Redeeming Technology Talk 2.2

Technology and Human Nature:
Is it ethical to use technology to enhance our bodies and minds?
Should we change our fundamental human nature?

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The Canadian writer George Grant wrote that the fundamental goal of technology is the mastery of nature, and the mastery of human nature represents the final frontier for technological project. We don't have to accept the limitations of our own bodies - we can transcend and change our humanity.

The idea of using technology to enhance and improve the function of our bodies and minds can be traced back to the European Enlightenment, in the writings of Diderot and other thinkers. Diderot, writing in 1769, wrote that since human consciousness is a product of brain matter, the conscious mind can be deconstructed and put back together. Humanity can redesign itself into a great variety of types "whose changes and whose future and final organic structure it's impossible to predict."

Although the modification and improvement of human nature can be considered part of the "Enlightenment Project", it has taken more than 200 years for this to become technically feasible. In the 21st century the idea of using sophisticated technology to modify human nature is being increasingly discussed.

The article by Nick Bostrom *"In Defense of Posthuman Dignity"* provides a recent example of this way of thinking. Bostrom argues that human beings have *morphological freedom* – they are free to change their shape and form however they wish, and they have *reproductive freedom* – they can create new lives in whatever form they wish. We should "embrace technological progress while strongly defending human rights and individual choice". To Bostrom 'the natural order' has no intrinsic value and there is no need to defer to what is natural. Instead we should reform our own human nature in accordance with what he calls "humane values" and "personal aspirations". Bostrom derides the fear that this will lead to a loss of innate human dignity. Instead we should give appropriate moral recognition to all who need them, "male or female, flesh or silicon". Within this form of thinking, the natural order is seen as constraining, restricting and limiting our human potential and true freedom is to break out of this constricting box.

A fundamental problem with this perspective is that it rests on a philosophical dualism which is difficult to defend. The choosing self is regarded as free to change the nature of the body in which it resides. The self stands free from the body and exerts its will on the body. It is clearly differentiated from the body. But what is this "self"? According to the dominant ideas of neuroscience, it is an emergent phenomenon that is created by neuronal activity within the brain. In other words the self is a product or expression of the body and it is completely dependent on the body. Hence there seems to be a deep incoherence in the idea that the self can choose to change the body of which it is an expression.

Christian responses to these challenges have been varied. Perhaps the most frequent response has been to see human enhancement and modification as a threat to the goodness of the original creation. This view tends to be expressed by those from a conservative evangelical or Catholic perspective. From this perspective our human nature, with all its inherent limitations, is to be celebrated as part of God's original creation plan, described in Genesis as "very good". This view is reinforced by the understanding that our original embodied human nature is vindicated and affirmed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus is raised as a recognisable, tangible member of the species Homo Sapiens, this is God's final vote of confidence in human nature as originally given.

On the other hand, some Christian writers have argued that the use of technology to improve humanity can be seen as a positive form of "co-creation". The creation is regarded as unfinished and flawed, and we can now take on the work of creation, enhancing the creative work of God to improve the original creation and overcome its restrictions and limitations. A further element of this view is that technology can be used to fulfil God's purposes for his creation as part of the eschatological vision of inaugurating and bringing into existence the new heaven and new earth. This view tends to be favoured by thinkers from a liberal Protestant perspective.

It is our overall theological view of creation that will largely affect our attitude to enhancement. If we emphasise the goodness of creation, we tend to overestimate humanity's intrinsic goodness (for example our powers of reason and ability to know what God wants) and we find it hard to recognise defects in the original natural order that should be corrected. This leads to the conservative position. However, if we see creation primarily as flawed, fallen or incomplete, we tend to assume that it is open to any manipulation, and we fail to see that it has an intrinsic value irrespective of its limitations. This leads to the pro-enhancement position.

In distinction to Bostrom, who sees the natural order as constraining and limiting our human potential and hence sees freedom as liberation from the natural order, orthodox Christian thinking sees true freedom as the freedom to become what we were meant to be. True freedom is therefore found when we accept the limits imposed by the creation order.

This would imply that it is appropriate to use technology to combat disease and to restore human function to normal, but it would not be appropriate to use technology to enhance human functioning to levels which are outside the normal range.

I have previously used the analogy of art restoration to illustrate the distinction between using technology for restorative purposes and for enhancing purposes. Art restorers use sophisticated technology to restore an ancient painting to the form as intended by the original artist, but they accept that it is not ethical to use technology to change the fundamental design of the painting. The original artist's intention is normative. In the same way, we should use technology to restore human functioning to normal, according to our original creation design, but we should not use it to change the fundamental design or nature of our humanity.

There is no doubt that enhancing technology will become increasingly powerful in medicine and bioscience in the coming decades and thoughtful debate about the appropriate uses of this technology is urgently needed.