

A CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF SIN AND TRANSHUMANISM IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE PROMETHEAN CONCERN OF PRIDE

Manitza Kotzé
Unit for Reformational Theology
North-West University

Abstract

Transhumanism and its attempts to enhance what it means to be human and overcome natural limitations is often described, also in secular discourses, as “playing God”. As such, it is often seen as forming part of the Promethean project. The sin of pride therefore, makes a fitting point of departure for responding to the challenges that transhumanism raises in the public sphere from the perspective of Christian theology. In this contribution, transhumanism is offered as a theological response in the public sphere, situating the discussion in public theology. While, traditionally, humility serves as the inverse of pride, in this contribution, I propose that within the context of biotechnological human enhancement, vulnerability can serve as a countermeasure to pride within the public discourse on transhumanism, utilising sin language.

Keywords: Transhumanism; Biotechnological enhancement; Public theology; Sin; Pride; Hubris; Prometheus

Introduction

Technology advances, “and each time our moral analysis must take account of our new circumstance” (Cole-Turner 2003:192). One such advancement of a variety of technologies can be grouped under the umbrella term, ‘transhumanism’, a philosophy that literally advocates transcending humanity; overcoming human limitations until we become *transhuman*.¹ Using various forms of technology, the aim of transhumanism is to improve human beings in order to transcend the limitations that we currently experience because of our biological nature. The transhumanist organisation, Humanity+, describes itself on its website as being “dedicated to elevating the human condition”. The organisation notes that technological interaction with human physiology for therapeutic purposes has developed quickly to the point where it can also be utilised to enhance human functioning beyond what is usually perceived as “normal”.

The notion of improving or enhancing ourselves, is not a new phenomenon. The development and use of technology have always been tied to reducing our human vulnerabilities. Mark Coeckelbergh says that this drive to become ‘better’ is part of what it means to be human. He notes that we always “struggle against our condition and try to improve it” (2013:4). We do not want this vulnerability, or at best we do not want to

¹ For discussions of transhumanism as a movement, see, for example, Sutton (2015); Gleaves (2017); Dumsday (2017) and Kotzé (2019).

be “as vulnerable as we are (now). We design and use technology to decrease our vulnerability” (Coeckelbergh 2013:4). As human beings, we have always attempted to reduce our feelings of helplessness, weakness, and vulnerability. While this insurrection against our human limitations can then be put down to who we are, Coeckelbergh admits that this “modern revolt may indeed be problematic in various ways” (2013:3).

Decades earlier, Reinhold Niebuhr stated that human beings, whether as individuals or as groups and nations, react to this realisation of human vulnerability and finitude with anxiety. It is challenging for us to deal constructively with the recognition that we are vulnerable, and as a result, we become anxious. Niebuhr therefore notes that anxiety gives way to the sin of pride, for, “Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin” (1949:182). He is quick to point out, however, that it is not anxiety itself that is sin, it is merely a precondition to sin, but also the root of all human creativity. Our limitations and vulnerabilities make us anxious, yet we are not so limited that we are unaware of these limitations (Niebuhr 1949:183). “The actual sin is the consequence of the temptation of anxiety in which all life stands” (Niebuhr 1949:250). In this contribution, one of the consequences of this anxiety, the inability to accept our limitations and vulnerabilities, is brought into conversation with the attempt to transcend these limitations through the development of biotechnological enhancement. Agneta Sutton asks whether the aspirations of transhumanism do not also express certain fears; “fears of not being there, fears of no longer being here in this world” (2015:124).

Reflecting on the challenges that transhumanism and biotechnological human enhancement raise, is not only a matter of academic interest or of concern to faith communities and church members who wonder about the morality and ethical implications of the scientific breakthroughs they read about in newspaper headlines. A Christian response to these matters within the public sphere is also necessary, especially a response to those in the scientific community who vocally call for ethicists to “get out of the way” of research. Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist writing an opinion piece for the *Boston Globe* of 1 August 2015, reproaches those concerned with the ethical implications of biotechnological research of slowing progress down. Pinker claims that they flood research with “red tape, moratoria, or threats of prosecution based on nebulous but sweeping principles such as ‘dignity,’ ‘sacredness,’ or ‘social justice’” (2015). Those of us concerned with the ethical and theological implications that developing forms of biotechnology and transhumanism hold then have a duty to be less vague and to make our contributions comprehensible within the public sphere.

Ronald Cole-Turner argues that theology makes the best contribution when it is aware of the reality that we live in pluralistic and often irreligious or secular societies, “and therefore not when it offers answers, much less insists that its answers become law, but when it invites citizens of every perspective and persuasion to reflect on the nature and meaning of human life in its many relationships and possibilities” (2003:192). Cole-Turner’s point is especially relevant in a discussion of Christian doctrine of sin within the public sphere, and it may mean describing the moral stakes involved in human biotechnological enhancement also in secular terms. This contribution hopes to be part of this reflection in the public sphere, as it asks how the Christian doctrine of sin can form part of the discussion on transhumanism in ways that make sense to a broader public.

Human limitations and the public sphere

Human limitations challenge us, “whether we are religious or not” (Cole-Turner 2003:196). Thus, Michael Crow affirms that with regard to a number of topical issues, “we seem to be operating beyond our ability to plan and implement effectively, or even to identify conditions where actions is needed and can succeed” (2007:29). While these limits appear to be declining from the perspective of technological optimists, those with a grimmer outlook see more and more situations arising where our limitations become apparent. Crow (2007:30-31) groups these limits, that is, individual limits, into sociobiological limits; socioeconomic limits²; technological limits; knowledge limits; and philosophical limits. All these limitations come to the fore in the discussion of transhumanism and the biotechnological enhancement of human beings. Another important limit, as Cole-Turner (2003:196) notes, has to do with the “limit implied by the meaning of species”. This is not so much a biological limit as one that is logical in nature: “If we transcend our species, will *we* still exist?” (Cole-Turner 2003:196, italics in original). The questions and challenges that transhumanism raises are not only important discussions to have in the public sphere as they have profound implications for how we think of, for example, human dignity, and many other concepts that are central to how many societies operate. Transhumanism also poses several theological questions, for example, about human nature, human beings as created, the desirability of limitations, and many others. As these are very public issues, they should also be addressed publicly.

Brent Waters launches a critical inquiry into techno-culture, arguing that this neologism that joins technology and culture wrongly implies that not only are we “living in a global culture that is being shaped by technology” (2014:7), but that asserting the priority of technology is misleading. New technologies do not appear by magic, foregoing and triggering cultural change. Such a view, Waters notes, awards unjustified autonomy to “a so-called technological system” (2014:7). However, technology “creates the vales of late moderns and not vice versa” (Waters 2014:8). If a specific technology were truly new, it would not be so commonly accepted. Accordingly, Waters notes that “it is not so much the case that technology creates new values as that it satisfies prior desires in often unanticipated ways” (2014:8). In turn, this prompts a cyclical pattern where new technologies result in further improvements, and users must modify their lives to make use of it fully. This spur “new desires and values in response to this unfolding potential, spurring another spate of technological innovation” (Waters 2014:9). The importance of dealing with the questions that the development of technology, also biotechnology, poses in the public sphere is also emphasised by Waters. He remarks that a “fixation on a glamorous future serves to misdirect attention away from the demanding and crucial task of critically examining the moral formation and pattern of daily, mundane life, which is precisely where technology, for both good and ill, works its greatest formative influence” (2014:1). This article aims to be a part of this critical examination.

² Much could be said regarding the possible socioeconomic implications of transhumanism and biotechnological enhancement of human beings, both on the level of the effects it could have in terms of the exacerbation of socioeconomic inequalities that already exist or the creation of new forms of inequalities. It is, however, beyond the scope of this contribution to engage in this discussion. For more on this topic, see for example Kotzé (2019).

Responding to the challenges raised by transhumanism which takes the Christian doctrine of sin in the public sphere as a point of departure is also particularly apt, given that to a large extent, sin language is used in the public sphere in this regard, often also in secular discourses. Ted Peters notes that whenever phrases are used as “*hubris*, or *playing God*, or *Frankenstein*” (2018:145, italics in original), the myth of Prometheus is being suggested. The notion of “playing God” will be discussed shortly. These expressions are all used often within the public sphere as well, and taking the time to reflect on their meaning is thus an important step. In the following section, this notion is framed as a Promethean concern.

Human biotechnological enhancement—a Promethean concern

The Promethean legacy, as Peters shows, is closely associated with “*hubris*, pride, overstepping our limits, crossing into forbidden territory, and violating the sacred. The antidote to Promethean recklessness is humility, caution, and sound judgment” (2018:145). John Gleaves also indicates that Prometheus has come to explain why pursuing the improvement of human beings is a task better left to omnipotent beings. Humanity has limited knowledge and as a result, what is intended to be an enhancement might become our ultimate undoing (2017:94). Peters also notes that “promethean pride or *hubris* is dangerous” (2014:13). In contemporary society, the shape that this Promethean pride can take among natural science is to overestimate the knowledge that we hold, ascribing omni-science which we do not possess (Peters 2014:13).

In an opinion piece for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Micheal Sandel notes that the biggest issue with genetic engineering and utilising it to enhance humanity is not, as is often assumed, that effort and human agency is challenged or eroded, but rather that a form of “hyperagency” is at play. Sandel calls this a “Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires” (2004:5). In this way of thinking, transhumanism is also an intentional act of bending not just nature, but the very building blocks of human life, to our will. Intentions are an important factor in the ethical assessment of an act, for those of us with religious convictions, Cole-Turner notes (2003:196). For this reason, he further states that, “we are deeply suspicious of the integrity of our own intentions” (Cole-Turner 2003:196).

This scepticism, which applies of course not only to the application of biotechnological enhancements and transhumanist undertakings, but to all human endeavours, can also be put down to the Christian doctrine of sin.

Transhumanism and the sin of pride in the public sphere

Paul Ramsey famously made the statement: “Men ought not to play God before they learn to be men, and after they have learned to be men they will not play God” (1970:138). This notion of “playing God” is one that have been widely echoed, especially by critics of biotechnology. The most common way of interpreting this phrase is that to “play God” is to do something prohibited, to transgress our boundaries in a way that would amount to the sin of hubris, insulting God in a manner that will be punished and

will end in catastrophe (cf. Peters 2014; 2018:145; Gleaves 2017:95; Coeckelbergh 2013:4; Baertschi 2013:435; Dumsday 2017:616)³.

John Sadler, for example, notes that in both science fiction and ordinary fiction, “the hubris myth, with its inevitable postscript of awful unforeseen consequences” continues (2010:68). He asks what becomes of the sin of hubris “when the virtue of humility is dismantled by a transhumanist pursuit of ‘excellences’”? (Sadler 2010:67). The usage of the term “playing God” could be applied “to oppose both the development and utilisation of biotechnological knowledge and skills, also when it comes to human enhancement, on the basis that human beings are interceding onto God’s territory and not taking our limitations into account” (Kotzé 2018:6). As such, one interpretation of this phrase could be summarised as the sin of pride.

The pride that can be said to be visible in transhumanism is not only in terms of the transgression of boundaries, but also the hubris of being the one to decide. Who decides which human limitations should be transcended? What attributes should be enhanced? Who should have access to these forms of technology? Ramsey asks whether human beings will ever be “wise enough” to successfully alter ourselves or our species (1970:123-124). Wisdom is also emphasised by Peters, who describes “playing God” in another way, namely to “confuse the knowledge we do have with the wisdom to decide how to use it” (2014:13). As one of the cardinal virtues, it makes sense that wisdom is also an aspect of the discussion on sin.

Wisdom is also identified as crucial to the discussion within Christian ethics on new forms of genetic technology by Celia Deane-Drummond. Deane-Drummond mentions that the “cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance” will in all probability be highly relevant in the “consideration of issues in genetics” (2006:47). This is because wisdom, she continues to note, “acts like an intermediary between these virtues and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity” (Deane-Drummond 2006:47). In reflecting on wisdom as a virtue as discussed by Aquinas, she remarks “human attempts at wisdom that simply fix on creaturely loftiness Aquinas names as ‘devilish ... because it copies the pride of the devil’” (Deane-Drummond 2006:48-49). From this, it becomes clear that even the notion of human wisdom, when coupled with the sin of pride, could then merely be described as hubris or arrogance. It is described by Aquinas here as nothing more than a parody of true wisdom.

In James Drane’s emphasis on moral virtues that are of importance of medical practitioners, he also lists a number of vices, naming commercial gain, disrespect, pride, love of power, self-centeredness and commitment to self-enhancement (1994:298-303). It is accurate that humanity have adapted to and have been changed by our environment. However, the new possibilities of change include not only the alteration of the conduct of human life, but the very nature of human life (Dumsday 2017:601). This aspect is also highlighted by Waters, who argues that “posthuman discourse is driven by largely inarticulate beliefs regarding human nature and destiny” (2014:1). Accordingly, he notes the necessity of “a counter-theological discourse” in order to reveal it as an untrue and even treacherous “collection of beliefs” (2014:1).

³ Certainly, this does not only happen in the public sphere. Robin Gill, in *Public Theology and Genetics*, notes that an increasing number of theological works argue that “a godless society is ever moving in a more destructive and irreligious direction, relegating powers to itself that properly belong only to God” (2004:153).

The argument that Ramsey makes, is that “from man’s rape of the earth and his folly in exercising stewardship over his environment by divine commission, there can be derived no reason to believe that he ought now to reach for dominion over the modifications of his own species as well” (1970:124). In short, we do not have a great track record. Ramsey disagrees with Karl Rahner on this point. Rahner states that humanity has always had the power to control our “permanent, everlasting orientation”, but that this power has mostly been wielded in the field of the meditative knowledge of faith, until recent technological advances have broadened where this power can be exercised (Ramsey 1970:139). With this development, Rahner claims that, “there is really nothing possible for man that he ought not to do” (in Ramsey 1970:141), a thought that alarms Ramsey. It would have been interesting if Rahner would still have held this view during present discussions on transhumanism. The present challenge of transhumanism and the biotechnological enhancement of human beings are very different than the challenges Ramsey and Rahner were responding to.

Ramsey, for example, appeared to view the utilisation of technology mostly in terms of ensuring healthy children and preventing “unduly defective individuals” (1970:35) rather than the ‘perfected’ individuals that transhumanists foresee at present. Rahner, writing his seemingly affirmative evaluation of biotechnological enhancement, was writing in 1970, long before the goals that present transhumanists envision were discussed as even possibly attainable and how far “what is possible for man” stretched in his mind is impossible to ascertain today. Given that his anthropology is marked by not only freedom, but also a profound awareness of human fallibility, he also emphasised that the reality of sin overrules the achievement of “total and finalising self-mastery” (Rahner 1971:183).

Still, the examination of Ramsey makes a fitting conclusion to the notion of “playing God” as overstepping, as rebelling against the natural limitations we are created with and acting in ways which is God’s prerogative.

On the other hand, an argument could also be made for the exact opposite perspective, namely that “not taking up the responsibility enshrined in this creative process, also through utilising the scientific tools at hand to become actively involved in creation, might rather be the failure to accept responsibility, to accept our vocation and calling” (Kotzé 2018:7). This argument is less common in discussions in the public sphere on “playing God”. Lee Silver, however, does exactly this when providing a justification for “playing God” with the human genome, arguing on the basis that if we accept that God has given human beings responsibility, “then it would seem that have at least a *prima facie* moral obligation to alter our genetic makeup for therapeutic ends. Such acts in this latter view, then, would not be improper acts of ‘playing God’; rather, they represent the rightful taking up of our responsibility for the goods of life and health” (2006:10). Adam Gross, while not explicitly mentioning the “playing God” argument, titles his article *Dr. Frankenstein, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love CRISPR-Cas9*, thereby invoking the Promethean concern. Gross indicates that amongst those involved in the development of biotechnologies such as CRISPR, there is a profound lack of interest in “an internationally binding treaty or convention” and “little willingness to engage in nonstate regulation of biotechnology” (2016:447).

Audrey Chapman reminds us that in many instances, scientific discoveries of new technological developments are introduced without there being any sincere attempt at assessing the ethical repercussions and usually also without public debate or input. Additionally, the way that the media usually reports on these breakthroughs or advances is in most cases lacking thorough and analytic examination (1999:109). She therefore notes that public theology is essential to stress the necessity of public discourse and societal decision making, rather than attempting to prescribe policy (Chapman 1999:250). This echoes the earlier statement of Cole-Turner, and brings the public sphere back into the discussion. In the following section, this is addressed more explicitly.

A Christian doctrine of sin in the public sphere— theology as public

William Stirrer and Andrew Morton defines public theology very simply by referring to the way it has been expressed by Jürgen Moltmann⁴, as having to do “with the public relevance of a theology which has at the core of its Christian identity a concern for the coming of God’s Kingdom in the public world of human history” (2004:1). For Moltmann, the public nature of theology is integral to it being theology. For the sake of the Kingdom of God, “theology has to be *public* theology: public, critical and prophetic complaint to God – public, critical and prophetic hope in God” (1999:5, italics in original). This is also similar to Duncan Forrester’s definition of public theology as theology “which claims to point to publicly accessible truth, contribute to public discussion by witnessing to a truth that is relevant to what is going on in the world and to the pressing issues which are facing people in societies today” (2000:127).

Nico Koopman pinpoints three fundamental questions for public theology, even though different approaches would deal with these questions in different manners: “first, the inherent public nature of God’s love; second, the rationality of God’s love for the world; and third, the meaning and implications of God’s love for every facet of life” (Koopman 2010:124). All three of these questions can be described as a “specification and concretisation of the three questions that Christian theology address”; that is, the essence or content of the Christian faith, the “rationality of the Christian faith”, and third, the significance and consequences thereof for all aspects of life (Koopman 2010:124). This includes the implications of Christian faith for questions raised in the public sphere, such as responding to transhumanism.

A concept, such as ‘public’, is used in different and often, in vague and even inconsistent ways, as Dirkie Smit remarks (2007). In making a proposal for a formulation of the Christian doctrine of sin also as a response to the public questions of transhumanism, it is important to clarify what exactly is meant by this public sphere.

Smit identifies three ways that contemporary societies speak of the notion of the public. First, public can refer to the areas and procedures where public opinion is shaped and supported regarding the normative vision for society (2007:1-2). In this same view, public can also be used as the opposite of private, or in contrast with the state or market.

⁴ Moltmann (1999:1) explains that, “Its subject alone makes Christian theology a *theologia publica*, a public theology. It gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the kingdom of God. It becomes political in the name of the poor and the marginalized in a given society. Remembrance of the crucified Christ makes it critical towards political religions and idolatries. It thinks critically about the religious and moral values of the societies in which it exists, and presents its reflections as a reasoned position”.

Public theologies that are based on this understanding of what public entails, Koopman (2010:135) indicates, “take on the form of public religion as civil religion, advocacy and struggle for specific goals, roundtable forums that facilitate public dialogue and address tensions and conflicts in service of the common good, and also participation in policy making and implementation”.

The second way in which ‘public’ can be understood, possibly the most widely used within the circles of theology and the Church, is to refer to life in a broad and general sense; living in the world, the entirety of creation, including history, culture, social life, reality, and humanity. Public theology within this understanding focuses on the role that the church plays in society, the relationship between church and state, the economy, and civil society (Smit 2007:3-5). The third approach to ‘public’ is still more ambiguous, working with the assumption that because specific audiences are addressed, all theological discourse can be described as public (Smit 2007:4-5).

For Koopman, this multiplicity in understandings and the differences in emphasis is an important diversity to maintain. It is necessary, he indicates, to have the contribution of theologians on the moral vision of society, “in public opinion formation and implementation” (2010:136). A theological grappling with formal questions of method, as well as substantial questions regarding the place, role, and shape of the church in the public sphere is also needed. “We need the skills to address different audiences or publics” (Koopman 2010:136).

Keeping to the pattern of identifying three approaches, Ian McFarland discusses societal voices supporting “the value of sin-talk in the public sphere” (2010:11), even though these voices are often on the periphery. Most often, the argument is based on the belief that a suitable appreciation for how human beings experience the reality of evil cannot be maintained without the vital and inimitable resource that the language of sin offers (McFarland 2010:12). He goes on to identify three models in which contemporary endeavours to “reclaim” the language of sin in the public sphere can be grouped, emphasizing a particular dimension of the way sin has traditionally been characterised. In the *responsibility model*, the emphasis is on sin “as a class of acts or attitudes that damages or disrupts the relationships necessary for human well-being” (2010:12). The focus in the *participation model* is on sin having a dimension that is beyond the merely personal, but being a power that damages the well-being of all creatures (2010:14). The last model, which McFarland (2010:16-17) calls the *tragic model*, utilises the language of tragedy as an alternative way of voicing the “human experience of evil”. None of these models, however, sufficiently brings together the complete scope of sin language in the Bible, which is characterised by the concept of humanity’s essential responsibility for sin on the one hand, and our essential powerlessness in the face thereof on the other. Accordingly, McFarland (2010:18-19) proposes that the doctrine of original sin is a way of attempting to step into this gap.

Theology makes a unique contribution to discourses in the public sphere. In comparing religious and secular ethicists, Gill indicates that the difference is relative and of course there are those that explicitly refer to the value they place on wider relational bonds, justice for the powerless, and the moral tradition in their arguments. However, in general, “religious ethicists ... are more likely than their secular counterparts to enshrine these three derivative virtues” (2004:258). For Gill (2004:263), public theology then has a critical function to fulfil in three ways; “criticizing, deepening and widening the ethical

debate in society at large”. The tasks of deepening and widening offer a vision of what could be and is based on the Christological assumptions that are at the core of Christian theology (Gill 2004:263). The content of theology is therefore an important feature of a public theology that addresses public issues such as those raised by transhumanism and human enhancement through biotechnology. In this contribution, the Christian doctrine of sin has been put forward as a resource that shows one way in which theological content could add to the discussion in the public sphere. In particular, sin expressed as pride has been chosen as the point of departure here, given that sin language is already often used in secular discourses, especially in the often-used expression “playing God”. In the following section, I suggest one way in which a Christian doctrine of sin, and pride in particular, can function in the public sphere in discussions of transhumanism, by showing the importance of vulnerability as a countermeasure to pride.

Vulnerability as a countermeasure to pride

Coeckelbergh reminds us that what we deem to be risks and our notions of how these risks could be mitigated or dealt with, as well as which issues we would prioritise, depend “on claims made by scientists and others in the public domain” (2013:40). Utilising sin language also in the public sphere in a theological response to the challenges raised by transhumanism necessitates that we respond in a manner that is understandable within the public sphere. Vulnerability as a countermeasure to pride is one way in which this can be done.

In traditional thought, the inverse of pride has been expressed as humility. I wish to argue that one facet of humility, and one that would contribute to discussions on transhumanism and sin within the public sphere, could in turn be expressed as an appreciation for vulnerability. Ernst Conradie notes that pride “comes in various forms” (2017:14), all linked to the notion of sin as revolt, arrogance, idolatry, a failure to trust God. Consequently, “sin may be understood as the refusal to accept our place, to know and to accept our limitations” (Conradie 2017:16). When speaking about sin as pride in general terms, humility then serves well as the counter. Utilising sin language to respond to the challenges raised by transhumanism, also in the public sphere, however, necessitates a more precise description of humility and I propose that vulnerability can fulfil this function.

“[E]xistential vulnerability and risk need to be discussed as a public matter, since they *are* of public concern” (Coeckelbergh 2013:147, italics in original). The problem of vulnerability also cuts through the modern distinction between the private and the public spheres (Coeckelbergh 2013:151). It is unsustainable to make too sharp a distinction between different spheres, such as “religion”, “politics”, “economy”, and so forth, as the intersectionality of these areas means that they often overlap and the distinctions become fuzzy at best. The notion of vulnerability in the discussion on transhumanism also makes these distinctions less sharp because it encompasses both individual vulnerability and public risk.

Responding to the challenges of transhumanism and biotechnological enhancement of human beings with the notion of vulnerability as a countermeasure to pride also offers a way to react to the anxiety over our limitations which precedes pride, as mentioned earlier. Koopman (2013:47) remarks that over against responding with anxiety to our vulnerabilities, “the Christological hope of the heavenly solidarity of the cross and the

expectation of renewal of the open grave are suggested as a faithful response to vulnerability”.

Sturla Stålsett argues that it is important to have a renewed appreciation of both the inevitability and the inimitable worth of human vulnerability (2015:466). The relationship between theology and anthropology is an intimate one in Christian theology; we understand ourselves in the view of God. Human beings are inherently vulnerable. While this vulnerability is an aspect that transhumanists seek to transcend, it does not only refer to the capacity to be affected by others, but more generally speaking, “openness, relatedness, mutability, and communicability” (Stålsett 2015:467). Vulnerability, in its positive dimension, Stålsett (2015:467) notes, is the invitation to enter into relationship; “that the vulnerable person be recognized, taken into account, cared for, respected, loved, and protected”. Our vulnerability, rather than something that we should aim to reduce through technological development, necessitates ethical action. It is because of our vulnerability that we depend on each other, which gives us power over others, but also gives others a claim against us—it is an ethical demand (Stålsett 2015:468). Vulnerability in theological discussion is also broader than this; it is not only human beings that are vulnerable, but God is vulnerable as well.

Many sources in the Christian tradition speak to the symbol of God as vulnerable. Moltmann, in particular, traces the theological development of the suffering God (Stålsett 2015:474). Confessing a vulnerable God, Stålsett (2015:477) notes that a God who has made the choice to be vulnerable through creation, love, and relationship with vulnerable human beings “calls for a ... theology that enhances human vulnerability as a value”. Over against the sin of pride, the recognition of our vulnerability, not as an attribute that needs to be transcended, but something to embrace, offers a powerful alternative. The embracing of our vulnerability is also a notion that can be utilised comprehensively in the public sphere.

Vulnerability also brings about the acknowledgment that we are beholden to God; that life itself is a gift. The recognition of the giftedness of life is also the acknowledgement that “not everything in the world is open to whatever use we may desire or devise” (Sandel 2004:5). An appreciation of the gifted nature of life holds back the Promethean project and helps to bring about a certain humility, which Sandel (2004:5), while acknowledging that this humility reaches beyond religion, also calls “in part a religious sensibility”. This humility can also be linked to the virtue of wisdom mentioned earlier.

Coeckelbergh argues that while transhumanism might diminish certain forms of vulnerability in the future, new forms would emerge. Accordingly, he puts forward that the choice “is not between vulnerable humans and invulnerable posthumans, or between vulnerability and invulnerability, but a choice between different *forms* of the human and different *forms* of vulnerability” (2013:204, italics in original). From a theological perspective, however, this argument puts a tenuous amount of trust in human ability to discern which vulnerabilities are worth discarding, what new vulnerabilities would emerge, and what forms they would take. Inherent to the human condition, Conradie (2017:152) reminds us, is human fallibility.

Stressing the importance of vulnerability as the inverse of human pride within the context of transhumanism functions on two levels. On the one hand, it reminds us that as human beings, we are vulnerable, fragile, and fallible. Even with the best intentions,

our endeavours for improvement often fail. On the other hand, vulnerability also reminds us to keep in focus those who are especially vulnerable in our discussions. Emphasising vulnerability means that in discussions on transhumanism, also in the public sphere, we keep in mind the differently abled, those individuals whose vulnerabilities and identity could be the first to be eradicated by quests for ‘enhancement’. By underscoring the importance of vulnerability, we are also reminded of social, economic, and structural vulnerabilities, and that the development of the type of technology envisioned by transhumanists will only be available and affordable to a select few. As the inverse of pride, vulnerability as one form of humility can contribute meaningfully to discussions on the ethical and theological questions that transhumanism poses by making use of accessible sin language also in the public sphere.

Conclusion

The duty of the public theologian is “to keep alive the dream of ending global human misery and to speak in public debate in ways that are prophetic, passionate and yet accessible” (Storrar & Morton 2004:21). John de Gruchy indicates that for public theology to be authentic and to function within the public sphere, it must be able to critique itself and be receptive to other approaches and viewpoints, including the historical context. However, this does not mean that it should be apologetic to the extent that its particular Christian content is concealed or negated, nor that its prophetic transparency and duty become weakened (De Gruchy 2004:59).

Richard Bauckman states that the questions that public theology needs to answer in the twentieth-first century include whether the freedom that modernity viewed as its aim has been delivered, whether this freedom is to our benefit or disadvantage, and whether the type of freedom it imagined can be called indeed the “authentic foal of human fulfilment” or rather a distortion of human freedom (2004:77). Bauckman (2004:77) further states that it is so clear that these are the questions to which answers are expected from public theology; it “hardly needs arguing”. Behind every discussion of human freedom in the crisis of modernity, he argues, “the question of the death of God” is present, although this is mostly in implicit ways (Bauckham 2004:77). In responding to these questions and reflecting on the matter of human freedom in the public sphere, this point must be made explicit.

The questions of human freedom and human limitations are intimately related to the challenges raised by transhumanism and responding also to the theological assumptions in these discussions in the public sphere necessitates not concealing the Christian content that enables theology to make a unique and important contribution also to the discourse in the public sphere. In this contribution, a Christian doctrine of sin within the public sphere was utilised in such a manner. I have argued that the widespread references to transhumanism and related forms of biotechnology as “playing God” and making itself guilty of the sin of pride, also within secular discourse, makes this a fitting doctrine to use as resource for this discussion.

Being human means that we are vulnerable. “We are under threat. We are fragile. We suffer” (Koopman 2013:53). Acknowledging our vulnerabilities, not with the aim of transcending them, can serve as countermeasure to reacting to this recognition of our limitations and vulnerabilities with pride rooted in the Promethean project of wanting to

overcome all our limitations and vulnerabilities. In this way, a Christian doctrine of sin can offer a response to transhumanism, in a way that makes sense in the public sphere.

Bibliography

- Baertschi, B. 2013. Defeating the Argument from Hubris, *Bioethics* 27(8): 435-441.
- Bauckman, R.J. 2004. Freedom in the Crisis of Modernity. In Storrar, W.F. and Morton, A.R. (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*. London: T&T Clark, 77-94.
- Chapman, A.R. 1999. *Unprecedented Choices: Religious Ethics at the Frontiers of Genetic Science*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Coeckelbergh, M. 2013. *Human Being @ Risk: Enhancement, Technology, and the Evaluation of Vulnerability Transformations*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Cole-Turner, R. 2003. Human Limits: Theological Perspectives on Germ-Line Modification, in Chapman A.R. and Frankel, M.S. (eds.), *Designing Our Descendants: The Promises and Perils of Genetic Modifications*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 188-198.
- Conradie, E.M. 2017. *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Crow, M.M. 2007. 'None Dare Call It Hubris: The Limits of Knowledge', *Issues in Science and Technology*, 29-32.
- Deane-Drummond, C. 2006. *Genetics and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Gruchy, J.W. 2004. From Political to Public Theologies: The Role of Theology in Public Life in South Africa. In Storrar, W.F. and Morton, A.R. (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*. London: T&T Clark, 45-62.
- Drane, J.F. 1994. Character and the Moral Life: A Virtue Approach to Bioethics. In Du Bose, E.R., Hamel R.P. and O'Connell, L.J. (eds.), *A Matter of Principles*. Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 284-309.
- Dumsday, T. 2017. Transhumanism, Theological Anthropology, and Modern Biological Taxonomy, *Zygon* 52(3): 601-622.
- Forrester, D. 2000. *Truthful Action*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Gill, R. 2004. Public Theology and Genetics. In Storrar, W.F. and Morton, A.R. (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*. London: T&T Clark, 253-265.
- Gleaves, J. 2017. Beyond Prometheus, Strawmen, and Science Fiction: Ethicists and the Moral Debate over Enhancements to Human Performance, *Kinesiology Review* 6: 91-98.
- Gross, A.J. 2016. Dr. Frankenstein, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love CRISPR-Cas9, *Jurimetrics: The Journal of Law, Science & Technology* 56(4): 413-447.
- Humanity+. Website: humanityplus.org. Accessed 12 February 2020.
- Koopman, N. 2013. Hope, Vulnerability and Disability? A Theological Perspective. In Claassens, J., Swartz, L. and Hansen, L. (eds.), *Searching for Dignity: Conversations on Human Dignity, Theology and Disability*. Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 43-54.

- Koopman, N. 2010. Some Contours for Public Theology in South Africa. *International Journal of Public Theology* 14: 123-138.
- Kotzé, M. 2018. The Theological Ethics of Human Enhancement: Genetic Engineering, Robotics and Nanotechnology, *In die Skriflig* 52(3), 1-8.
- Kotzé, M. 2019. A Life with Limits: A Christian Ethical Investigation of Radically Prolonging Human Lifespans, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32(1): 56-65.
- McFarland, I.A. 2010. *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Moltmann, J. 1999. *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Niebuhr, R. 1949. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*. New York: Scribner.
- Peters, T. 2014. *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Peters, T. 2018. Playing God with Frankenstein, *Theology and Science* 16(2): 145-150.
- Pinker, S. 2015. The Moral Imperative for Bioethics. *Boston Globe*, 1 August, online.
- Rahner, K. 1968. Experiment: Man, *Theology Digest* 16: 57-69.
- Rahner, K. 1971. *Theological Investigations*, Volume 6. Translated by Cornelius Ernst et al. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Ramsey, P. 1970. *Fabricated Man: The Ethics of Genetic Control*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sadler, J.Z. 2010. 'Dignity, Arête, and Hubris in the Transhumanist Debate', *The American Journal of Bioethics* 1(7): 67-68.
- Sandel, M.J. 2004. The Case against Perfection: What's Wrong with Designer Children, Bionic Athletes, and Genetic Engineering?' *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2004, page 5.
- Silver, L.M. 2006. 'The Biotechnology of Culture Clash', *Science and Technology News* 6(10):10.
- Smit, D. 2007. Notions of the Public – and Doing Theology? Tentative Theses for Discussion, *International Journal of Public Theology* 1(3); 431-454.
- Stålsett, S.J. 2015. Towards a Political Theology of Vulnerability: Anthropological and Theological Propositions, *Political Theology* 16(5): 464-478.
- Storrar, W.F. and Morton, A.R. 2004. Introduction. In Storrar, W.F. and Morton, A.R. (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*. London: T&T Clark, 1-21.
- Sutton, A. 2015. Transhumanism: A New Kind of Promethean Hubris, *The New Bioethics* 21(2): 117-127.
- Waters, B. 2006. *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World*. New York: Routledge.