ATTAINING TRANSCENDENCE: TRANSHUMANISM, THE BODY, AND THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

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The last thirty years have seen the growth of biotechnologies which are offering the promise of new kinds of medical treatments for improving human performance. While many biotechnologies are in their nascent stage they reflect human concern with human decline and the loss of cognitive abilities due to trauma and ageing. The advent and growth of new biotechnologies such as genetic engineering and recombinant DNA, nanotechnology and information technology have impressed global audiences. These new technologies promise a new world which will alleviate human suffering and improve and augment human capacities. Genetic engineering, for example, has in the past ten years created recombinant animals which contain the DNA of human beings. These new technologies may pose challenging questions for the Abrahamic religions. Therefore, this chapter examines the similarities and differences between the Abrahamic religions and the growing movement of transhumanism which views new biotechnologies in a positive light.

Where are the Abrahamic religions located in relation to transhumanism? I contend that both the Abrahamic religions and transhumanism describe varying notions of the human body which are comparable. I also argue that for the Abrahamic religions and transhumanism the body is an instrument and a means of spiritual transformation. My position is informed by Cox1 who views the body as an aspect which connects the material and immaterial elements of human beings. The first section provides an overview to transhumanism and provides the backdrop for the next sections which offer a comparable analysis of the Abrahamic religions and transhumanism. Three areas of analysis are explored in relation to the body; body techniques and enhancement, the body and natural order, and becoming Godlike. While this analysis is not exhaustive it identifies points of ideological meeting between the Abrahamic religions and transhumanism in relation to the body.

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Transhumanism: An Overview

An interesting philosophical offshoot of the new biotechnologies has been the increasing popularity of transhumanism in the Western world. Transhumanism is a school of thought which contends that future humans will be radically different due to technological forays into the human body and brain. Transhumanists view the future world as a “process of evolutionary complexification toward evermore complex structures, forms and operations”.\(^2\) According to noted transhumanists such a Ray Kurzweil, Nick Bostrum, Gregory Stock and Simon Young, current human cognitive and physical capacities are limited due to evolution. The futurist artist Stellarc goes so far as to claim that the human body is obsolete and weak and needing revamping via new technologies. Various transhumanists view the body as susceptible to malfunction, fatigue, disease and ageing. In other words, humans are prisoners to their bodies due to their inherited limitations. What the transhumanist foresees is a future in which the human body shall transcend its biological constraints and be enhanced via genetic and molecular engineering, cybernetics and nanotechnology. The transhumanist movement towards body enhancement may also be viewed as the ancient human drive to alter and improve upon the human form. Many societies, both ancient and modern, have engaged in various body altering techniques in order to improve its physical performance.\(^3\)

For example, Hindu, Buddhist and Sufi practitioners use meditational techniques known as pranayana and fikr in order to improve heightened states of awareness. These techniques are alleged to have various benefits such as improving physical and mental well-being. Long-term benefits of meditation may include heightened awareness, improved sense of comfort and a shift in experiencing self.\(^4\) For example, according to Cahn and Polich neuroimaging studies indicate that meditation may trigger changes to the anterior cingulate cortex and dorsolateral prefrontal areas.

Some transhumanists believe that by 2030 technology will reach a singularity point which will spur a new generation of ‘super’ technologies. The singularity is a point whereby old paradigms are discarded for

