

THE PERILS OF PERFECTION



Living the Feminist Dream

A Faithful Vision for Women
in the Church and the World
Kate Bryan

Keep at it, Riley!

Accompanying my Father
through Death into Life
Noreen Madden McInnes

Rehumanize

A Vision to Secure Human Rights for All
Aimee Murphy

The Church's Mission in a Polarized World

Aaron Wessman

The Perils of Perfection

On the Limits and Possibilities of Human Enhancement
Joseph Vukov

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of Human Enhancement

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The Perils of Perfection
On the Limits and Possibilities of Human Enhancement

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For my children.



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Series Preface

Does the book that you are about to read seem unusual? Perhaps even counterintuitive?

Good. The Magenta series wouldn't be doing its job if you felt otherwise.

On the color wheel, magenta lies directly between red and blue. Just so, books in this series do not lie at one limit or another of our hopelessly simplistic, two-dimensional, antagonistic, binary imagination. Often, in the broader culture any answer to a moral or political question gets labeled as liberal or conservative, red or blue. But the Magenta series refuses to play by these shortsighted rules. Magenta will address the complexity of the issues of our day by resisting a framework that unnecessarily pits one idea against another. Magenta refuses to be defined by anything other than a positive vision of the good.

If you understand anything about the Focolare's dialogical-and-faithful mission, it should not surprise you that this series has found a home with the Focolare's New City Press. The ideas in these books, we believe, will spark dialogues that will heal divides and build unity at the very sites of greatest fragmentation and division.

The ideas in Magenta are crucial not only for our fragmented culture, but also for the Church. Our secular idolatry—our simplistic left/right, red/blue imagination—has oozed into the Church as well, disfiguring the Body of Christ with ugly disunity. Such idolatry, it must be said, has muffled the Gospel and crippled the Church, keeping it from being salt and light in a wounded world desperate for unity.

Magenta is not naïve. We realize full well that appealing to dialogue or common ground can be dismissed as a weak-sauce, milquetoast attempt to cloud our vision of the good or reduce it to a mere least common denominator. We know that much dialogic spade work is yet to be done, but that does not keep the vision of the Magenta Series (like the color it bears) from being *bold*. There is nothing half-hearted about it. All our authors have a brilliant, attractive vision of the good.

It is difficult to imagine a more timely and therefore important book than this one delivered by Joe Vukov. As the issues surrounding technology and human enhancement continue to explode onto the scene in nearly every aspect of our lives—from sexual performance to standardized test-taking—the debates over these technologies are predictably coalescing into two polarized camps. One camp is basically “technological progress no matter what!” while the other camp is skeptical of any transformation of the human being at all. And, as usual, they define themselves by opposition to each other.

Into this mess wades Professor Vukov—someone who manages to be a careful philosopher, engaging writer, and a faithful, non-ideological Christian. He has produced a powerful argument (one which, like all Magenta books, relies a series of powerful stories) based on both reason

and theological commitment for a via media which puts significant limits on these technologies while at the same time making space for a Christian vision of human enhancement. Dear reader, you are in for a treat!

Enjoy!

Charles C. Camosy
Series Editor



Introduction

Welcome to the future. Start with a stop at Tesla, Inc. No, not to buy a new car, but rather for a conversation the company's eccentric CEO, Elon Musk. Musk, one of the wealthiest people in the world, also mans the helm of Twitter, SpaceX, and The Boring Company. But that's not why we are here. Instead, we're here to discuss one of Musk's newest ventures: Neuralink.

Neuralink, launched in August 2020 with all the hoopla we've come to expect, has been touted as a "Fitbit for the brain." Its feature product: a type of brain-computer interface (BCI), a device implanted into the brain and linked to a computer. The immediate applications of Neuralink: to "help people with paralysis regain independence through control of computers and mobile devices."¹ A laudable goal, and one that would mark a milestone in assistive devices. Indeed, even before Musk applied Silicon Valley veneer to BCIs, scientists had developed technology that allows wheelchair-users to operate their chairs directly with their brains and people with quadriplegia to manipulate computer interfaces. Musk, however, lets us know that the plan isn't to stop here. Eventually, Musk hopes, Neuralink will allow users to "give people the ability to communicate more easily via text or speech synthesis, to follow their curiosity on the

web, or to express their creativity through photography, art, or writing apps.”² Move a cursor on your computer by thinking about it; control your iPhone with a thought; order an Uber by reflecting on your destination.

The end game of Neuralink? Musk is mum. But you needn’t spend your spare time penning sci-fi novels to conjure possibilities. Imagine piloting a car simply by visualizing your destination. Or downloading the latest dance craze to shine at the wedding reception. Or mastering calculus with the click of a button. And the more sinister side of things? Again, you needn’t have a well-developed dystopian vision to picture possibilities. All your data, sold to hungry marketers and transformed to ads beamed directly to your stream of consciousness. Government agencies, preventing “thought crime” by requisitioning Musk’s servers. A vast social chasm opening between “linkers” and “non-linkers.” Neuralink, you conclude, presents nothing short of revolutionary possibilities.

Let’s move on. Our next stop is a rapid-fire tour of startups run by so-called “immortalists” or “healthspanners.” Both groups pursue technologies to live longer; immortalists hope never to die. In Silicon Valley, these startups are as ubiquitous as high-end hoodies. United Therapeutics aims to grow new organs from human DNA. Verily, a life sciences firm owned by Alphabet, Google’s parent company, aims to give people just a few more years. Unity Biotechnology, backed by investors including Jeff Bezos and Peter Thiel, aims to develop drugs that target “senescent cells—cells that, as they age, start producing a colorless odorless, noxious goo called SASP, which Unity’s researchers call ‘the zombie toxin.’”³ Calico (California Life Company), launched by Google in 2013 with a billion dollars in funding, pursues a secretive agenda, but in its public-facing work tracks mice from birth to death to identify biomarkers of aging.⁴

Oh, and young blood transfusions? No longer merely fodder for bad teen vampire novels. Alkahest is an industry standard, and targets “neurodegenerative and age-related diseases with transformative therapies derived from a deep understanding of the plasma proteome in aging and disease.”⁵ Competitor companies pitch their services even more boldly: if you were born before 1991 and live in the United States, the company Ambrosia will ship you a liter of healthy, young blood for \$5500. That’s just a couple dozen high-end hoodies.⁶

Let’s continue our tour, this time to some more familiar locations. Google: the tech giant promises us unprecedented access to human knowledge at the swipe of a screen. Plato, Leonardo da Vinci, generations of high school English teachers: none had access to the information that lies behind your smart phone screen. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter: all provide new modes of social interaction from the privacy of our own homes. And in Seattle, Amazon: capable of locating far-flung items for purchase (a pair of scissors from Japan! A rediscovered Miles Davis tune, *on vinyl!* A book on human enhancement!) and delivering them to your door in two days or less.

We’ll end our tour at Stanford University. Here, a less visible kind of revolution is underway. A drug-fueled one. Study drugs, that is: the use of unprescribed medications such as Adderall, Ritalin, and Modafinil by college students hoping for a leg up during finals week. Do they work? Maybe. A recent article by researchers Ruairidh Battleday and Anna-Katherine Brem found that Modafinil—a medication typically used to treat sleep disorders such as apnea and narcolepsy—can marginally boost attention, learning, and memory, though the drug seems to have little effect on creativity.⁷ The takeaway: study drugs won’t skyrocket you to the Honor’s list, but they might help give an edge to your late-night study sessions. More shocking than study

drug effectiveness, however, is their widespread use. Study drugs are no niche taste. One survey found of students at a small college found that 35.5 percent of students had used them.⁸ Another, more widely distributed survey, found that an average of 6.9 percent of college students had used study drugs, but that usage rates climbed at schools with more cutthroat admission standards.⁹ At a competitive place like Stanford, then, you can bet that study drug use is rampant. See those students streaming into the library? Check their backpacks, and you'll likely find some Ziploc bags of unprescribed Adderall or Modafinil, purchased underground in hopes of a top-notch internship or stellar first job. Human enhancement, taken out of the hands of the Valley's executives, and into those of the next generation's ruling class.

All right, folks, tour is over. Grab a bite of sushi from the kiosk over there, post a picture of the experience to social media, and come back again next year. We'll have more innovations, more startups, more ways of making you a better you!

As you saunter back to your hotel, you gather your thoughts. Surely, you reflect, we live in a brave new world, one in which modern technology serves up new possibilities at each new turn.¹⁰ Life in the 1950s, let alone 1750s? Messy, unpredictable, stale. Life now? Well, at least not *that*. Or at least that's the message we get from tech entrepreneurs. And often, from the broader culture.

How to respond to these promises of perfection? Do you jump at the chance for young blood transfusions, join the ranks of future "Linkers," invite Siri into your life, pursue new followers on social media with reckless abandon? Or do you summarily reject all of it? Ditch the smartphone; decline the promises of a better you; unfriend your roster of social media connections? The questions are not hypothetical,

nor fodder for some far-flung future. We rather face these questions daily—whether we acknowledge them or not—and will only face more difficult questions in the months, years, and decades to come. We must carefully reflect on them *now*, before we find ourselves already living out our answers to them.

We needn't embark on the journey alone. As we'll see, a range of scholars, influencers, and everyday Joes have already weighed in on our collective quest for more perfect lives. On one end of the spectrum, we'll encounter the transhumanists, who push us to pursue more, more, MORE. We'll also encounter the modern Luddite, those who, like their technology-smashing forebears, would have us toss modern technology to the curb, getting our heads out of the clouds to focus our attention and lives elsewhere.

Ultimately, however, I won't be casting my lot with either. That's for a couple reasons. First, and as we'll discuss in detail later, there are significant problems with both sides: their downfalls lie in the extreme positions they stake out, positions that can't be maintained in the face of level-headed analysis.

But there's also a second reason that I won't side with the transhumanists or modern Luddite. This reason has less to do with the problems they face, and more to do with the positive view I accept. In what follows, we'll call it the fallen dignity view. The fallen dignity view includes two ideas that may seem to be at odds but can in fact be held in a productive tension: the fundamental dignity of all human beings; and the fact of human fallenness. If some of those ideas are new to you, don't worry. We'll be unpacking them later. Moreover, while these views are based on my own unabashed Christian outlook, don't put the book down if you are not a Christian: the fallen dignity view is widely embraced by non-Christians as well. Plus, I'll be exploring the fallen

dignity view not simply as a Christian, but as a Christian *philosopher*. And as a philosopher, I am invested in providing arguments that appeal beyond the boundaries of my own religious community. For now, though, here's the important point: when we start with the fallen dignity view, we gain a foundation for mounting a response to the new technologies and possibilities that are presented to us regularly. And this response, it turns out, provides a middle course between an all-out embrace and wholehearted rejection.

Who is the book for? In short: it is for anyone who is looking for a sure-footed strategy for navigating the kinds of technologies I have introduced above. Want to avoid the all-out technological embrace of the transhumanists and the technological dismissal of the modern Luddites? The fallen dignity view provides a strategy for doing so. Whether you adopt the view because you are a Christian or for other reasons, this book offers a distinctive and level-headed approach to navigating twenty-first-century life. More broadly, it offers a roadmap for avoiding the perils looming in the quest for perfection, even while taking advantage of the tools and resources we have developed for the journey. Our aim: to avoid the hubris of Babel without abandoning what we have learned about tower building.

A few words on how we'll be proceeding. In chapter 1, we'll dive deep into the kinds of technologies I have already introduced in passing. We'll discuss what it might mean to say that these technologies are forms of "human enhancement," and conduct a survey of the possibilities that are presented to us. We'll learn how a zap of electricity might boost your creativity; how shining a flashlight on your brain may hone your intellect; how tweaking human genes could lead to different patterns of human life. Chapter 2 turns from the technologies themselves to the controversy surrounding

them. We'll consider more carefully a group we've already met: the transhumanists. In this chapter, we'll scrutinize their vision of humanity—what it can and should be. We'll learn what makes transhumanists tick, explore the appeal of their dream, and see how an undercurrent of this dream runs beneath popular culture. We'll also uncover deep problems with transhumanism. Put broadly: by calling for humans to become more and better, transhumanists neglect the fundamental dignity of human beings *as we are*. Chapter 3 thus turns from the transhumanists to those at the other end of the spectrum: the modern Luddites. As we'll see, the modern Luddites identify several crucial problems with transhumanism, and we should pay careful attention to their criticism. They also, however, often stake out an extreme position, one that, while not morally bankrupt, is difficult to maintain consistently.

We are, therefore, left with no wind our sails, stuck between the empty promises of transhumanism and the overwrought standards of the modern Luddites. Chapters 4 and 5 navigate us out of these doldrums. They present the positive vision of the fallen dignity view. And then they show how this vision presents an alternative to both transhumanism and the modern Luddites. Our goal: an approach to new technologies and possibilities that is characterized by an unabashed commitment both to fundamental human dignity and to human fallenness. Seen from this perspective, new possibilities of modern technology lose the transhumanist luster, but also avoid the Luddite wreckage.

Are you left dizzy by these new possibilities? Skeptical about the newest Silicon Valley craze being worth the hype, yet wary of those who would throw these technologies to the curb? Me too. In what follows, I therefore offer you strategies for evaluating both the possibilities and the limits of human enhancement. A map for navigating the perils of perfection.

