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more on

The human and the post-human

Gilbert Meilaender's *Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging** (2013) was published by Eerdmans. Ron Highfield's *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity: Embracing a God-Centered Identity in a Me-centered Culture** (2013) was published by InterVarsity Press. Also relevant to this topic are two of Meilaender's earlier books, *Neither Beast Nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person** (Encounter, 2009) and *Theory and Practice of Virtue** (Notre Dame, 1984). Two books by sociologist Christian Smith establish a framework for answering the questions Meilaender raises and rebutting the false assumptions Highfield describes: *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture** (Oxford University Press, 2003) and *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up** (University of Chicago Press, 2010). In an article entitled "Humanism and Transhumanism" (*The New Atlantis*, Fall 2010, available online at www.thenewatlantis.com), author Fred Baumann traces the lineage between today's transhumanists and the reductionist materialism of behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner, whose 1971 *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* anticipated some of the radical adjustments-in-the-name-of-progress now almost commonplace. As Baumann writes, "The new science isn't squeamish about man as machine; transhumanism goes a step further and embraces man's becoming a different machine, or any number of kinds of machines. If that were to come to pass, even if only among elites, it would be a change of world-historical proportions, because it would mean that the new science was no longer merely seeking to transform the world to suit human beings, but rather transforming human beings into whatever they chose." Another notable article available online is "Programming the post-human: Computer science redefines 'life'" (*Harper's*, October 2002) by former software engineer Ellen Ullman. She describes how researchers in robotics and artificial life "openly question the 'specialness' of human life. Some call life as we know it on Earth merely one of many 'possible biologies,' and see our reverence for humanity as something of a prejudice ('human chauvinism'). Personhood has been defined as 'a status granted to one another by society, not innately tied to being a carbon-based life form.'" As she summarizes, "Over the last half-century, in addressing the question 'What are we humans?' cybernetics has come up with three answers. We are, in order of their occurrence in the debate, (1) computers, (2) ants, and (3) accidents." In a provocative response to Ullman's article, *Journal* guest Steve Talbott responds to the reductionism she

Part 1

1 Introduction

- Gilbert Meilaender**, on the ethical questions raised by anti-aging research, especially its most extreme forms in the "transhumanist" movement
- Ron Highfield**, on why modern assumptions about personal identity, freedom, and human dignity create prejudices against the Gospel's account of God and the self
- Mark Mitchell**, on why gratitude and stewardship should be seen as fundamental political necessities

Part 2

- Daniel M. Bell, Jr.**, on how capitalism nurtures the assumptions of the autonomous self
- Helen Rhee**, on the centrality of almsgiving to Christian identity in the early Church
- Peter Brown**, on how the early Church's wrestling with the questions of wealth and poverty steered a course between radical asceticism and careless indulgence

*An asterisk means that the book is in print; if you wish to purchase it from our friends at Eighth Day Books, call 1.800.841.2541.

describes: "The faith buttressing this work is what Ullman refers to as 'engineering empiricism'. It is the conviction, long prevalent within artificial intelligence, that we should abandon 'sterile philosophizing' and just get down to the practical business of building minds. 'You don't have to understand thought to make a mind', as computer scientist Douglas Hofstadter puts it. And Rodney Brooks, director of MIT's artificial intelligence laboratory, told Ullman, 'The definition of life is hard. You could spend five hundred years thinking about it or spend a few years doing it'. Breathtaking statements. What we see here, in Ullman's apt phrase, is 'anti-intellectualism in search of the intellect'—a mindless search if ever there was one. . . . The abstract, softwarish view of mentality is the conclusion and crown of a long development in science and technology. This development is now presenting us with a strange outcome: having focused single-mindedly upon what they think of as the 'solid, physical world', scientists have found themselves sacrificing, not only mentality, but even materiality itself. That is, 'hard' science has proven itself unable, in the last analysis, to reckon with anything but numbers, algorithms, and other airy abstractions."

Other Works Mentioned

Mark Mitchell's *The Politics of Gratitude: Scale, Place and Community in a Global Age** (2012) is published by Potomac House. Daniel M. Bell, Jr.'s *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World** (2012) is published by Baker Academic, as is Helen Rhee's *Loving the Poor; Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation** (2012). Peter Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD** (2012) is published by Princeton.

The MARS HILL AUDIO *Journal* is produced at our studio in rural central Virginia, outside of historic Charlottesville. The *Journal* is one of several audio products we distribute, all of them intended to encourage greater wisdom about interaction with contemporary culture.

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