

7

Human Dignity and the Future of Man

Charles Rubin

We are accustomed to the fact that modern science and technology allow people to lead healthier, wealthier and even happier lives by reducing disease and disability and opening up new opportunities for thought and action. Furthermore, we expect the future to look like the past in this respect, perhaps even more so as our knowledge of nature expands. So it is hardly surprising to find that expected advances in biotechnology focus on gene therapies to correct heritable defects,¹ or that nanotechnology promises tiny machines that could monitor our health or repair cell damage from the inside,² or that artificial intelligence and robotics are being developed to enhance the mobility of those with missing or non-functioning limbs.³ What is surprising is that, in some quarters, speculation about the uses of these technologies embraces the ardent hope that human beings will soon arrange to replace themselves with a vastly improved “Mark II” version. Even a healthy human being, these enthusiasts reason, is subject to all kinds of limits that we can imagine overcoming. Why be satisfied with senses that perceive in the limited range of our own?⁴ Why accept that we must sleep, eat and excrete as we now do?⁵ Why be content with the clumsy media of spoken or written language for learning and for the exchange of our thoughts?⁶ Why

not be fully happy all the time rather than intermittently and imperfectly?⁷ Why not become a computer program that could travel the stars at the speed of light?⁸ Why ever die?⁹

For a small but growing number of writers and thinkers—who refer to themselves as transhumanists,¹⁰ extropians,¹¹ or singularitarians,¹²—the answers to these questions are more or less obvious, and the solutions are to be found in future science and technology. They do not see themselves as idle day-dreamers; for they believe that the force of necessity stands behind their hopes for self-directed evolution to some better form of life not subject to present limitations. They claim that our ever-increasing knowledge of how nature works puts us on a very slippery slope. The nanotechnology that might be used to repair a damaged eye, or the robotics that might replace a lost limb, could just as readily be used to enhance our vision or increase our strength beyond “normal.” And a technology that can be used to enhance an existing capacity will likely add entirely new abilities.¹³ Thus, human beings are on the verge of a “transhuman” transformation that will, because of the ever-accelerating rate of technological development, at no greatly distant date lead us to a “post-human” future in which intelligence far beyond our own will be embodied in forms we can barely begin to imagine. Perhaps minds will one day be downloaded as “software” into far more durable, flexible and capable machines.¹⁴ Perhaps future lives will be lived in virtual realities, or in hybrid realms where the distinction between “virtual” and “real” will have become meaningless.¹⁵ Some day the individual consciousnesses of our “mind children” may be able to mix and meld, even with the consciousnesses of other animals, into a group mind.¹⁶ The search for ever greater computational power could lead our descendants to overcome the speed of light in order to “saturate the universe with our intelligence.”¹⁷ They might use a neutron star as an “immense simulator” modeling Earth at the atomic scale, able to run its history backward and forward, providing for “wholesale resurrection” of the “long dead.”¹⁸ If human beings as we know them survive at all in this new world—and it is hard to say why we would, given the wonders that are held up before us if we consent to abandon our mere humanity—it will be as mere epigones and curiosities.

In the face of these thinkers’ fantastic hopes and visions of the future, it might appear that a notion of “human dignity” would

prove useful in restraining their excesses and bringing their most extravagant thinking back down to earth. Yet, interestingly, the transhumanists themselves claim to be friends and defenders of human dignity—at least as they understand it. But the more seriously we take their conception of human dignity, the more problematic it becomes. On the other hand, as we shall see, its very defects point the way to something more solid. Let us therefore examine the transhumanist conception of human dignity: where it comes from and where it leads; how it undermines itself; and what sounder notion of dignity emerges from the wreckage.

I

First of all, the transhumanist advocates of *de facto* human extinction follow the lead of thinkers like Bacon and Descartes in believing themselves to be the true defenders of human dignity against all the indignities imposed on us by the naturally given: disease, deprivation, decay, and death. They see the story of humanity as the triumphant tale of an organism unwilling to accept these limitations on their own terms and progressively gaining greater power to confront and eventually overcome them. We are, on their view, the resourceful beings who can become ever increasingly the masters and possessors of nature, including our own nature. We are consummate problem solvers who have come to understand how much better things would have been if someone had asked *us* how they should be arranged, and who can solve the ultimate problem of our own defective natures.¹⁹

From this point of view, rectifying the flaws in our design is simply the next logical step in what human beings as such have always done. Indeed, it is precisely this rejection of resignation, this capacity for perpetual problem-solving and self-overcoming, that makes human beings worthy of respect in the first place, that gives us our *dignity*. For otherwise, we are no more deserving of dignity than any other randomly evolved living configuration of matter that has come down the pike.

A certain kind of skeptic might answer that to introduce any moral valuation into this description of what we are—to reason from the fact that we *are* beings who can take charge of our own destiny to the conclusion that we *should* do so, and that our dignity *consists*

in our doing so—would be to violate the distinction between facts and values, one of the bedrock assumptions of modern natural science and of much contemporary moral philosophy. In a universe of matter, motion and chance, one is not permitted to derive an “ought” from an “is”; put simply, there is no such thing as natural right. But transhumanism has an answer of sorts to this scruple. For in demonstrating our worth by using our intelligence to improve on nature, we introduce conscious purpose into a universe that was formed without it. The brute facts of randomly configured nature thus give way before the values imposed on matter by intellect, and through science we make the “is” into what it “ought” to be.

It is important to understand that the universe thus remanufactured would be unlikely to strike any human being presently alive as more comprehensibly good or right than that in which we live today, if only because it would be so totally alien to anything we know. To their credit, the transhumanists acknowledge this point. For many of them, the transformation to posthumanity represents a huge discontinuity, a historical “singularity.”* The capacities of our posthuman, self-optimizing successors will exceed our own by orders of magnitude comparable to the gulf between humans and bacteria. It follows that present humanity would be as incapable of comprehending the posthuman world of the future as bacteria are of comprehending ours.^{20†}

It appears, then, that while in the near term transhumanists are content to rely on technology to make our lives better in ways that conform to our all too human desires, for the longer term the

* Vernor Vinge is usually credited with this insight. His presentation of it differs significantly from the manner of presentation by Kurzweil, e.g., in his recognition that for humans the outcome could be “...pretty bad. The physical extinction of the human race is one possibility.... Yet physical extinction may not be the scariest possibility. Again, analogies: Think of the different ways we relate to animals. Some of the crude physical abuses are implausible, yet....” Vernor Vinge, “Vernor Vinge on the Singularity” (1993), online at www.mindstalk.net/vinge/vinge-sing.html.

† Vinge, for his part, thinks the singularity may not be so incomprehensible; a posthuman world “could well be still comprehensible to a broad-minded human with enough time and desire to learn.” Yet he makes the significant qualification that “there could be things our minds aren’t big enough to grasp, ideas we don’t have the memory to hold the parts of; there could be Powers capable of thinking faster than we do.” That surely suggests effective incomprehensibility so long as humans are mortal and limited as they presently are. See www.mindstalk.net/vinge/antising.html.

extraordinary good to be achieved by the transformation of ourselves and our world must be taken more or less on faith.* That might sound reassuring to those who expect that, over the next years and decades, technological advances will continue to ease our lot without radically altering our nature. For them it is enough to know that we are steadily curing more illnesses, or growing more wheat per acre, or extracting more miles per gallon. From this pragmatic point of view, the propensity to speculate about distant prospects will make any discussion of transhumanist radicalism seem like a harmless (though useless) diversion.

But once the transhumanist challenge has been laid down and the road to posthumanity marked out, what is the ground for dismissing it in this way? To assert now that we know what will be technologically impossible in the future is a well-recognized fool's argument. To ignore what look like distant and unlikely prospects ("sufficient unto the day...") is to risk *assuming* that the transhumanists are wrong. But the transhumanists will reply that the accelerating rate of technological change could well mean that their desired future is less distant than it seems,[†] and they may well be right. More important, those who too hastily dismiss the transhumanist agenda run the risk of *assuming* that the transhumanists are wrong about the slippery slope that runs from therapy to enhancement to transformation of human nature. It may be naïve to assume that, in the absence of scientific/technical "stopping points" along the way, there will be moral ones to restrain us in our march toward self-reinvention.

* Contrary to Kurzweil, e.g., who claims that "being a Singularitarian is not a matter of faith but one of understanding" (Kurzweil, *Singularity*, 370, full citation in endnote 12 below). What the Singularitarian understands is that it is "our destiny now to evolve into the vast intelligence of the Singularity" (Kurzweil, op. cit., p. 298). A great deal of effort is made to show how the development of posthumanity is necessary by those who also regard it as highly desirable. Such arguments, and their persuasive power, are well presented in Joel Garreau, *Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies—and What it Means to be Human* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

† The point of Garreau's "the Curve" (Garreau, op. cit., pp. 47-77) and of Kurzweil's "Law of Accelerating Returns" (Kurzweil, op. cit., pp. 7-14) is that the speed of technological development is increasing exponentially; new technology allows the next generation to develop that much faster. So, for example, by 2030 Kurzweil expects totally immersive virtual realities, brains enhanced by nanobots, and direct sharing of sensory experience.

There is in fact no guarantee that any moral considerations restraining present-day technological development will hold sway in the future—all the more so given already powerful intellectual trends that deny the very possibility of rational moral judgment in the first place.²¹ Even today the warning signs are apparent; there is already powerful and growing resistance to any attempt to direct and restrict science and technology “on moral grounds.” Beyond that, the transhumanists catch a glimpse of something that the pragmatically-minded observer of the scientific scene is likely to miss. The transhumanists have fully assimilated the lesson of J. B. S. Haldane’s reading of the moral meaning of technological progress in his famous 1923 essay, “Daedalus, or Science and the Future.” Haldane’s Nietzschean lesson can be summed up simply: Science creates new moral orders as it enlarges our capacities for thought and action; when it comes to discoveries and inventions, what starts as perversion ends as ritual. But science is also inherently destructive of those new moral orders as well, always pushing beyond to some new possibility.²²

This argument may well prove wrong, but it is far from simple to refute. Neither is it terribly alien to the relativism that is practically the default mode of moral belief for a great many educated Westerners. This relativism, allied with the commercial, military and intellectual forces that so effectively drive technological development today, makes saying “no” to any new thing very difficult. So the fact that the transhumanists are openly agitating for the extinction and supersession of the present human species may be just the sort of thing that could spur a search for clarity about the real meaning of “human dignity.” Otherwise—just as the transhumanists expect—there are so many good and enticing things to be achieved on the road to post-humanity, including longer, healthier, wealthier lives filled with undreamt-of opportunities and choices, that merely by allowing people the freedom to do as they please we may pave the way to a redesigned humanity without ever directly intending to.²³

We have seen so far how—by defining human dignity in terms of ceaseless self-overcoming—the transhumanists open the door to an incomprehensible human future. In so doing, they deprive the term “dignity” of any determinate moral meaning. Nevertheless, the conjectured “happiness” of our descendants proves serviceable to the transhumanists for cultivating a low opinion of human beings as we

now are. If (they assure us) there were all that much to be said for humanity “Mark I,” their advocacy of our obsolescence would be far less vociferous. But, as Nick Bostrom informs us,

Nature’s gifts are sometimes poisoned and should not always be accepted. Cancer, malaria, dementia, aging, starvation, unnecessary suffering, cognitive shortcomings are all among the presents that we wisely refuse. Our own species-specified natures are a rich source of much of the thoroughly unrespectable and unacceptable—susceptibility for disease, murder, rape, genocide, cheating, torture, racism.²⁴

Given the many flaws and vulnerabilities of man as we know him, were we to fail to strive or fail in our striving to escape our plight and overcome our defective nature, we would eventually be squashed like bugs, in some sense deservedly, by some random cosmic catastrophe like a stray comet hitting Earth, or by the self-destructive human behaviors rooted in our own outmoded evolutionary design. There is no God-created or God-supported providential order. Blind nature does not care for our well-being and did not make us perfect for all time; the very forces of nature that gave rise to us will eventually destroy us.

So the transhumanist conception of human dignity that takes its bearings from what we can be goes hand in hand with a contemptuous attitude toward what we actually are. School children have long been instructed as to the modest value of the heap of chemicals that make up our body; pound for pound we are worth far less than many varieties of inanimate matter (never mind that we are the ones doing the valuing). More recently they have also been enlightened as to just how much DNA we share with chimps or even frogs, so as to inculcate the lesson that we are not so different from other living things, despite what prideful “species-ism” might tell us. The transhumanists would no doubt applaud such lessons pointing out the commonness and ordinariness of human nature, for they are merely the flip side of their view that the core of dignity is the rebellion against nature. But the conviction that there is nothing special about man threatens to make all our supposedly dignified striving look merely like boastfulness and species self-deception. Give bacteria the right medium, and their numbers

will expand too. Viewed from the outside, what human civilizations do is really not that different from what invasive living things do whenever they are given a chance, that is to say, modify and adapt to their environments so as to produce ever more favorable conditions for expanding numbers. Nor should that thought surprise us, as it is but a consequence of the “decentering” of humanity in the cosmic scheme of things that played such a central part in the development of modern science. Compare Alan Gregg’s famous speculation (in 1955) that “The world has cancer and the cancer is man”²⁵ with Haldane’s yet earlier remark (in 1927) that “At worst our earth is only a very small septic area in the universe, which could be sterilized without very great trouble, and conceivably is not even worth sterilizing.”²⁶ Essentially the same thought is to be found in the recent film *The Matrix* (1999), where Agent Smith describes the human race as a virus, a disease, a cancer of the planet.*

In this way, the logic of the new transhumanist dignity turns back on itself. Are we uniquely striving, or are we merely typically invasive? What does it mean to say that our dignity resides in the fact that by nature we strive to overcome our nature? What seems to come through most clearly is that the misery of what we are should drive us to be something else. Or to put it another way, the human dignity defended by advocates of scientific and technological transcendence is a cattle-prod humanitarianism that has contempt for what we are in the name of the unfathomable things we could become.

II

The new transhumanist dignity arises first and foremost from self-conscious negation. That marks it off quite clearly from older meanings

* Agent Smith: “I’d like to share a revelation I had, during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species. I realized that you’re not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment, but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply until every natural resource is consumed. The only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. And we are the cure.” *The Matrix* (directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros. and Village Roadshow Pictures, 1999).

of dignity, which revolved around affirmations of what was owed to particular kinds or classes of human beings. One had dignity if one was of “the dignity,” one of the usually small class whose conventional or natural distinction from others made them worthy of due regard or respect from others and of honor from their own. At first glance, the new transhumanist dignity follows in the democratic footsteps already suggested by the very phrase “human dignity,” which surely would have sounded paradoxical to those who believed their dignity set them apart from everyone else. Evidently the hoped-for truth that human beings as such possess dignity is not *immediately* evident to human beings as such. It is perhaps conceptually easiest to overcome the aristocratic origins of dignity if “human dignity” comes to be understood as a revealed truth about God’s equal regard for all human beings. Alternatively, one can have recourse to a notion of dignity built on certain inalienable rights that we possess by nature. But for reasons already articulated, neither of these sources of inherent human dignity (God or nature) is available to the transhumanist.

Is there a transhumanist foundation for democratized dignity? Actually, there is more reason to suspect that transhuman dignity is in some loose sense aristocratic in the older fashion. In the future, “the dignity” will be the enhanced and the redesigned, and any mere unimproved humans who manage to remain will likely be treated with pity and condescension.* Indeed, for some transhumanists, humanity’s ability to reconstruct itself introduces a new kind of *noblesse oblige*. The dignity of self-creation requires us to strive to expand the circle of those freed from the misery and unhappiness of natural contingency, including not only our fellow humans but also members of animal species not hitherto endowed with dignity at all. For these transhumanists who have taken philanthropy to the next level, we have a moral obligation to engage in “uplift” efforts, at least to free other animals from fear and deprivation, and perhaps even to redesign them in such a way as to place them on the path of infinite self-improvement.²⁷

* See Garreau’s account of what it may be like for a second grader of today to go to law school in fifteen years with “enhanced” fellow students: “Her new friends are polite when she can’t keep up with their conversations, as if she were handicapped. They can’t help but condescend to her, however, when she protests that embedded technology is not natural for humans.” Garreau, *Radical Evolution*, p. 8.

Nevertheless, despite this sense of obligation to enhance the dignity of their fellows, both within the human race and beyond, the transhumanists are reluctant to own up forthrightly to aspirations to become elite and beneficent supermen; much of their rhetoric is devoted to establishing their democratic credentials. The effort is largely, though not completely, successful because of their wholehearted adoption of the democratic principle of “doing as you like.” If creative self-overcoming is the source of our dignity, there will be an infinite variety of ways to be dignified. There are no absolute standards governing what one’s given nature is to be replaced by. News reports of a recent transhumanist gathering featured an individual who calls himself Cat Man. By the crude methods now available, he has been tattooed and surgically altered so as to vaguely resemble a cat; he is evidently on the lookout for a workable tail.²⁸ If Cat Man is dignified, then Dog Man and Deer Man can hardly be far behind. We see in transhumanism the libertarian relativism that follows naturally from this obsession with freedom (or that prompts it), where the spirit of enhancement and modification is essentially “anything goes” so long as it is freely chosen (some would add “and safe and effective”). Nobody is to be forced to be enhanced, nobody is to be forced not to be enhanced.²⁹ Individual choice—mere will—is the final arbiter, with due deference to the liberal principle of not harming others (at least against their wills).

So the worth of an individual is shown in the perpetual overcoming of the self in whatever manner the self wishes, a paradoxical position likely to result either in restless dissatisfaction or principled unhappiness. Furthermore, more is at stake than literal “self” overcoming. As it is undignified to accept what nature produces by chance, it is crucial to the transhumanist agenda that parents be encouraged to design their own children genetically. If it remains an open question whether the children, like their parents presumably contemptuous of the given, will be grateful to their parents for designing them, at least they will at some point be able to exercise their own powers of reconstruction, if the transhumanists have their way. Then again, perhaps those who want to design their progeny will look for someone more tractable.

And yet there is also a deeper paradox here, for the modern scientific materialism on which the hopes of these transformations depend

is hard to enlist in the cause of “free choice.” We are, they tell us, bound by the same natural laws that bind all other matter. The brain is a very complex computation machine, but a machine nonetheless. While there are scientists who attempt to find room in the interstices of physics for freedom,³⁰ it is hard to see how transhumanists—committed as they are to materialism—can see freedom and even self-consciousness as anything other than “user illusion.”³¹ Some indeed explicitly call into question the existence of a core, choosing “self.”³² From this point of view, the dignity owed to an individual consists in the exercise of a free choice that is likely not free, in order to negate and refashion a self that is likely not a self.

So even as the transhumanist vision of dignity envisages an ever-ascending chain of self-overcoming beings that suggests a new aristocratic order, it also fragments our sense of self and splinters the human race into a multitude of isolated self-overcomers, lest a shared choice not appear to be my authentic expression of self-overcoming. That is a significant departure from the old understanding of dignity, aristocratic or democratic, which expressed and embodied dignity in actual public and private relations. The act of negation from which the new transhumanist dignity arises comes from an impulse that is entirely aspirational. In technologized and democratized form, the dignity that is sought characterizes no real persons or relationships, but rather is based on imaginative negation of the characteristics of real persons and relationships. While dignity in this sense certainly avoids the danger of becoming a source of inertia in ossified or even oppressive social and political systems, the price of being so progressive is that it can never flourish comfortably in any enduring here and now.

Which is presumably the point, given that there is, according to the transhumanists, so little of value in the actual here and now. But we are again forced to conclude that the new transhumanist dignity is in effect nothing more than a leap of faith. Transhumanists would deny that, of course, pointing out that human ingenuity in the past has often solved problems once thought insurmountable. Were it not so, we would “still be picking lice off each other’s backs.”³³ Yet, while transhumanists are only too happy to provide reassurance that their critics are presenting nothing but imaginary horrors, their future of unknowable posthuman dignity can hardly even be said

to be grounded in imagination. (Indeed, there is a body of transhumanist criticism of *merely* imaginative science fiction visions of the future such as *Star Trek*.³⁴) For, unlike serious fiction writers, the transhumanists want to dismiss inconvenient lessons of experience or history that might restrain speculative hopes about novel technical possibilities. That is why, contrary to its intention, the vision of the future inherent in the new transhumanist dignity cannot genuinely be called progressive. We can judge something as progress when it brings us closer to some goal, but transhumanism at the deepest level is goal-less. Hence it can really promise only change.

III

The new transhumanist dignity starts from an important question. What does it mean that human beings can engage in self-overcoming as a species and as individuals? And it is certainly not wrong in that connection to question the beneficence of the naturally given. But a notion of dignity whose default mode is to negate whatever is present in the name of an unspecifiable future is not really attempting serious answers to these questions. What we have found to be *missing* from the new transhumanist dignity, however, suggests an outlook on human dignity that could support serious reflection to counterbalance the inhuman possibilities inherent in the relentless march of science and technology. Such serious reflection would provide a basis for addressing whether the undoubted changes the future holds for us can be called genuine progress, and not merely change.

As we have seen, the new transhumanist dignity is minimally concerned with moral judgment of what people do with themselves, or how they do it, judging instead according to what transcends the given and what does not. But human dignity ought in fact to be a term of finer discrimination, requiring that people be treated in accordance with *what is due to them*. When we deny the moral relevance of the conventional distinctions that in aristocratic ages marked out “the dignity,” we readily fall into the trap of denying the moral relevance of any and all observable distinctions among human beings. The recognition that such a thing as “human dignity” exists, however, ought to imply that *as human beings* we deserve to be given *our*

due—and that is, as any reader of *Charlotte's Web* knows, something not routinely extended to other animals. Human dignity implies that we are morally responsible beings, worthy of judging what others do and are, and of being judged for what we do and are. Thus the equal possession of dignity by human beings provides the opportunity for moral discrimination among them. Accordingly, for human beings, the recognition of equal dignity does not have the same result as love. Doubtless there is something owed to people simply in light of their being human, but beyond that minimum some actions and choices are more worthy of regard, more dignified, than others. For example, people who expose and revel in their disgraceful secrets on television are not so worthy of our regard, are not as dignified or honorable, as are quiet benefactors of mankind.

To speak of things like honor, regard, and dignity in this way may seem to some at best anachronistic and at worst repressive. In our time, entirely apart from any transhumanist aspirations, there are well-meaning people in the comfortable circumstances of post-industrial liberal democracies who—while acknowledging the social pathologies of our easygoing culture—are afraid that holding people to our moral standards would be a remedy worse than the disease. We don't want to "impose our views on others," we seek to be "open-minded." This misplaced (and likely inconsistent) reticence is the main practical challenge that any notion of human dignity that goes beyond mutual, nonjudgmental niceness will have to face.

Such skeptics need to be reminded that taking human freedom and dignity seriously is perfectly consistent with laws, rights, customs and norms, religious or otherwise, that constrain the *consequences* of individual or collective judgments of moral behavior. Individual, social or legal disapproval of something as dishonorable does not automatically mean tyrannical repression. Furthermore, between the obvious extremes of self-debasement and greatness of soul, there will often enough be vigorous debate about the virtues and vices that define dignified and undignified behavior—which is just as it should be in a diverse modern society. But for human dignity to be meaningful, this debate will also have to be understood to be meaningful, not just the expression of incommensurable preferences or tastes. Finally, in the manner of the "natural aristocracy" that Jefferson hoped would arise under democratic conditions, the dignity owed to individuals

is not to be defined by some class characteristic shared automatically by every member of the group. We may consider human beings to be of equal dignity by birth, and yet still believe that by action and accomplishment some are more honorable than others.

In the second place, as human dignity ought to be grounded in an understanding of what is owed to us as human beings and as individuals, it must be framed by what we essentially are as human beings. Human beings living as they ought, thought Aristotle, are neither beasts nor gods.³⁵ We are, the Psalmist says, a little lower than the angels;³⁶ and with the proposition that men are not angels the authors of *The Federalist Papers* are in agreement,³⁷ without boasting in Kantian fashion that they have built a political system that will work perfectly well for a population of devils.³⁸ However one wishes to understand the metaphysics of such various statements of “human in-betweenness,” they can be taken to point to human dignity as properly residing in a realm between the best and worst that we can imagine of ourselves. As much as it may be part of being human to aspire nobly to transcend this middling state, the honest truth about such transcendence, whether in traditional religious form or in scientific transhuman form, is that at a certain point it “passeth understanding.”

With such limits in mind, we can still hope for and strive for better. But we will also avoid that contempt for what we are that results from thinking that we *know* something far better to be possible (when in fact we can only have faith in it). Human dignity ought to be humanly understandable, at any rate, and conformable to the limited capacities of imperfect beings. Here again, we brush up against the controversial question of how to shape a life that makes the most of the limits, strengths, and weaknesses that define us. But, as the ability to use speech or reason to engage in such controversy is part of what makes us human, to engage in it is far more an expression of human dignity than to avoid it through the dogmatic belief that anything goes.

That human dignity needs to be understood in terms of giving people their due already strongly suggests that it is relational, unlike the isolating exercise of the will that characterizes the new transhumanist dignity. To put it another way, while human dignity requires a moment of freedom with respect to our ability to make

moral choices, that moment is mediated through real relations, institutions, customs and mores, and we may judge such things by their success or failure at promoting proper regard for one another. Of necessity these relationships will vary from close to distant, but as such they moderate the pretentiousness of notions of “human dignity” which begin and end with concerns for the fate of the “human species” as such. While the rubric of human dignity does call forth some attention to this highest level of generality, for that realm to be its sole expression risks the impotent abstraction of the “telescopic philanthropy” so well illustrated by the character of Mrs. Jellyby in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, whose unsuccessful efforts on behalf of those far away made her oblivious to the needs of her own family.

This embodiment of human dignity in real relations does not have to be comprehensive, let alone (as some transhumanists claim) totalitarian, in order to be meaningful.³⁹ We can expect that there will be outliers, deviants, criminals, and creative envelope-pushers of all stripes who will not conform to the culturally, politically, socially, and legally expressed common judgments of human dignity. Cat Man can be permitted to be Cat Man without having to be respected *for being Cat Man*; we can tolerate him while pitying his self-defacing self-promotion. This tolerance is worth preserving, since it expresses that aspect of human dignity, which is found in freedom. In fact, human dignity properly understood will doubtless provide ample grounds for concerns about hypocrisy, properly understood as the tribute vice plays to virtue. But knowing in advance that people will break boundaries does not mean that the effort to contain their influence should be abandoned, any more than the fact that people continue to kill each other invalidates, in principle or practice, our many efforts against homicide.⁴⁰

That real human dignity involves judgment and relationships is the source of the most powerful argument against it. For by being relational, the door is open for dignity to be based on how people seem to be rather than how they actually are; and because it involves judgment, dignity may be accorded to qualities that do not in fact deserve to be honored. To “solve” these problems by reconstructing dignity so that it involves neither judgment nor relation, however, is to throw out the baby with the bath water. Instead, acknowledging the problematic status of human dignity is part and parcel of

understanding the human limits within which it must operate (e.g., that we do poorly at seeing into the hearts of others and even into our own) and the human possibilities on which it builds (e.g., that we can deliberate about the noble and the base).

This richer characterization of human dignity can at best begin to counterbalance, and certainly not cure, all the problems and perils that our increasing power over nature will create. Doubtless the world 200 or 2,000 years hence will be at least as different from our own as ours is from the world of 200 or 2,000 years ago. If history is any guide, that world will be more dangerous in some respects, less dangerous in others; some possibilities will have widened, others narrowed. In some realms, the changes over these past centuries might well be called a progressive enhancement of human dignity, while in others change has come at a terrible cost. Human dignity in the terms suggested here is a way of thinking toward a future that, however different, will likely exhibit some of the same morally unsettled continuity. We can look back 200 years, or 2,000 years, and still see a human world, a world of people whose actions and motivations, pleasures and pains, triumphs and tragedies are recognizably akin to our own. Human dignity properly conceived may help us make choices that will mold a future in which the fundamental things still apply.*

* The author thanks the Scaife Foundation, which supported the leave during which this essay was written, and Adam Schulman and Leslie Rubin for their substantive and editorial advice.

Notes

- ¹ *Engineering the Human Germline*, ed. Gregory Stock and John Campbell (New York: Oxford University press, 2000).
- ² K. Eric Drexler, *Engines of Creation: The Coming Era of Nanotechnology* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), pp. 104-116.
- ³ David Brown, "Bionic Woman Grabs the Future: Controls Artificial Arm by Thoughts," *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 15, 2006, p. A-3.
- ⁴ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 221.
- ⁵ Simon Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2006), p. 28.
- ⁶ Ramez Naam, *More Than Human: Embracing the Promise of Biological Enhancement* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), pp. 189-205.
- ⁷ David Pearce, "The Hedonistic Imperative," online at www.hedweb.com/hedethic/hedonist.htm.
- ⁸ Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 114-121.
- ⁹ Moravec, loc. cit.
- ¹⁰ Nick Bostrom, "The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction (Version 2.1)," online at www.transhumanism.org/resources/FAQv21.pdf.
- ¹¹ Max More, "Principles of Extropy Version 3.11" (2003), online at www.extropy.org/principles.htm.
- ¹² Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 369.
- ¹³ See, for example, Naam, op. cit., pp. 2-3.
- ¹⁴ Moravec, op. cit., pp. 107-108.
- ¹⁵ Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, p. 240.
- ¹⁶ Moravec, op. cit., pp. 115-116.
- ¹⁷ Kurzweil, *Singularity*, pp. 356-366.
- ¹⁸ Moravec, op. cit., pp. 122-123.
- ¹⁹ Kurzweil, *Singularity*, pp. 1-5; Young, op. cit., pp. 27-29; Nick Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values" (2003), section 2, online at www.transhumanism.org/index.php/WTA/more/transhumanist-values/.
- ²⁰ The analogy is to be found in Kurzweil, *Singularity*, pp. 297-298.
- ²¹ Han Jonas, "Technology and Responsibility: Reflections on the New Tasks of Ethics," in *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 18.
- ²² J. B. S. Haldane, "Daedalus, or Science and the Future," in Krishna R. Dronamraju, ed., *Haldane's Daedalus Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 23-50.
- ²³ Naam, op. cit., pp. 3-9; Young, op. cit., pp. 66, 251, 294.
- ²⁴ Nick Bostrom, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity," online at www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity.html. Also published in *Bioethics* 19 (2005): 202-214.

²⁵ Alan Gregg, "A Medical Aspect of the Population Problem," *Science* 121 (1955): 681-682, p. 682.

²⁶ J. B. S. Haldane, "The Last Judgment," in *Possible Worlds* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p. 288.

²⁷ David Pearce, "Hedonistic Imperative," Chapter 4, Objection 29, online at www.hedweb.com/hedethic/hedon4.htm.

²⁸ Wesley J. Smith, "The Catman Cometh: Among the Transhumanists," *The Weekly Standard*, June 26, 2006, p. 20.

²⁹ One finds degrees of libertarianism among transhumanists. Compare, for example, the account in Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-295, with James Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Westview Press, 2004), pp. 164-180. Kurzweil charmingly notes that in any case those who choose enhancement will inherit the Earth, as those who reject it die off. See Kurzweil, *Singularity*, p. 322.

³⁰ See for example, Steven Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science* (Champaign, Illinois: Wolfram Media, 2002), pp. 750-753, or Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose, "Orchestrated Objective Reduction of Quantum Coherence in Brain Microtubules: The 'Orch OR' Model for Consciousness" (1996), online at www.quantumconsciousness.org/penrose-hameroff/orchOR.html.

³¹ Tor Norretranders, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

³² Naam, *op. cit.*, p. 59. This problem is not unique to transhumanism and is arguably an inevitable consequence of the way modern natural science understands human beings. See Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³³ Bostrom, "Posthuman Dignity," p. 205.

³⁴ Nick Bostrom, "The Transhumanist FAQ." See also Chris Wren, "Star Trek's Greatest Weakness" (2006), online at www.cyborgdemocracy.net/2006_05_07_archive.html.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a29.

³⁶ *Psalms* 8:5.

³⁷ James Madison, "The Federalist #51," in Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist* (Cleveland, Ohio: Meridian Books, 1961), p. 349.

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 112-113.

³⁹ Kurzweil, *Singularity*, pp. 395, 406, 407.

⁴⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), p. 11.