

The Kingdom of Health, the Kingdom of Sickness, and the Kingdom of God

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ABSTRACT:

To what extent should Christians use technological means to mitigate their vulnerabilities and augment or enhance their capacities beyond what is humanly normal? The most influential arguments for a conservative answer—from C.S. Lewis, Leon Kass, and Michael Sandel—should not persuade Christians. But there are better reasons to hold a conservative position. The two greatest welfare goods for humans, corresponding to the two greatest commandments, are *loving communion with others* and *loving communion with God*. Our vulnerabilities and frailties accelerate our access to such goods, whereas a high degree of self-sufficiency and invulnerability is likely to hinder our access; we should expect to reach the Kingdom of God by way of the “Kingdom of Sickness,” rather than the “Kingdom of Health.” Thus, while some enhancements may be permissible or even obligatory, many others threaten to deprive us of our highest flourishing.

KEYWORDS: Christian hope, enhancement, Kingdom of God, *koinonia*, *theosis*

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay is a contribution to the debate about “human enhancement.” More specifically, it is an attempt to provide at least a partial answer to the question, “To what extent ought Christians to put their hopes in biotechnological progress?”

‘Human enhancement’ is a notoriously slippery category. One reason is its ambiguity: it can be understood as an essentially positive category (roughly coextensive with *human improvement*) or as a neutral one.¹ Another reason is that it is invoked as the umbrella-category for quite the motley of interventions: vaccines, gene-editing, in-vitro fertilization and other reproductive technologies, nano-scale therapy, prosthetics, cognitive stimulants, mood stabilizers, and so on. Whether these innovations have much of substance in common is not immediately obvious.

We need some sort of preliminary account of the category that makes sense of the fault-lines in the debate. Emma Gordon (2023) helpfully delineates enhancement as technological innovations of the following sort. First, the *means* of intervention is new technology; second, the *locus* of intervention is human functions and capacities; third, the *goal* of the intervention is for one to become “better than well”—that is, to become such that one’s functions and capacities are improved beyond what is normal, in some relevant sense of that term.

I will be advocating for a moderately conservative position with respect to human enhancement, so understood. According to a moderately conservative position, there may be plenty of cases where enhancing is morally and prudentially permissible, and perhaps a few cases where enhancing is obligatory. But there are also cases where making such interventions would constitute a harm, and thus is both morally and prudentially forbidden. I will argue that Christians have reasons to maintain a moderately conservative position that non-Christians lack.

¹ See e.g. Earp et al (2014) for a discussion of what they call the “welfarist” vs. “functional-augmentative” approaches to enhancement.

II. UNPERSUASIVE CONSERVATIVE ARGUMENTS FROM GIVENNESS AND MASTERY

There have been many arguments for a conservative position on enhancement. I will not attempt to discuss them all. (See Gordon [2023] for a nice summary.) But I do want to show that Christians should not be persuaded by the most celebrated of these arguments, the argument from the ‘giftedness’ or ‘givenness’ of human nature. A version of the argument can be found in C.S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*, where Lewis argues that a eugenicist program would effectively ‘abolish’ human nature by failing to take it as a given. Recently the argument has been developed by Leon Kass and Michael Sandel. Kass writes:

Most of the given bestowals of nature have their given species-specified natures: they are each and all of a given sort. Cockroaches and humans are equally bestowed but differently natured. To turn a man into a cockroach—as we don’t need Kafka to show us—would be dehumanizing. To try to turn a man into more than a man might be so as well. We need more than generalized appreciation for nature’s gifts. We need a particular regard and respect for the special gift that is our own given nature. (2002, 48)

Similarly, Sandel, writing specifically about genetic engineering, worries that the “gifted character of human powers and achievements” will be lost if they become products of human technology. Interventions that seek mastery over our capacities amount to “a kind of hyperagency—a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires” (54), a “one-sided triumph of willfulness over giftedness” (60).²

² The idea of “human nature” is ambiguous, and the likes of Lewis, Kass, and Sandel are not always clear what they mean. If human nature is the essence of the kind *human*—that which makes a human a human—then “remaking”

Lewis, Kass, and Sandel are worried that our proper relationship to our nature is lost when we take a posture of ‘mastery’ toward it. Our nature is to be received as a given, or even as a gift, complete with its peculiarities and vulnerabilities.

Critics have responded that the posture of mastery seems part and parcel of human nature, rather than a threat to it. As Gordon (2023, 33) puts it, “Enhancing ourselves via technology is just a natural point on a continuum that is predictable for human beings who have always distinguished themselves by resourceful tool use.” We have always applied our wits to the modification of our environment and the enhancement of our capacities. Isn’t this tendency constitutive of the ecological niche we inhabit? What could be more human?

Christians should side with the critics here. Consider the dominion mandate in Genesis 1: “Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue [*kabash*] it, have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth.”³ This mandate not only *permits* a posture of mastery toward nature, but actually *commands* such a posture.

It might be objected that the dominion mandate is not applicable to *human* nature. But this is not plausible: first, because so much obviously salutatory human industry *has already* aimed at taming our wild nature (I have in mind everything from spiritual disciplines to cleft-palate repair); and second, because there are scriptural intimations that our nature is in need of radical alteration. The contrast made throughout the New Testament between the “old man” that one must put off and the “new man” that has been renewed in the image of Christ implies that we emphatically ought *not* to treat our inherited nature as a fixed point.

human nature is nonsensical. (You can’t ‘remake’ the three-sidedness of a triangle.) More likely, they mean something like the prototypical, hereditary, persistent, root characteristics of human beings—those characteristics that determine, in tandem with our environment, the “human condition” in its broad strokes. When I use the term, this is what I have in mind.

³ Here and throughout, Biblical quotations are from the Revised English Bible.

Conservatives often invoke a distinction between therapy and enhancement. In the present context, they might argue that we are indeed to *kabash* nature, including our own, but only in the sense of remedying its ills, allowing it to flourish. We must not replace properly-functioning nature with a different nature.

But again, Christians should not be persuaded. The New Testament emphasizes that the “new man” will be, when fully realized, unimaginably different from our current state. 1 Corinthians describes the fulfillment of God’s promises for humanity as “things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagination, all prepared by God for those who love him.”

The Eastern Orthodox tradition understands this promised glorified state as the culmination of the process of *theosis*—that is, the process of becoming divine (with a lowercase ‘d’, of course). The Orthodox take their cue from the epistle of Peter: “God has given us His promises, great beyond all price, so that through them you may escape the corruption with which lust has infected the world, and may come to share in the very being of God.” In the West, the preferred language for this exalted state is the “beatific vision,” a state of cognitive apprehension of and spiritual union with God. Thomas Aquinas emphasizes that attaining such a state “is beyond the natural power of any created intellect” (ST part 1 q12 a4)—implying that our nature must be radically altered before we can attain our ultimate end. Or again, the Revelation of John declares that “There shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain, for the old order has passed away!” (Revelation 21:4). If such be our hope, we are not to rest content with the current order of things. It is Christians, not transhumanists, whose hopes for the transformation of the human condition are the most radical.

It might be objected that the Christian hope is, nevertheless, for therapeutic restoration, not transformation. The eschaton will amount to a return to ‘normal’—to the glory proper to our nature that we enjoyed prior to our rebellion against God. But at this point, one wonders if advocates of radical enhancement cannot say something similar, viz.: we are not yet what we are *meant* to be, understood as the state of limitlessness toward which our nature is even now tending.

In sum: it is no part of Christian wisdom to treat human capacities as non-negotiable givens. Christians are right to hope that the unruliness of their natures can be mastered, to a degree that goes “beyond therapy” (in the ordinary, medical sense).

If there is a problem with radical technological enhancement—and I am convinced there is—it is not with the goal (humanity transfigured) but with the means proposed to get there. The trouble is that when we try to overcome our vulnerabilities using technological means, we are likely to block our own access to the greatest welfare goods. Or so I shall argue.

III. VULNERABILITY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Kingdom of God, as I understand it, is the state of human affairs in which the two greatest commandments—to love God with one’s whole being, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself—are honored by all. But the two greatest commandments correspond not only to humanity’s two highest duties but also to their two greatest welfare goods: loving communion with God and loving communion with other people. The Kingdom of God is the state of human affairs that makes for the fullest flourishing of human nature, or as Scripture puts it, fulness of joy and abundant life.

What makes certain forms of enhancement problematic, in brief, is that it is precisely through vulnerability that these two greatest welfare goods become most readily available to us.

Loving Communion with Others

Let me begin with the good of loving communion with others. By the word ‘communion,’ I mean to express the Greek notion of *koinonia*. Something is *koinos* when it is shared or held in common. *Koinonia* is the sharing of a common life or a common good. “Sharing,” in what sense? A pizza can be “shared,” but only by cutting it up into pieces that are *not* shared. By contrast, a team sport is “shared” in a very different way. Playing the sport is not something that can be divided amongst individuals. The sport is *koinos* in the sense that it is constituted by the mutual, coordinated activity of a plurality of athletes.

The term ‘*koinonia*’ can be found throughout the New Testament, most famously in the second chapter of Acts, where it is used to describe the rhythm and texture of life among the earliest Christians: “They met constantly to hear the apostles teach and to share the common life [*koinonia*], to break bread, and to pray” (Acts 2:42).

Christians were by no means the first to celebrate *koinonia* as a great good. The term is used pervasively by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* to describe the active expression of friendship. Here is just one example (where ‘community’ and related terms translate ‘*koinonia*’ and related terms):

Fellow voyagers and fellow soldiers are called friends, and so are members of other communities. And the extent of their community is the extent of their friendship, since it is also the extent of the justice found there. The proverb “What friends have in common” is correct, since friendship involves community.

But, whereas brothers and companions have everything in common, what people have in common in other types of community is limited, more in some communities and less in others, since some friendships are also closer than others, some less close” (book VIII ch. 9, 1159b 28-35).

It is clear from Aristotle’s discussion that the concept of *koinonia* applies to many different kinds of associations and common activities. But it is also clear that not all expressions of *koinonia* are equal. Depending on what is shared, the relationship will be more or less intimate. Elsewhere Aristotle makes it clear that the more intimate the *koinonia*, the more rewarding the relationship. The most intimate relationships are those in which the lives and souls of friends are transparent to each other, where a friend becomes “another self,” the goodness of whose life is as much a source of joy to one as is one’s own good life (see *NE* book IX ch. 9).

Whatever advantages modern Western people enjoy, deep *koinonia* is not generally among them. A confluence of factors has been responsible for this dearth of *koinonia*: an ethos of individual autonomy, automotive travel, telecommunication, the rise of home entertainment followed by the distraction of personal digital devices. (These trends have been exhaustively documented and commented upon; see, for example, Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together*, and especially Derek Thompson’s recent essay in the *Atlantic*, “The Anti-Social Century.”) The common dynamic among these various influences is the deterioration of *interdependence*. We are becoming, or at least we perceive that we are becoming, more self-sufficient. We don’t need to work together to build our homes, repair our tools, or harvest our crops; we don’t need to live in close proximity to those who grow and raise our food; we don’t need to share theater spaces and museums to enjoy entertainment and the arts. In short, we do not need each other in the ways humans traditionally have. We are certainly dependent on systems

and networks and corporate entities, but not on the particular *members* of those collectives in anything like a personal way. But *koinonia* runs on the infrastructure of interdependence, at least within the human community in its current, earthly form. As that infrastructure disappears, so does the regular practice of *koinonia*. We “share the common life” only in sporadic and superficial ways.

Enhancement threatens to exacerbate the problem, because interdependence is a function of our vulnerabilities. We collaborate with and care for one another because we *aren't* self-sufficient. Paul instructs the Galatians to “Carry one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). The mutual carrying of burdens is the practical way in which the 2nd greatest commandment, as fleshed out by Christ, is to be observed. But the fewer vulnerabilities we have, the fewer are the burdens that we have available to entrust to one another.

Enhancement threatens *koinonia* in another way. Shared activities can accommodate differences among people, but the degree of difference matters. Some basketball players are taller than others, but imagine a basketball league in which players range from five feet tall to twelve feet tall. The game won’t work; the league will have to divide into different height classes. Or consider gradeschool classrooms, which bring together students with differing aptitudes and interests. But imagine a classroom comprised of severely gifted children alongside severely cognitively disabled children. The point is that enhancements threaten the natural similarities that make a common life possible. Better to remain within the human bell-curve and participate in the common life, than to become an extreme outlier with wildly divergent needs and capabilities from those of your fellows.

Loving Communion with God

I now turn to the welfare-good associated with the greatest commandment: loving communion with God.

A pervasive theme in the New Testament is that the path that leads to the glorification of humanity is a path of humility, smallness, and weakness. The epistle of James is particularly pithy on this point: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” Call such a trajectory—from humility to glory—the ‘J-shape’. We find the J-shape exemplified over and over in the New Testament. Paul describes his own experience: “I am content with a life of weakness, insult, hardship persecution, and distress, all for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). And, of course, the central episode of the New Testament, Christ’s obedience unto death by crucifixion followed by his resurrection and exaltation, quintessentially exemplifies the J-shape.

The Eastern church frequently tells the story of the fall from Eden as an inversion of the J-shape. As St. Sophrony of Essex puts it, “Herein lies the essence of Adam’s sin—it was a movement towards self-divinization. Adam could naturally wish for divinization—he had been created after the likeness of God—but he sinned in seeking this divinization not through unity with God but through rupture” (*His Life is Mine*, p. 37. See also Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, pp. 84ff.) The serpent’s invitation is to become “like unto God” by *grasping*. Christ, the new Adam, does not consider equality with God “something to be grasped,” but instead empties himself, only to be exalted above all other powers (Philippians 2).

History is littered with examples of human beings straining for godlikeness using their own strength. Never has the folly of this impulse been so vividly portrayed as in Percy Shelley’s famous poem *Ozymandius*:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

For the Christian, the point is not so much that the quest for greatness is an absurd one, but that it is absurd to seek greatness by one's own powers. God's grace is needed in order for human nature's highest capacities to be activated. (This is what Aquinas means by saying that the beatific vision is beyond our natural powers.) We can receive God's grace only when, accepting our status as limited, vulnerable creatures, we surrender our pretensions to greatness and put our trust in the God who lifts up the lowly. Our limitations and vulnerabilities, that is, create the conditions most suitable to occupying a posture of willed dependence on God.

Technologically overcoming our vulnerabilities is, or at least seriously risks, a grabbing of the apple, an attempt to become godlike without God, thus blocking the only path there is to *theosis* and the beatific vision. No error could be more foolish or tragic.

IV. PHYSICAL VS. SPIRITUAL VULNERABILITY

Embracing life in the Kingdom of God means embracing our vulnerabilities, allowing us to be communally interdependent, alike in our frailties, and humbly open to God's grace.

One might very well wonder, however, if I have conflated certain physical and psychological states—the vulnerabilities normally associated with human nature—with those spiritual states essential to life in the Kingdom.

When it comes to loving communion among humans, can't we *choose* interdependence, even if it is not forced upon us? Within a sport, players are interdependent, but only because they have chosen to play the sport. Their experience of *koinonia* is by choice rather than necessity. Cannot enhanced persons, with greatly reduced vulnerabilities, choose to share a common life nonetheless?

Aren't there forms of *koinonia* that bridge vast differences? If God condescends to share a life with humanity (see 1 John 1:3), cannot enhanced persons condescend (to an incomparably lesser degree) to share a life with their unenhanced fellows?

When it comes to loving communion with God, it would seem that physical frailty is neither conceptually necessary nor sufficient for the *spiritual* state of willed dependence required for receiving God's grace. One could certainly imagine a physically strong penitent, and a physically frail blasphemer. Isn't the message of the New Testament that we must be poor *in*

spirit, regardless of our physical state? Isn't it possible to be virile and vibrant in body while poor in spirit?

The answer to these questions is yes. Of course it is possible. But weaving a common life and attaining poverty of spirit are much harder for the strong than for the weak. Such seems to be Christ's point when he says that it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. We might say that it is likewise easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for an invulnerable man to enter the Kingdom of God.

The classic illustration of this insight comes from St. Paul. He writes: "I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to buffet me; this was to save me from being unduly elated. Three times I begged the Lord to rid me of it, but his answer was: my grace is all you need; power is most fully seen in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12). There was, of course, nothing intrinsically good about whatever was hobbling Paul's thriving. But its removal was not likely to redound to his benefit. His physical (or perhaps psychological) frailty served as a daily reminder of his spiritual dependence on God. Without it, he very likely would have drifted toward the pride that is endemic to the class of self-assured leaders, and which would have disrupted his connection to God's grace.

I submit that it is part of the general economy of salvation, as befits the peculiarities our human situation, that spiritual vulnerability be underwritten by physical vulnerabilities. God, that is, has ordained that here below, in our fallen state, the depths of *koinonia* and the heights of blessedness be attained through the experience of physical weakness and infirmity. Some of the rich will be saved, along with some of the hale and hearty; with God all things are possible, after all. But we should treat these cases as merciful exceptions, and none of us should presume that our own salvation will come by way of health and wealth. Most of us will know our spiritual

poverty only by way of its physical and psychological corollaries—by way of our “feeble and mortal condition,” as Pascal puts it in the *Pensées* (1670, 39).

In a recent article in *Plough*, the poet and essayist Aberdeen Livingston describes her experience of living with chronic pain as akin to inhabiting two kingdoms, the “Kingdom of Health” and the “Kingdom of Sickness” (she credits Susan Sontag with coming up with the metaphor).

First there is the kingdom of health. The kingdom of root causes, experimental treatments. On the streets, the mood is: *Absolutely not, we will not give in, what can we do to change this?* Its industry is problem-solving, and its weapon is perseverance. Its inhabitants are keen-eyed in their search for what is wrong and unwavering in their quest to make it right. They stretch out their hands to take hold of the next promise of hope, no matter how many have failed before. Their anthem is: Keep trying. It can get better.

Then there is the kingdom of sickness. The kingdom that confines you to bed, or to hospice care. In this land, you hear people say, *This is what it is, what can we do to make it bearable?* Its economy is built on acceptance, and its tool of choice is gratitude. Its inhabitants focus on what is already going right, picking out the treasure amidst the trash. They rest, and recount all the unexpected blessings to be gained in the realm of imperfection. Their anthem is: There is already goodness here. Keep looking. (2025, 18-19)

The attitude that characterizes the Kingdom of Health is mastery and control. The attitude that characterizes the Kingdom of Sickness is acceptance and receptivity. The Kingdom of Sickness is not, of course, the Kingdom of God. We are not meant to resign ourselves to decrepitude. But it seems to me that the Kingdom of Sickness shares a long border with the Kingdom of God.

There are many points of entry: they can be found wherever one's physical helplessness makes one aware of one's spiritual helplessness. The Kingdom of Health, on the other hand, connects to the Kingdom of God by a single, well-hidden border-crossing. The only ones who find it are those who, *despite their physical vitality*, grasp their true ontological poverty and weakness. And that is not easy to do. None of us should presume to be among the few who, by God's mercy, find that little border-crossing.

V. THE KINGDOM OF HEALTH, THE KINGDOM OF SICKNESS, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

To enter the Kingdom of God, we should embrace our vulnerabilities. Can this insight be made concrete, in terms of specific recommendations of vulnerabilities that should be retained?

It would be absurd to forestall all attempts to protect human beings from the forces that threaten them. We wear clothing, we build houses, we strengthen our cardiovascular system through exercise, we secure sources of clean water and sustainable nutrition, we strengthen our immune system through vaccination (not to mention proper sleep), we avoid physically and emotionally abusive people, we establish an income, and so forth. There may be a time and place for avoiding one or more of these interventions, but only as temporary and reversible measures.

Which vulnerabilities, then, should we refuse to enhance our way out of? More specifically: which vulnerabilities are best suited to facilitate *koinonia* and receptiveness to grace?

When it comes to *koinonia*, we are wise to retain those vulnerabilities that foster interdependence. Most obviously, this means that our basic psychological need for human connection should not be dealt with deviantly—either by its removal (via pharmacologically

relief of the pain of loneliness, for example) or by its pseudo-satisfaction via technological surrogates (e.g. interactive AI “companions”).

It also means an embrace of our most socially vulnerable life-stages, viz., childhood and elderhood. The increased need for others during these stages—beginning, of course, with the infant’s utter dependence on parents—is not a problem to be solved but a special opportunity for relationships of care to flourish.

What about preventive medicines? It seems to me entirely appropriate to render one’s physiological systems more resilient, via vaccination at least, and perhaps via gene therapy. But *remedial* medicine ought to remain a human enterprise. When our immune systems give way to disease or our bodies give way to injury, it ought to be caring humans—not autonomous algorithms or nano-bots—that do the good work of restoration, a work that enlivens love in both its practitioner and its recipient. More generally, the work of healing and repair, in its many different forms, ought to remain central to human life. *If* remedial medicine were automated, it would be important to safeguard other restorative practices from being automated—the healing of the mind, the restoration of broken relationships, even home repair and suchlike.

Finally, there are ‘enhancements’ of a certain sort already in place that we should walk back. I am thinking of the impersonal corporatization of the food system and other supply-chains. We have been too willing to trade the personal nature of a local economy for the promise of greater purchasing-power. We should take incremental steps to detach from these systems in order to depend on those near to us, whom we can know personally or at least interface with.

When it comes to receptiveness to grace, it is clear that our mortality is a vulnerability to be protected rather than removed. At one’s death, there is simply no looking away from one’s utter ontological dependence. For most of us, this is likely to be the moment in our life when the

posture of receptivity to grace comes most naturally—when there is simply nothing else to depend upon.

There are other psychological and biological vulnerabilities that can play a similar role. For example, it is right and good that human should suffer from negative emotions such as grief and despair. How often have such emotions shattered someone's illusions of self-sufficiency and laid bare their true existential situation? Although we may be tempted to ameliorate such emotions when they come, we should instead be reminded that "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

Likewise, we should embrace the daily rhythm of the satisfaction of our biological needs: for food and water, for shelter and warmth, for sleep. Our vulnerability to hunger, thirst, cold and fatigue are daily reminders that we are at the mercy of forces we did not create and cannot ultimately understand. The very act of eating can become a sacrament, a means of encountering God's goodness and a cause of grateful worship. (My inspiration here is Alexander Schmemmann's theological anthropology, developed in *For the Life of the World*.) Even settling into sleep can be a practice of releasing control and falling into the waiting arms of God—prefiguring our death.

A difficult question remains about the vulnerabilities that accumulate as we age. Modern medicine has worked in piecemeal fashion to mitigate, or at least ameliorate, many of the infirmities associated with old age—everything from hearing loss to cancer. As Daniel Callahan (1996) has pointed out, aging is ambiguous: it is both a natural biological life-stage *and* an accumulation of particular maladies, disabilities, and disorders, each of which might be treatable.

I submit that the experience of physical decline is nearly as spiritually significant as death itself. (Some forms of *psychological* decline may be spiritually significant as well, for example

when they increase one's dependence on others—but only when one's mind is basically and generally intact. I don't see how losing one's mind could be spiritually beneficial.) But decline is a complicated phenomenon, often the result of multiple maladies. Which such maladies should we aim to prevent (by genetic engineering, say), which we should treat via traditional medicine, and which (if any) should be allowed to run their course?

I have no general proposal for how to resolve the ambiguity inherent in aging. (I heard Gil Meilander say once that he felt the problem of life-extension to be the single hardest problem for the Christian bioethicist.) But there are those for whom the resolution comes naturally—the wise ones who understand the spiritual significance of both the Kingdom of Health and the Kingdom of Sickness and are able to inhabit either when it is appropriate. The best exemplar I know of is Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia (1906-1991), canonized by the Eastern Orthodox church in 2013. As a boy with a second-grade education, Porphyrios ran away from home to become a monk on Mt. Athos. He struggled with health problems all his life. As a young man he was forced to leave Mt. Athos for treatment and not long afterward was offered a chaplaincy at the Polyclinic, the major research hospital in Athens. He remained there for some three decades, gaining a reputation as a spiritual counsellor with gifts of clairvoyance. (Several volumes have been published containing wild stories of the interactions he had with his spiritual children.) In his retirement, his health continued to decline and eventually he became completely blind. Nevertheless, the stream of visitors seeking his wisdom and blessing only increased right up until his death. St. Sophrony described him simply as “a bag of skin filled with the Holy Spirit” (Nuns, 2013, 55).

Porphyrios discussed physical as well as spiritual ailments with his visitors. George Papazohos, a professor of cardiology at the University of Athens, claims that he gave thousands

of preliminary medical diagnoses that were later confirmed by medical professionals (Iōannidēs, 1997, 267). Porphyrios once told a visitor that he thought cancer was largely caused environmentally, and in that sense, was largely preventable. There are several stories about his prayers healing cancer-patients, sometimes in dramatic fashion. These episodes suggest that he typically thought of physical maladies as hindrances to the flourishing of the person. To that extent, he resided in the Kingdom of Health.

But as far as his perspective on his own health goes, his permanent residence seems to have been in the Kingdom of Sickness. One of his spiritual children relates the following episode.

Another friend who used to frequently visit the Elder got sick with a very serious illness, cancer of the bones. She had entered the Hospital of St. Savas for some type of therapy. The doctors had said that there was not one bone that had not been affected by the disease. In fact, the cranial bone had been attacked. The prognosis was that she would never get up again. She would continuously get worse and die. I would frequently go up to St. Savas Hospital and see her and every time she had a message for me to take to the Elder that he should pray for her. The Elder ordered her through me to be closer to Christ during that time and that she should not be afraid of anything.

One particular day, when she was still at the St. Savas Hospital, someone told her that the Elder had performed a miracle. A nine year old girl had cancer in her lower jawbone and he went to her and made the sign of the cross on her. They had planned to take her to England for an operation to remove the lower jaw...When the child went to England, the English doctors determined that it was a simple inflammation and they cured her with antibiotics. My sick friend said to me, “See, the Elder’s prayer made the

girl well and not the antibiotics. But I thought, with so many incidents that the Elder has every day, will he remember me? I beg you; tell him not to forget me.”

I was certain that the Elder would not forget her...It was for this reason, that I was embarrassed to tell him that she requests that he should not forget her. But he himself said to me, “Yes, and tell her that I do not forget her and I pray for her” [expressing his clairvoyance, presumably]. The elder continued, “Tell her so that she can be comforted, that I also have the same sickness that she has. ... I have it in the head. I suffer much and am in pain. I also suffer from other sicknesses. Yet I glorify God for my pain but you should not pray that He will take them from me. Once, when I first became a monk, I asked God to give me cancer but at that time He did not give it to me.

[It is worth noting that he had been sternly rebuked by his elders for this request. Porphyrios continues:]

He gave it to me now when I did not ask him for it.”

After some time in remission, the sickness came back to my friend again. [The Elder’s] last words for her were, “Tell her that I do not forget her and I am praying and that I love her very, very much.” After the repose of the Elder, about one and a half years later, her life on earth ended. She had exhibited a great deal of patience and humbleness during the whole time of her suffering” (Nuns, 2013, 184-186).

St. Porphyrios anticipated, sometimes quite confidently, that certain of those he counseled would be physically healed, in some cases miraculously, in some cases medically. But ultimately he joyfully acquiesced to his physical vulnerabilities. As another one of his spiritual children summarized his outlook, “A disease is a divine visit! Woe to the person who will never have

such a visit. He is lost. The healthy and the rich are at the same distance away from the entrance of Paradise!” (Kalliatos, 2015, 150).

I am inclined to say that it is St. Porphyrios, and not the Silicon Valley transhumanists, who can guide us on our journey to our true homeland.

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