

## A CHRISTIAN HUMANISM VS. THE TRANSHUMAN APPROACHES ON FINITUDE AND DEATH

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**Abstract:** *The human being experiences in the depths of his being a longing for plenitude. However, pain, disease and death accompany their existence. Transhumanism tries to overcome the limits of man through all a technological scientific development and ventures to predict the definitive triumph over death. In this study, we carry out a historical journey in which we analyze the meaning of finitude and death for both transhumanism and Christian humanism, focused on the person. Transhumanism and Christianity coincide in the desire to conquer death. The understanding of the concepts studied and the means to save humanity that they are proposed differ in both approaches. We understand that in transhumanism there is a reductionism of the definition of person and therefore of the solution that it is offered to respond to the deep longing inscribed each human being.*

**Keywords:** *vulnerability, limit, Human nature, death, plenitude.*

### Introduction

There are many differences in different cultures, societies and historical moments. However, in all human beings there is a deep desire to be happy, and in order to achieve this, the aim is to eradicate everything that is an obstacle: pain, illness, death, etc. The transhumanist project aims to improve the human species by making use of the advances that science and technology can offer. It proposes an evolution of humanity towards a situation in which physical, cognitive and emotional capacities are developed in such a way that an improvement and improvement of the species is achieved. The aim is to banish any deficiency that would diminish the individual in order to overcome the natural limits of our species.

Albert Cortina gives a brief definition of transhumanism as follows:

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Transhumanism is an ideology that affirms the moral duty to improve the physical and cognitive capacities of the human species, and to apply new technologies to man, so that the unwanted and unnecessary aspects of the human condition - suffering, illness, ageing and even mortality - can be eliminated" (Cortina, 2017: 66).

Transhumanism recognises that human beings in their present situation are limited in their various capacities, vulnerable to themselves, to others and to the environment around them. He is irremediably faced with a known destiny: death. This makes it impossible for him to achieve the longed-for happiness. Transhumanist approaches believe that science and technology will provide an answer to the longing of the human being, not to use all the potential they offer would be immoral as it is the way to defeat the limits of the species this time and definitively.

This project raises an infinite number of questions: some about the technical feasibility, others about the economic cost and the possibility of extending it to all individuals. But we could say that these are minor questions; what is really questionable is whether we have thought in depth about what it means to be human. Then, it is necessary to answer what it means to be a person, to get to know human nature; to understand the notion of limits and see if there are some that can be overcome and others that cannot; when faced with the existence of insurmountable obstacles, to ask ourselves if it makes any sense that they are inevitable; in short, are human beings capable of achieving the longed-for happiness if these limits do not exist, and if they can overcome them, would we be talking about truly full persons or would it be a different kind or another type of fullness that is not the one we yearn for?

In this study we will put transhumanism in dialogue with a person-centred anthropology. We believe that this approach is viable because both recognise the obstacles of our species and seek to offer a salvation, a hope for the human being. Let us look at both proposals to identify whether both approaches and answers are of the same order or whether one is more complete in its premises and conclusions for our species.

### **Starting point on the human being from transhumanism and Christian humanism**

As we have already indicated in the introduction, we believe that it is possible to establish a dialogue between transhumanism and a person-centred anthropology because we share a common desire. A desire implicit in the

heart of every human being that leads us to yearn for a fullness that we cannot seem to conquer definitively on our own.

It is impossible for human beings to stop time and with it all the effects it has on our bodies. To circumvent old age, to overcome our limits, to banish the effects of illness from our nature, and so on. The transhumanists, from a purely materialistic starting point, propose the solution by turning to the NBIC: Nanoscience, Biotechnology, Infotechnology and Cognotechnology: science and technology come together to provide solutions to the weaknesses that undermine the human body. New divinities promise eternal youth to those who worship them. Quintili explains that in just a decade, damage that was previously irreparable has now been solved without leaving any after-effects on individuals (2012: 125-155). The pace of progress is dizzying. We are one step away from conquering the dream world, a reality in which pain, illness and death do not have the last word.

The improvement of the body will be of such an order that concepts such as limit, finitude, vulnerability will have no place in our vocabulary. Overcoming will be possible by resorting to the new elixir that techno-science promises us. Marcos comments that in transhumanism "the component of techno-scientific optimism and the will to overcome human nature, understood always and only in terms of limitations, is still present" (2018: 111). An optimism that is a fallacy because it is based on a way of understanding human nature that reduces it to pure matter. If the human being is pure matter, they propose to investigate and improve it in order to overcome its limits.

From a person-centred anthropology, the human being is not just pure matter. Made up of two co-principles: body and soul, he cannot overcome his limits by attending to only one of them. Moreover, the anthropology provided by Christian humanism according to Ruiz de la Peña, in his *Theology of Creation*, interprets the world and the human being as God's creatures, but the act of creation must not be understood as a closed and concluded process, quite the contrary. The human being, in the image and likeness of the Creator, is called to perfect both his being and the world around him according to a preconceived plan, but open, at the same time, to the will of man (Ruiz de la Peña, 1988). The creative work, which in principle was good, is tinged with mystery at its very origins and, along with the goodness of the work, both physical and moral suffering arises. An eternal, infinite and kind God creates a valuable world, a reality different from that of the Creator, with a finite, limited and temporary character.

His existence implies a precariousness, a relationship of dependence that makes him vulnerable, but at the same time worthy of being loved by the other.

Let's leave aside the theological conception of this anthropological proposal, let's not talk about God and let's replace the beginning of the world and of life, if we wish, with a random beginning. Be that as it may, we note the same thing: the finite, limited and temporary character of the cosmos and of our species. Let us not enter either into an assessment of why a God who we say is Almighty and Omnipotent is capable of creating a world where pain and death are present. We could try to understand that, since creation is an unfinished work, in the evolutionary development physical evil arises (Teilhard De Chardin, 1982) and through the misuse of human freedom, the so-called moral evil. Transhumanism does not delve into moral evil; it focuses on eradicating physical evil. However, from the anthropology of Christian humanism, we understand that some of these limitations can be overcome, but many others are inevitable because they are part of our own nature and we cannot eliminate them, among them, death. It is then that we are invited to reflect on whether the world, man and society are better precisely because they are vulnerable. In short, we are questioning the meaning of human finitude.

### **The desire to circumvent death in transhumanism**

Transhumanism does not pretend to reflect on the meaning of finitude, it is something that cannot be studied from its techno-scientific parameters because it is not proper to its formal object. Therefore, we believe that the solutions it proposes to overcome the limits are based on a reductionist consideration of the person. It cannot provide a complete answer as it ignores the true nature of the person. The great challenge of transhumanism is not to overcome deficiencies, but to overcome death. But, again, it studies the possibility by looking at the corporeal, material part. The yearning for immortality arises with an impetus that directs all fields of research, but the solutions offered do not seem to respond to the deep desire inscribed in the human heart.

A number of objections arise in the face of his proposals. Thus, although we note the existence of the desire, we should not accept that every human being aspires to live forever. We should qualify that we are talking about maintaining ourselves in the world with an adequate quality of life. But we are opening a debate that goes beyond the intentions of this study.

Talking about the meaning of an adequate quality of life and living forever at a time when the euthanasia law has been passed in our country is paradoxical. Even so, let us consider as valid the transhumanist argument that everything will have evolved in such a way that physical pain and even the pain of the soul will have been eradicated; that there would be no difficulties to subsist because there would be natural resources for everyone; that we could continue to maintain our bonds of friendship and family since we would all be immortal, although it is difficult to control accidents that trigger the death of a loved one; that we would be able to assimilate history as an endless process and time as a magnitude that is in some way no longer meaningful;? trying to find a satisfactory answer to all the objections that may arise, it is worth asking ourselves what they offer me to overcome this death and what is the proposal to live this life eternally.

Thanks to technology, Bostrom and his disciples believe it is possible to overcome death through post-biological existence. Paradise on earth can be reached through information. In the future, the necessary software and hardware will be available to migrate the synaptic matrix of each individual and reproduce it inside a computer. We would leave our biological body subject to change, at risk of accidents, burdened by multiple limitations and needs, to live forever in a digital substrate (Postigo, 2009: 267-282).

When Matt Damon and Ben Affleck wrote the script for *Good Will Hunting*, we don't know how the famous scene in the park between Robin Williams and Damon himself would have played out if Damon had been a transhumanist. Williams makes the young man see that he is ignorant, that he thinks he is back from life and yet he knows nothing:

If I ask you something about art you will answer me with facts about all the books that have been written, Michelangelo, you know everything, life and work, political aspirations, his friendship with the Pope, his sexual orientation, whatever it takes? But you can't tell me what the Sistine Chapel smells like, you've never been there and looked at that beautiful ceiling. You haven't seen it... (Damon y Affleck, 1997).

Is the dream of transhumanism to overcome death that we leave the shells of material bodies to be imprisoned in electrical circuits? As Ballesteros states: "Posthumanism, with its information piety, ignores the essential distinction between the degrees of compression of reality, which go downwards from wisdom to information, passing through knowledge" (2012: 19).

Transhumanism doubly undervalues the person, first by dispensing with one of the co-principles that shape us: the body, and replacing it with an electronic substrate; second, by transmuting the synaptic matrix into a computer in which only syntactic-level processes fit, without considering the greatness of human intelligence. One wonders whether this experiment proposed by the transhumanists will put an end to the existence of man. Let us recall the paradox of Theseus' ship: after replacing all the parts of the ship, could we consider it the same or would we be facing a different ship? The transhumanist project goes further, it does not change the pieces, but only seeks to rescue a rudder from the whole being in order to assemble it not in another ship, but in an object that has nothing to do with the great ship.

Transhumanism fragments the human being, destroys him as an individual and isolates him from society. It takes away his biography, removes him from history and forbids him to grow old in order to sell him the eternal habitat of an electrical connection in which to develop. However, as Roberto Casas tells us, "the opinion is spreading that this humanity characterized by finitude (...) is destined to give way to a new reality that will no longer be subject to these limitations" (2020: 24) but let us not deceive ourselves. But let us not deceive ourselves, the author warns that we are talking about a different reality, which will no longer be us. It seems that society is blindfolding itself in the face of the drift that events may take and prefers to give credibility to slogans such as those that can be read in works with a high transhumanist content: "Death is just a technical problem. Goodbye equality. Hello, immortality" (Harari, 2017). And as Casas himself reflects, it seems that we do not realise that the fundamental problem that technological advances will bring is not scientific but philosophical (2020: 25). We do not know what the world would be like inhabited by these new beings who, a priori, do not seem to have much in common with what we understand as people.

Transhumanism aims to circumvent death under different formulas. Some investigate how to slow down human ageing to the point of controlling the natural biological processes that can be reversed and achieve an unlimited existence of the physical body. Others are looking to transfer the consciousness of the mind to alternative media such as computer equipment. To create mechanisms that escape the laws of physics and thus transform us into beings with indefinite longevity, barring accidents or hecatombs, who would no longer die.

At last, transhumanism will have won its victory over death. Man will see his desire for happiness fulfilled, he will be eternal. For Justo Domínguez, this infinite end that they propose does not coincide with the yearning of the human being:

It would be desirable not to have to die, but if not dying entails eliminating fundamental elements of the human person, then it may be that the consequence of what is achieved or the path by which it is achieved leads to a negation of the human being itself" (2020: 68).

When the yearning for immortality has been studied throughout history, it has been in relation to death and a life beyond death. Of course, it is legitimate to improve the life expectancy of our species and to do research to contribute to the biotechnological development of mankind, but when we aspire to prolong life we want to "live better in the broad sense of all the dimensions of the person and to live more to the extent that it helps to live more fully" (Justo Domínguez, 2020:68). Deep down we know that the challenge for man is to know how to face the mystery of evil (pain, suffering, death, etc.) on a daily basis with our whole being, with wisdom, will and, why not, also with faith. The person who knows how to give meaning to suffering shows a greatness beyond any machine. Ballesteros recognises this with the term *homo patiens*, capable of fulfilling himself even in failure, his categories are not success or failure but fulfilment or despair, the goal is to reach the end of existence with the conviction that everything has been fulfilled (2012: 21). However, we are easy to deceive. And transhumanism, starting from the premise of the intellectual arrogance that characterises our species, locks itself into the illusion of technology and science. And the problem of pain, dissatisfaction and the legitimate longing for a full life, do the rest of the work (Díaz. 2020). When someone offers a magic solution, we take it because we want to think it is infallible. We don't want to see that perhaps to find the answer to our desire we must come down from our pedestal and raise our eyes upwards.

### **The human being: mortal being**

We cannot forget that all limits ultimately lead us to the extreme and definitive limit of death: life is a dying every day. Life is given up piece by piece. The person suffers because, at the same time as he perfects himself, he expires and is exposed to annihilation and time. He or she lives in a permanent stare at the empty space of time, which slips away like water through

his or her hands. As Gómez Sancho puts it: "The life of every man is an intermediate sigh between two tears: that of birth and that of death" (1998: 149). The only condition necessary to die is to be alive. From the very moment we come to life, we are exposed to death. This radical possibility reveals an aspect of the truth of what the human being is, or rather, of who the human being is, although it is a truth that is not conceptually apprehensible, as Domínguez states (2011:85). From a person-centred anthropology we understand that this mortal condition must be assumed and accepted if one wants to live in the truth of what one is, of one's authentic identity. In spite of this, we often live as if death did not exist, nourishing a false illusion of eternity and losing awareness of the unrepeatability of each moment. We forget that it is the *cotidie morimur*, as Seneca pointed out in his *Epistles*, that allows us to live the present to the full.

In our society, human beings often seem to be anaesthetised in relation to the reality of death: first they ignore it as a possibility in their youth, only to forget it later and then reject it in old age or in illness (their own or someone else's) as if it were something that has not yet arrived. In short, death is not accepted as a stage of life, the last one, which is called to be lived with its own value and meaning; as Spaemann points out, death is not taught now: "Children no longer see how old people die; most people meet death for the first time in their own" (2004). Today's culture has succeeded in expelling the reality of death from the everydayness of life. People no longer die at home as they once did, surrounded by family and the warmth of home. Now it is more common to find a private and solitary death, isolated in a room alone or with medical staff, surrounded by tubes and machines, everything and everyone well sterilised to avoid infection; the hospital allows death to be removed from the home, to be placed at a certain distance. It is another way of dying and watching death: with a glass in between or through a screen at the touch of a remote control, without the danger of being splashed by blood or invaded by the smell.

Death is part of everyone's life and constitutes a personal and unique moment. Dying is something strictly personal, it is one of the parameters of living. And even if the reality of death is removed from everyday life, the human being is determined by it, before, now and always. It is part of their essence, since the finiteness of human existence structures the real from Heidegger's being for death, as Alonso Cano states: "The fact that we are entities traversed by death is what gives us our paradoxical entity (I can

die for the other, but I can never die their death would be the precept that would condense this perspective)" (2017).

**But, death hurts, isn't there a way to beat it? I need to be saved**

The formulas offered by transhumanism do not seem to respond to the deep desire inscribed in our nature. Justo Domínguez understands that its approaches "provoke a reduction in the understanding of death and in the way to overcome it" (2011:65). To be immortal by living indefinitely or in a cybernetic form, if technology were to develop in such a way that it could be achieved, does not seem to be the aspiration of human beings. As we noted at the beginning of this paper, both transhumanism and the vision proposed from a Christian anthropology share the goal of definitively overcoming death, but the answer they give is not the same. With the transhumanist solution we are faced with problems of various kinds: demographic, psychological, social, ... but, what is more, it supposes a renunciation of what each one of us is, a being born to love and be loved unconditionally, that is to say, also in its limits.

The fact of being born means that life has been given to us, no human being can make himself born, nor is he able to make another be born out of nothing. Life as a gift has been given to us, but not in a complete, full way, but for each one of us to build it according to a mission that we discover day by day: "life has not been given to him already made, but he receives himself with the mission to become in a certain way" (Domínguez, 2011:70). This open condition of man allows our freedom to acquire meaning. The human being in the use of his freedom is becoming. And again, both transhumanism and Christian humanism seem to have something in common: the importance of the faculty of freedom. For the sake of freedom, the former justifies it as an absolute faculty that allows human beings to become themselves. However, from the point of view of Christian anthropology, it is not an absolute faculty, as our own experience shows: not every human action perfects us, and not every time man acts freely, he does well. Freedom, like life, is also a gift received and is related to the origin of our being and to other beings. We recognise our freedom as the faculty that enables us to reach the fullness we long for, but we recognise it as finite and as imperfect as ourselves. Man's misuse of freedom leads him to be capable of moral evil. This reality and that of our own death reminds human beings of their condition of being in need; we are not gods; we are creatures in need of something or Someone greater to take us in despite this constitutive fra-

gility. Man becomes aware that he is incapable of explaining himself, not even through that collective consciousness that could be dumped into a computer could we explain our species, not even if we were given all eternity to see our software in a new hardware.

The finitude that characterises us implies that human freedom is creative because it needs to travel a path to reach a fullness. This fullness, which he sees is not within his reach, allows him to realise that the relationship with the other also constitutes him and is a prerequisite for the continued development of one and the other. In this relationship we understand that we are all, although necessary, contingent beings. We humans do not explain ourselves; we did not give ourselves life, we received it. Trying to deepen the meaning of life as a gift and death as an inability to accept that it can be the end of something as marvellous as being, leads us to search for the Maker and the Saviour. Can the one who created life be the one who conquers death?

Christian anthropology identifies death as evil, so it cannot be the end of life understood as being, the beautiful, the good, the true. At the same time, we are not capable of overcoming it, at least in the sense of doing so in a way that eradicates evil. With the transhumanist proposal we see that it annuls true nature, it is reductionist and partial. Death must be defeated not only biologically, but beyond: my whole self in body and soul awaits a fullness that is not the transhumanist dream that implies renouncing what I naturally am: it dilutes me, it attacks my person, my historicity, my capacity for relationship, my freedom insofar as the supreme act of it is to love the other unconditionally, now I can only "love him" if my synaptic matrix is united to his. To overcome death is not to overcome some biological aspects technically. Overcoming death, as a metaphysical evil, is impossible for the human being. Overcoming death as a symbol of the evil that threatens mankind in the world is unthinkable. This is why death makes man question the existence of God, even as a protest against the evil in the world, or to ask for an explanation of the mystery, or to fall on his knees when he discovers his greatness and begs for salvation (Domínguez, 2011:75).

The Christian hope of overcoming death can already be found in the eschatology of the Old Testament, where we see God's faithful relationship with his people, who never leave him despite the constant falls of the chosen people. In the biblical texts the conception of time is linear and teleological, far from the vision of cyclical time which is maintained outside the

biblical sphere and which in a certain sense is taken up by transhumanism. There is a faith in creation and a hope in promise. Man recognises that the ultimate vitality is manifested in God's relationship with man, acting in communion, and hence the people intone the psalm: "Your grace is worth more than life" (Sal 63,4). Life is thus existential fulfilment even in the midst of difficulties, hardships and sorrows. God accompanies us in this human pain even when we do not feel it and believe that we are abandoned in the deepest loneliness. The figure of Job is a clear example of remaining faithful to God even when his ways are not understandable. Job believes in God because he is God himself, ungraspable in his greatness for the created being. Throughout the Old Testament, the idea of joyful union with God is deepened, and this life with God is given a claim to eternity (Ruiz de la Peña, 2002: chapter I). In the book of Wisdom, the doctrine of immortality is taken up not in the Greek way, but as the fruit of righteousness, of holiness. It seems that the fulfilment of the promise begins to be interpreted as the eternal communion of divine life (Ruiz de la Peña, 1988: chapter II).

With the coming of Jesus Christ, the promise to the Jewish people overflows, in God made flesh everything is fulfilled: Christ has come into our history (incarnation, earthly existence and death, resurrection and ascension) but at the same time he has remained in it through the sacraments and the Church and is to come at the end of time in a definitive form of presence in created reality.

And what does this plan have to do with each one of us, with the possibility of definitively overcoming death, but not in the transhumanist sense? If transhumanism seems like science fiction, although increasingly plausible, Christian anthropology seems inconceivable for our reason.

First of all, we are asked not to stick to a reason in the scientific sense, but to an open reason in which we make room for mystery. Moreover, we must be ready to come down from our intellectual arrogance to recognise that there are realities that escape our intellect: we are faced with the question of God who is impossible for us to grasp in our categories. But the most important thing is to recognise that our nature, which seems so perfect, in order to feel complete, needs a piece that it cannot find, a desire that it does not satisfy. Perhaps the Christian proposal, if it does not do violence to the being, if it gives it peace, if it is not a pill to satisfy that longing, can be that piece that we cannot find (Mangano, 2009).

Christ came to offer salvation to mankind, to manifest God's love, capable of pouring it out on us unconditionally. In this loving relationship,

human beings know that they are accepted and comforted by the only one capable of overcoming metaphysical evil and death as its most radical representation. Only a God could definitively overcome death. Our history begins in the act of creation; we are called to consummate this work of salvation in Christ, the merciful judge of our life, who proposes eternal life to us. Once the personal barrier of death has been overcome, man is called to eternal life with Christ, a pneumatic participation in this eternity is not proposed, we are told of the resurrection of the flesh itself: a pneumatic corporeality: "a mortal body is sown, a spiritual body is raised" (1 Cor 15, 44). The subject of the resurrected existence is the same as that of the mortal existence, but at the same time transformed, having overcome the crucible of death and sin, we can speak analogically of a qualitative mutation that reaches the coating of the corruptible and mortal to make it incorruptible and immortal: man, body and soul that was sometimes fragmented, becomes a "spiritual body". Up to the moment of the resurrection of our body, Benedict XII in *Benedictus Deus* maintained that there is no delay, man already enjoys eternity, eternal life with the intuitive vision of the divine being. After the Parousia, it is the whole man who is resurrected, who is saved, the whole community is called to salvation and the whole reality (Manglano, 2009: chapter V).

In both the Old and the New Testament, we are told of the "new heaven and the new earth", Christ himself speaks of a regeneration or "restoration of all things" (Hech 3, 21). Anthropology and cosmology find their synthesis in Christology.

The question about death is the question about the meaning of life; about the meaning of history; about the ethical imperatives of justice, freedom, dignity; about the present-future dialectic; about the person, who am I, what will become of me? Death, which in fact holds us back in our earthly existence, presents itself as a scandal to reason. Our whole being is revealed before it before the absurdity of a life condemned to death. Victory over it is necessary, it is the hope of all humanity. With Christ, death makes it possible to open up to eternal love; man's faith and hope are fulfilled in Him. If life has meaning, death must make way for the human being to remain eternally in what he longed for during his earthly existence: the eternal enjoyment of infinite love for the one who welcomes me always.

## Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to enter into a dialogue with transhumanism from a Christian anthropological perspective centred on the person. For both, the discovery of the finitude of the person is a challenge. It seems that it is necessary to overcome it in order to live in fullness. As a radical evil, the problem of death arises. The transhumanist vision tries to offer a series of solutions to overcome the truncation of human existence, but it is presented with partial solutions. Either because they refer to the lengthening of existence, or because they project an emptying of our mind on a computerised support. In all of them, the meaning of being a person is reduced. The concepts of human nature, vulnerability, deficiencies acquire a meaning from Christian anthropology that goes beyond the transhumanist sense. Moreover, limitations are interpreted as opportunities to open up to others and to a reality beyond ourselves that requires an expanded reason to access it. Being willing to renounce our intellectual pride and open ourselves to a transcendent reality allows us to encounter a God the Father who encounters humanity throughout history.

In Christ the victory over evil, his message of salvation to humanity allows human beings to discover the meaning of their life and the vocational call to love and be loved in eternity. It is not man who gives himself eternal life, but God the Creator and Saviour himself.

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