger about the individual’s responsibility to the whole. What happens to embodied community in an age of gods?

The Age of Excarnation is upon us. It is an age in which we choose data over people, screen over skin-and-bones, and connectivity over community. For a generation of young people, the concept of community has taken an utterly strange turn. Many believe that online social networks serve as an adequate medium for participating in all affairs of communal life. Paradoxically, but also predictably, researchers are finding this generation to be lonelier than ever.³² Young men and women exercise ever-increasing controls on their friendship groups yet find that online discussions quickly turn into shouting matches and *ad hominem* attacks. Whereas “third places” like bars and bowling alleys traditionally used to facilitate full spectrum communication and community bonding, now one receives a text message and an emoji.³³ Even sexuality is no longer assumed to be an embodied experience. In fact, the term “digisexual” has emerged as a description of those whose only sexual experiences come mediated by digital or virtual environments.³⁴

Earlier, I quoted Charles Taylor from his work, *A Secular Age*. His comment on excarnation articulated a movement within faith communities—a movement away from embodied, physical expressions of religious faith in favor of private contemplation and individualistic spirituality. I would venture to add two small phrases to expand the quote’s reach, to read: Excarnation is, “the steady disembodiment of spiritual [and communal] life, so that it is

The Age of Excarnation presents a deep, utterly gnostic challenge to theological anthropology. If parishes ignore this threat or remain blind to its subtle effects, they risk becoming a church-community that no longer visits the hurt, binds the broken, shelters the homeless, and reconciles the imprisoned. Instead, they remain distant from their obligations to the physical neighborhoods to which they belong, choosing instead to inhabit virtual (i.e., online) worlds with virtual (i.e., not *real*) acts of love and pastoral care. Can the Church counter this tidal shift toward excarnate living?

HOMO CHRISTIANUS

In his wildly popular book, *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari claims that man’s only unique distinction among other animals is that man can “cooperate in very flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers.”³⁶ Is this the last surviving tale of human identity? If true, this surely is music to the ears of Mark Zuckerberg and other tech giants, since by pinning human identity to cooperation, they can justify massive data grabs that produce greater levels of connectivity and near-unlimited cash flow. And yet, this approach leaves substantial gaps. Harari’s statement, like de la Mettrie’s *Man a Machine*, fails to produce any resource by which one can claim intrinsic dignity for the human body, strong or weak. What’s left is a fragile accord between individuals for the sake of survival, akin to one member of a community pleading with another, “If you don’t hurt me, I won’t hurt you.”

I suggest that if one gets human identity wrong, then the resulting model of human flourishing risks minimizing or ignoring the crucial role of the body.³⁷ Solid theological anthropology must include a space for the person’s physical constitution. Therefore, I believe that the Church’s first and most pressing step is to lay out a straightforward case for human identity that incorporates enfleshed living and properly accounts for the necessity of physical communities of grace. This approach need not be Luddite in any way, as the Lutheran articulation of freedom allows us to engage culture in all of its forms.

I suggest a model that binds human identity directly to the life of the Trinity. Human distinctness is borne out of the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying purposes of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, respectively. What does that look like, exactly?

Telos (Vocation)

From the instant of his creation, man has been given purpose. In the broad sense, Adam and Eve are created to bring glory to God, to participate in the life of God made immediate to them in the Garden. God the Father bestows man and woman with the gift of *telos*, a reason for

theory. Sax’s research, however, highlights the great gap between *Wissenschaft* (knowledge about something) and *Kenntnis* (knowledge through direct experience).

³⁶ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 133.

³⁷ This dynamic works in the reverse, to an extent. A healthy understanding of our collective past can help us better understand our individual identities in the present. Charles Taylor notes this by saying, “Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can’t do justice to where we come from.” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29).

blessing—because he is alone.”⁴⁴

What is lost if there are two of the above, but not all three? Vocation and embodiment without community leaves the Christian without the full word of grace, isolated from his opportunity to hear *and* proclaim the great hope that exists for the Christian. Embodiment and community without vocation leads to the deep depression of being disconnected from God’s purposes on earth. It is the actor in search of a story in which to play a part. Vocation and community without embodiment leads to gnostic forms of Christianity, where the physical is reviled, creation is ignored or despised, and the fundamental good of being gifted with flesh-and-blood bodies is cast aside for utopian visions of perfect thinking, perfect religiosity, *perfect folly*.

As the Age of Excarnation continues to hypnotize us with shiny new toys and grand promises of pixel-induced bliss, the Christian confession can offer a narrative on human identity that actually addresses the whole person. Our neighbors are not simply minds. They are much more than complicated computers that produce outputs.

Human beings require the features of vocation, embodiment, and community grounded in the mutual love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With these non-negotiables set in stone, the Christian can boldly interact with the world of technology and Transhumanism with discerning hearts and clear eyes. Every topic, every conversation, every new innovation is open to the gaze of the free Christian, knowing that such matters do not put his justification at risk. Yet in this exploration, the Christian need not fret when hopes of a technologically-driven utopia never come to pass; Christian hope was never placed in the hands of men in the first place.

In this day of miracle and wonder, a Christian need not cry, “Crucify!” at each new technological advance, for he has a vocation to perform, a body to enjoy, and a church-community to participate in. His efforts can be more fruitfully directed by boldly identifying what it means to be human, especially in light of the over-promising, under-delivering (and ultimately, de-humanizing) promises of Transhumanism. Christian eschatology, after all, offers *all* good things to those whose identity is found in the risen Christ—a new heaven, a new earth, and a redeemed body. And that is truly super.

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