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Transcendence, Transhumanism, and the Shift from the Quest for the Absolute to the Pursuit of Utopia

Abstract

This article explores the evolving perspectives on human existence, focusing on the concepts of transcendence and transhumanism. It delves into the inherent religious nature of man and his quest for the Absolute, seeking to surpass the limitations of his natural state, particularly in the face of mortality. For Christians, the Absolute is identified with God, and the journey to overcome death involves an internal struggle and spiritual growth toward eternal life. On the other hand, the rise of transhumanism signifies a departure from the transcendent and a shift toward the pursuit of Utopia through technological advancements and the transformation of human nature. The



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article will analyze the contrasting values between Christian transcendence and transhumanist utopia. It will examine the motivation behind the search for the Absolute in religion, the desire for immortality, and the emergence of a humanistic approach that rejects the transcendent in favor of a utopian vision achievable through scientific progress.

Keywords

Transcendence, Transhumanism, Utopia, Ideologies, Absolute

1 Introduction

In the vast landscape of human thought and aspiration, one profound concept has shaped our understanding of existence and our quest for advancement: the quest for transcendence. This notion delves into the core of human nature, exploring our inherent desires to go beyond our limitations and forge a path toward a greater state of being. The significance of these concepts lies not only in their philosophical depth but also in their influence on shaping human identities, belief systems, and visions for the future.

Transcendence, rooted in the very essence of human existence, speaks to our innate religious inclinations and our relentless pursuit of the Absolute. It is an age-old quest to surpass the boundaries of our nature, most notably in our endeavor to overcome the daunting finality of mortality. Throughout history, this concept has manifested in various spiritual traditions, providing a guiding light for those seeking purpose and meaning in a seemingly chaotic world. For Christians, transcendence finds its pin-

nacle in the divine as they strive to align themselves with the Absolute, seeing death not as an end but as a gateway to eternal life.¹

In contrast, the relatively contemporary concept of transhumanism heralds a paradigm shift away from the traditional religious perspectives on transcendence. Rooted in humanistic ideals and accelerated by the rapid progress of science and technology, transhumanism envisions a future where humanity transcends its biological limitations through artificial enhancement. It places the notion of Utopia at its forefront, a vision of a perfected society where humanity attains unparalleled heights of physical and intellectual prowess, aided by the fruits of scientific progress.²

As we embark on this exploration, we shall journey through the historical context and development of both transcendence and transhumanism, seeking to understand how these ideas have evolved and impacted human society and culture. This article aims to unravel the complexities surrounding these concepts, examining the motivations behind the pursuit of the Absolute in religion and the allure of Utopia through technological means.

Man is essentially a religious being, a seeker of the Absolute. Through his tension towards the Absolute, he desires to overcome the limitations of his nature, especially death, and to enhance his being, to transfigure it, becoming as similar as possible to the Absolute. For Christians, the Absolute is God, and death is

¹ Ronald Cole-Turner, *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, (Georgetown University Press, 2011).

² The Transhumanist Declaration. <https://www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-declaration>

conquered from within, “trampling death with death”³ not avoiding it, and the ultimate enhancement of human finitude is achieved through participation in the eternally good life of God, a process that begins in time but is perfected in eternity, beyond time and death.

For any current of thought that originates from the humanistic process of repudiating the transcendent, of “disenchanted the world”⁴ by renouncing “religious superstitions” and “the death of God”, as is the case with the transhumanist movement, Utopia takes the place of the Absolute, and immanence replaces transcendence. Our limitations are transcended not from within them but by their elimination, and the enhancement of the finite is achieved by fulfilling Utopia in time and space. For some, it is the perfect race, for others, the perfect class, and for transhumanism, it is the transfiguration and perfection of human nature through technology and medicine. Based on these considerations, in this work, we will analyze the relationship between Christian transcendence and transhumanist utopia.

As we delve into the clash of transcendence and transhumanist utopia, we will contemplate the implications of these contrasting beliefs on human ethics, societal values, and the very essence of what it means to be human.

2 Transcendence: The Quest for the Absolute

Transcendence, deeply embedded in the fabric of human existence, reflects our innate yearning to transcend the boundaries of

³ The orthodox hymn of the Resurrection.

⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1997).

our finite nature and to seek something greater, something beyond the tangible realm. At the core of this quest lies man's religious inclination⁵ – a profound desire to connect with the Absolute in order to comprehend the mysteries of existence and to find purpose and meaning in the vastness of the cosmos.

Throughout history and across cultures, the pursuit of transcendence has been an enduring aspect of human life. It emerges from the fundamental questions that have puzzled our minds since time immemorial: Who are we? Why are we here? What lies beyond this life? These questions, fueled by curiosity and an innate spiritual yearning, drive us to seek answers that extend beyond the scope of the material world.

The human quest for transcendence stems from a recognition of our limitations. As mortals, we are bound by the passage of time and the inevitability of death. This awareness of impermanence prompts us to explore realms beyond the physical, seeking solace in the notion of something eternal, something that exists beyond the confines of our earthly existence.

Religion, in its various forms, has been a primary avenue for the pursuit of transcendence. Through rituals, prayers, and contemplation, believers seek to transcend their immediate reality and establish a connection with the divine or the sacred. In this journey, spiritual seekers aim to expand their consciousness and elevate their understanding of the cosmos, finding comfort in the idea of a greater purpose that surpasses the transience of mortal life.

⁵ For this concept see: Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (Harcourt, Inc., 1957); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, (Oxford University Press, 1950); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*. (Harcourt, Inc., 1959).

Within the realm of religious transcendence, Christianity stands as a prominent worldview that has profoundly shaped Western thought and culture. Central to Christian belief is the concept of an omnipotent and transcendent God, the Absolute, who exists beyond the material world. For Christians, God represents the ultimate reality and the source of all creation.

In the Christian tradition, the quest for transcendence involves a deep and personal relationship with God. Through prayer, meditation, and adherence to moral principles, believers strive to draw closer to the divine, seeking wisdom, guidance, and solace. The Christian journey towards transcendence is often depicted as an intimate communion with God, where the boundaries of the self dissolve, and the soul aligns itself with the divine will.⁶

One of the most profound aspects of the Christian perspective on transcendence is the notion of conquering death from within. This idea finds expression in the belief in resurrection and eternal life. Rather than evading or escaping death, Christianity emphasizes facing mortality with courage and hope, trusting in the promise of a life beyond this earthly realm.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians find a model for conquering death. Christ's sacrifice is seen as an embodiment of love and selflessness, illustrating that death can be transcended through a transformation of the soul. The Christian journey toward transcendence involves spiritual growth, a process of becoming more Christ-like and aligning one's life with the divine principles of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia ascetică și mistică ortodoxă*, (Editura Basi-lica a Patriarhiei Române, 2019); Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (SVS Press, 1997); Karl RAHNER, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, (Orbis Books, 2003).

In the book “Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement”,⁷ Ronald Cole-Turner provides an in-depth examination of Christian theology's core principles and their relationship to the concept of transcendence. Ronald Cole-Turner highlights the centrality of hope, resurrection, and the pursuit of the divine Absolute in the Christian understanding of transcendence, showcasing how religious faith drives humanity's yearning for a higher purpose and connection with the divine.

Cole-Turner delves into the idea of transcendence as deeply embedded in religious faith. He highlights how, within the Christian tradition, human beings are drawn to seek a higher purpose and establish a meaningful connection with the divine. Transcendence, according to Christian thought, involves moving beyond the limitations of the material world and embracing a higher spiritual reality.

In Christianity, believers anticipate a future of fulfillment and divine communion. The hope of resurrection is a central tenet, emphasizing the belief in life after death and the promise of eternal life through Christ. This hope of transcending earthly existence and experiencing a renewed spiritual life is closely linked to the concept of transcendence.

In conclusion, the quest for transcendence is an intrinsic aspect of human nature, driven by our religious inclination and the desire to overcome our limitations. In Christianity, this pursuit finds its ultimate expression in the search for God as the Absolute, the conquest of death from within, and the transformative journey towards spiritual growth. As we continue our exploration, we will contrast these perspectives with the emerging ideology of transhumanism and its vision for achieving Utopia

⁷ Ronald Cole-Turner, *Transhumanism and Transcendence...*

through technological means. By juxtaposing these worldviews, we aim to gain deeper insights into the contrasting forces that shape human aspirations and the evolving understanding of what it means to transcend our humanity.

3 Transhumanism: The Shift Towards Utopia

In recent times, a transformative movement known as transhumanism has emerged, redefining the human quest for transcendence through a departure from traditional religious beliefs. Transhumanism envisions a future where humanity harnesses the power of science and technology to transcend the limitations of our biology, ultimately leading to the realization of a utopian society. This radical shift in perspective represents a departure from the pursuit of the Absolute seen in religious traditions, as transhumanists seek to reshape human nature itself through technological advancements.⁸

The roots of transhumanism can be traced back to the 20th century, gaining momentum with the rapid advancement of technology and the exploration of human potential. It challenges the conventional notions of transcendence that are often rooted in religious faith and spiritualism. Instead, transhumanism embraces a humanistic perspective that emphasizes human agency and the potential for self-directed evolution.

⁸ A. E., Buchanan, *Beyond Humanity? The Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement*, (Oxford University Press, 2011); Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, (DIANE Publishing Company, 2005); J. Savulescu, & N. Bostrom, *Human Enhancement Ethics: The State of the Debate*, in J. Savulescu, (R. Ter Meulen, & G. Kahane (Eds.)), *Enhancing Human Capacities*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

Transhumanism holds that humanity's current state is not the final stage of our development but rather a stepping stone towards an enhanced future. By utilizing scientific knowledge, transhumanists seek to overcome the limitations imposed by biology, such as disease, aging, and even mortality. This departure from traditional religious beliefs represents a shift towards a secular and scientific understanding of human potential, where the journey to transcendence is facilitated through tangible progress rather than spiritual revelation.

Central to transhumanism is the concept of Utopia⁹ – a vision of an ideal society where humanity attains unprecedented levels of physical, intellectual, and emotional capabilities. This vision transcends traditional religious notions of an afterlife or an external Absolute, focusing instead on achieving tangible improvements in the here and now. Utopia, in the transhumanist context, is not a distant and abstract concept but rather an achievable reality through the integration of science and technology.

Utopia can be also seen as a religious surrogate due to the shared human yearning for a perfect world, quest for salvation and redemption, pursuit of transcendence, establishment of moral and ethical frameworks, fostering of community and identity, potential for absolutism, faith in progress, and the role of utopian leaders. These parallels highlight how the concept of Utopia fulfills similar functions and aspirations that are traditionally associated with religious beliefs and ideals.¹⁰

⁹ Nick Bostrom, *Letter from Utopia*, 2008. <https://nickbostrom.com/utopia>.

¹⁰ Thomas More, *Utopia*, (Dover Publications, 2001); Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006); Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias*, (Forgotten Books, 2017); Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, (MIT Press, 1995).

Transhumanists envision a world where age-old afflictions are eradicated, where human potential is no longer confined by biology, and where the very nature of what it means to be human undergoes a profound transformation. The pursuit of Utopia in transhumanism seeks to enhance the human experience in ways that extend far beyond the aspirations of religious transcendence. It envisions a future where humanity takes control of its evolution, shaping itself according to its own desires and visions. Transhumanism can be seen as a quest for Utopia and a religious surrogate due to its pursuit of human perfection, technological salvation, and immortality, emphasis on transcendence, the establishment of moral and ethical frameworks, fostering of community and identity, faith in technological progress, and the role of transhumanist leaders. These similarities suggest that Transhumanism fulfills similar functions and aspirations traditionally associated with religious beliefs and the concept of Utopia.

At the heart of transhumanism lies the belief that technology and medicine can serve as potent tools for transfiguring human nature. Advancements in fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and robotics play pivotal roles in this transformative journey. Through genetic engineering, brain-computer interfaces, and regenerative medicine, transhumanists envision the possibility of augmenting human capabilities and extending life indefinitely.¹¹

¹¹ N. Bostrom, *Ethical Issues in Advanced Artificial Intelligence*, in *Science*, 316, 214, pp.1534-1537; Sandberg, A., & Bostrom, N., *Whole Brain Emulation: A Roadmap*. Technical Report 2008-3, (Future of Humanity Institute, Oxford University, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.); R. Sparrow, *Robots, Rape, and Representation*, in *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 3(3), 2008. pp. 279-286; A. R. Wallace, *Transhumanism, Metaphysics, and the Posthuman God*, in *Theology and Science*, 7(2), 2009, pp. 173-192; W. Wallach, & C. Allen, *Moral Machines: Teaching Robots Right from Wrong*, (Oxford University Press, 2009).

The integration of technology with human biology has the potential to enhance cognition, memory, and physical prowess, transcending the limitations that have historically defined the human experience. Moreover, the idea of merging human consciousness with digital systems opens up new avenues for collective intelligence and interconnectedness, envisioning a future where the boundaries between individuals blur, giving rise to a global network of enhanced minds.

In conclusion, transhumanism represents a departure from traditional religious beliefs, offering a secular and scientific pursuit of human potential and utopia. The concept of utopia in transhumanism fulfills functions and aspirations similar to religious beliefs, addressing the human yearning for a perfect world and hope for salvation. Transhumanism envisions a future where science and technology augment human capabilities, leading to a transformative journey that challenges the boundaries of human existence. While distinct from religious frameworks, transhumanism plays a role as a surrogate for the pursuit of transcendence, urging careful consideration of its ethical and philosophical implications as we navigate the possibilities of a technologically enhanced future.

Ultimately, transhumanism challenges humanity to grapple with ethical questions, philosophical implications, and the potential risks that accompany such transformative advancements. The quest for Utopia and the pursuit of transcending human limitations require careful consideration and responsibility, acknowledging the dual role transhumanism plays as both a potential avenue for progress and a substitute for traditional religious aspirations. As we move forward into an age of technological enhancement, it is vital to engage in thoughtful dialogue and critical reflection on the profound impact that transhumanism may have on our individual lives, society, and the very essence of what it means to be human.

4 The Clash of Ideas: Christian vision of Transcendence vs. Transhumanist Utopia

Both worldviews offer distinct visions of human advancement and fulfillment, drawing from different sources of inspiration and driven by unique sets of beliefs and values.

On one hand, Christian transcendence centers on a belief in the divine Absolute, with God as the ultimate source of meaning and purpose. This perspective fosters a deep sense of humility and reverence before a higher power, encouraging a moral framework anchored in the teachings of sacred texts. The notion of conquering death from within through spiritual growth emphasizes the importance of compassion, forgiveness, and selflessness as pathways to personal transformation and communion with the divine.

In contrast, transhumanist utopia draws from a humanistic worldview, placing faith in the potential of science and technology to propel humanity into an era of unprecedented progress. The pursuit of Utopia revolves around the idea of self-directed evolution, where human beings embrace their agency to shape their own destiny. The values of autonomy, scientific inquiry, and the desire for continuous improvement lie at the heart of this ideology, with an emphasis on using knowledge and innovation to conquer human limitations.

The clash between these two ideologies extends beyond theological debates, influencing broader discussions on human identity and purpose. Christian transcendence emphasizes the significance of a higher calling, framing human existence as part of a grand divine plan. This worldview may offer solace and hope in the face of adversity, providing individuals with a sense of purpose and a moral compass to guide their actions.

On the other hand, transhumanist utopia shifts the focus to human potential and the pursuit of self-improvement through technological means. This perspective promotes a future-oriented outlook, where human identity is malleable and open to enhancement. Transhumanism challenges the traditional notions of human limitations and mortality, raising ethical questions about the implications of manipulating the very essence of what it means to be human.

Moreover, these visions also bear implications for societal values. Christian transcendence often fosters a sense of community and interconnectedness, emphasizing empathy and collective responsibility towards others. The pursuit of Utopia in transhumanism, however, may lead to individualistic ambitions, where the quest for self-improvement overshadows communal welfare. The clash of these ideas has implications not only for individuals but also for policy-making, bioethics, and societal structures. How society addresses the balance between technological advancement and preserving human dignity becomes a pivotal concern in light of these divergent worldviews.

In conclusion, the clash of Christian vision of transcendence and transhumanist utopia brings to the forefront contrasting perspectives on human identity, purpose, and societal values. While Christian transcendence draws from religious faith and emphasizes a relationship with the divine, transhumanist utopia places trust in human agency and the potential for scientific progress. The clash of these ideologies requires thoughtful reflection, as it shapes the course of human aspirations and raises essential ethical questions about the impact of technology on our understanding of what it means to be human.

5 The Future of Human Aspirations

As humanity moves forward into an era of rapid technological advancement, the clash between the visions of transcendence and transhumanist utopia raises crucial questions about the future of human aspirations. Both worldviews hold profound implications for the trajectory of our species and the very essence of what it means to be human.

While the pursuit of transcendence has been deeply rooted in religious faith throughout history, transhumanism presents a paradigm shift towards a humanistic and scientific understanding of human potential. The allure of a utopian society achieved through technological enhancement captivates the imagination of many, offering the promise of overcoming age-old afflictions and pushing the boundaries of human capabilities.

However, as we embrace the pursuit of Utopia, we must also consider the potential consequences and ethical dilemmas that accompany such a transformation. The complete artificialization and dehumanization of man through extensive reliance on technology may lead to unforeseen challenges. Dependence on technological enhancements could diminish the significance of the afterlife, as viewed in Christian doctrine, potentially reshaping our understanding of life's purpose and destiny.

Moreover, the pursuit of Utopia may inadvertently lead to the erosion of human autonomy and agency, with technological advancements shaping human nature in ways that challenge our intrinsic identity. It becomes vital to critically examine the ethical implications of transhumanist aspirations and ensure that our pursuit of progress remains grounded in principles that preserve human dignity and respect for the sanctity of life.

The future of human aspirations demands a thoughtful and collaborative dialogue involving stakeholders from diverse backgrounds and disciplines to ensure that technological advancement aligns with the values that define our humanity.

Amid this dynamic interplay between transcendence and transhumanist utopia, humanity stands at a crossroads, grappling with questions of identity, purpose, and the potential for transformation. The path we choose will shape the course of human history, prompting us to weigh the benefits of progress against the preservation of our fundamental human essence.

Ultimately, our shared endeavor should be guided by a reverence for life and a dedication to addressing the profound ethical challenges that come hand in hand with the quest for transcendence and the pursuit of Utopia. As we look towards the future, we must remain mindful of the delicate balance between harnessing the power of technology to enhance human existence and preserving the values that define us as beings imbued with both reason and spirit.

In conclusion, the future of human aspirations lies at the crossroads of transcendent spirituality and transformative technology. While Christian vision of transcendence and transhumanist utopia present contrasting worldviews, they share the common theme of human yearning for progress and fulfillment.

Conclusion

In summary, this article delves into the intrinsic connection between the human quest for transcendence and the emerging ideology of transhumanist utopia. Both concepts are rooted in humanity's innate religious inclination and desire to overcome limitations, but they differ in their ultimate targets and approaches.

Christian transcendence centers on the pursuit of the Absolute, with God as the ultimate source of meaning and purpose. It involves an internal struggle and spiritual growth, aiming for eternal life with God in the Kingdom of God. This religious quest for transcendence emphasizes facing mortality with hope and courage, viewing death not as an end but as a gateway to a higher existence.

On the other hand, transhumanism represents a shift away from the transcendent and toward the pursuit of Utopia through technological advancement. It envisions a future where science and technology augment human capabilities, aiming to eliminate human limitations such as disease, aging, and even mortality. Transhumanist utopia is a secular and humanistic vision driven by the belief in human agency and the potential for self-directed evolution.

The clash of these perspectives goes beyond theological debates and influences broader discussions on human identity, purpose, ethics, and societal values. Christian transcendence fosters humility, reverence, and interconnectedness, while transhumanist utopia may raise concerns about individualism and the potential dehumanization of humanity.

As humanity faces the future of rapid technological advancement, it is crucial to engage in thoughtful dialogue and reflection on the implications of these contrasting visions. Ethical considerations and the preservation of human dignity must accompany the pursuit of progress and the integration of technology into human life.

Ultimately, the future of human aspirations lies in striking a balance between the pursuit of transcendence and the responsible advancement of technology. By acknowledging the shared human yearning for progress and fulfillment, while respecting the values that define our humanity, we can navigate the complexities of the human condition and shape a future that serves the

common good. As we embrace technological enhancement, let us be guided by a reverence for life and an unwavering commitment to preserving the essence of what it truly means to be human.

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