

Suffering Technology (Part 1)

articolo

Joseph Tham, L.C.

Suffering, in the ideology of contemporary medicine, is an evil, a fate worse than death; and it is perhaps an unmitigated evil, whose presence in human experience is a symbol of failure, and thus is not to be tolerated but conquered through technology¹.

Introduction

Three-year old Mallory Zuidema was suffering from a rare kidney cancer called Wilms' nephroblastoma. Her distraught parents sought to understand how this could happen to their innocent child. While people in the past would have raised their fists to God, this couple pointed their fingers at the mass of power lines hanging a few meters from their home. After extensive research, they concluded that the electromagnetic field generated by the high voltage wires can increase the incidence of certain types of cancer, including the one that afflicted the girl. Ted and Michelle Zuidema eventually sued the electric company but lost the case². Even though the relationship between electromagnetic field exposure and carcinogenic effects remain highly controversial, this incident illustrates an irony that we face today. Science and technology has eliminated many miseries and discomforts, but at a cost. Thanks to technical advances, we now live longer, healthier lives, travel with relative ease, and communicate with family or friends on the other side of the globe touching a few buttons. Most of us cannot live without these modern comforts—just imagine living without electricity or hot showers. At the same time, we are plagued by the fact that technology can sometimes harm us, especially when

we hear about the plane crashes and cancers caused by the modern lifestyle.

The binomial of suffering and technology is the key to deciphering many current cultural debates. In our globalized world of high-speed internet, stem cell research, space shuttles and instant text messaging, we are at once dazzled by these technical possibilities and terrorized by their harmful potentials. This paper will examine the reasons for this ambivalence, tracing the historical development of thoughts regarding the subject. Technology and science has replaced religion in providing the answer to human suffering. Yet secular answers seem woefully inadequate to satisfy our deepest needs. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the theological perspectives on hope, false expectations, suffering and mortality that are constant themes on the roles and limits of technical progress.

Transcendent and immanent responses to suffering

Suffering is a ubiquitous human experience. From the moment we are born to the moment of our death, we learn to live with it—some minor, others grave, some physical and mental, others spiritual and emotional. It touches our profoundest sensibilities and provokes in us a yearning for answers about our origin, purpose and end. Death is the ultimate affliction, where there will be annihilation of all fond memories of our earthly existence—pleasures, friendship, and love—especially poignant in a world which has lost its faith in the afterlife.

Humans are the only species aware of life's fleeting passage. Literary, religious, philo-



Medico, dottore di ricerca e docente di Bioetica, Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum, Roma.

sophical and historical works of every race and culture have recorded the tragedy of our ephemeral existence. In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal eloquently captures this enigma of human greatness and misery:

Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he is able to know that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe, however, knows nothing of this... The greatness of man is great in that he knows himself to be miserable. A tree does not know itself to be miserable. It is then being miserable to know oneself to be miserable; but it is also being great to know that one is miserable³.

The struggle to understand and defeat suffering is the golden thread that runs through history. The attempts can be grouped into two categories—one religious and the other technological. Different religions have offered solace to distressed humanity with transcendence. Buddhism, for instance, explains human woes in terms of unfulfilled desires or the need for enlightenment. In the Jewish Bible, the *Book of Job* stands out as a classic religious response to the mystery of suffering. Interestingly, the biblical author did not seek to explain it away; God's presence and omnipotence are sufficiently eloquent. Christian revelation understands suffering through the lens of the economy of salvation; it is no longer solitary and purposeless, but a sharing with Christ's passion. "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (*Col.* 1:24). Beginning with this quote, Pope John Paul II offers the Christian believers a deep reflection in the apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*⁴.

Prominent thinkers of antiquity, from Socrates and the Stoics up to Thomas of Aquinas, have tackled the mystery of pain, often with nuanced responses. However, the problem of evil became acute in the modern era, which concurrently challenged the Me-

dieval belief of the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God. Kant, Hume, Hegel and Marx proposed some variegated responses to the purpose of suffering. Feuerbach and Durkheim reduced the problem to material and Freud posited it in psychology. The nihilism of Nietzsche and existentialism of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre were more recent attempts. In the last century, celebrated classics such as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Camus' *The Plague* etched in ink their poignant cry against the injustices of suffering, and not a few of them grumbled against God. Two writings of the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis displayed the enormity of this task. *The Problem of Pain* was a philosophical endeavor to provide a classic answer for his contemporaries. But with the death of his dear wife, he recognized the futility of intellectual solutions in *A Grief Observed*⁵.

Unsatisfied with finding abstract responses in God, others have sought to defeat the woes of suffering with immanent and practical remedies. Technical advances allow humanity to construct such an earthly kingdom. I have chosen two accounts, one ancient and one contemporary, to illustrate this enterprise.

Greek mythology hails Prometheus as the savior of humankind because he stole the secret of fire from the gods. The deities entrusted Epimetheus, whose name means afterthought, the task of bestowing different gifts on the creatures. He handed out strength, swiftness, fur, wings, and shells to different animals but when he came to human beings, he had exhausted all the gifts. So he asked his brother for help and Prometheus lit a torch of fire from the sun and gave it to the mortals, "And now, though feeble and short-lived, Mankind has flaming fire and therefrom learns many crafts"⁶. Unluckily, the jealous gods punished Prometheus for this theft. Fire is an apt symbol of technology which humans with their intelligence can use to tap into the forces of nature, transforming it for their benefit. The ire of the gods is a premonition that this gift can be a blessing and a curse.

Many centuries later, the science fiction film *GATTACA* portrays a futuristic struggle with biotechnology. The initial letters of the four DNA bases (Adenine, Cytosine, Guanine, and Thymine) forms the title of this cinematographic drama. In this society driven by liberal eugenics, there was a lot of pressure for parents to use preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to create children selectively with the best hereditary traits. In this way, society differentiated its members according to their genetic makeup which predicts their personality traits, physical prowess, disease risks and lifespan. Thus, only those who have superior genomes and enhanced traits qualified for the best jobs, whereas the disease-prone and mentally inferior members were consigned to menial jobs. The plot revolves around one of these inferiors who managed to beat the system by his ingenuity, hard work, sacrifice, courage, and indomitable spirit that were ironically missing in his genetically superior counterparts. The last scene is evocatively religious. The genetically defective protagonist managed to reach the heavens in a space shuttle. As the fire of the rocket blasted, the scene shifted to the fire of the furnace where his genetically perfect alias incinerated himself for failing to live up to his destiny⁷.

These two accounts illustrate the ambiguities of technological solution(s) to human suffering. As a protest against the gods, we have managed to minimize human misery with our talents and determination. Technical progress has certainly brought many advantages and eliminated many ravages. We seem to fare quite well in escaping pain and death, or delay them as much as possible. Nevertheless, have we purchased this at the high price of our humanity? Leon Kass notes, as:

Aldous Huxley prophetically warned us, in his dystopian novel *Brave New World*, the unbridled yet well-meaning pursuit of the mastery of human nature and human troubles

through technology can issue in a world peopled by creatures of human shape but of shrunken humanity—engaged in trivial pursuits; lacking science, art, religion, and self-government; missing love, friendship, or any true human attachments; and getting their jollies from high-tech amusements and a bottle of soma⁸.

The great divide between the transcendent and the immanent solution in resolving suffering is the main cause of cultural debates on many life issues today. Sociologist John Evans surveyed how religious and secular cohorts differ in their opinions regarding the use of genetic reproductive technologies to relieve suffering. Those with very loose or no religious affiliations view suffering as totally

meaningless, to be eliminated with all available means. At one point in the survey, when asked why it is necessary to eliminate suffering, they were flabbergasted by the question itself because it appeared self-

evident to their secular mindset. On the other hand, those with religious sensibilities do not see suffering as necessarily negative. They believe that there are important values we can learn from it and (that) technical solutions are not absolute⁹. In spite of the mind-boggling development of modern technology, there is a palpable unease.

Ambivalence of Technology

The man of today seems ever to be under threat from what he produces, that is to say from the result of the work of his hands and, even more so, of the work of his intellect and the tendencies of his will... Man therefore lives increasingly in fear. He is afraid that what he produces—not all of it, of course, or even most of it, but part of it and precisely that part that contains a special share of his genius and initiative—can radically turn against himself; he is afraid that it can become the means and instrument for an unimaginable self-destruction, compared

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with which all the cataclysms and catastrophes of history known to us seem to fade away¹⁰.

We can see this ambivalence toward technology from this passage of John Paul II in *Redemptor Hominis*. A cursory examination of the impact of technology in the areas of ecology, information and communication, military and medicine could be helpful.

Industrialization has undoubtedly improved the quality of life, but we are just beginning to recognize many ecological disasters that came with it. The nightmare of Chernobyl, acid rain from electric plants, air pollution from automobiles, oil spillage and water pollution, ozone depletion, animal extinction, the problem with waste disposal and climate change are examples of damages done to the environment¹¹. While genetically modified foods promise to alleviate world hunger, there are those who are worried of “Frankenfood” and the seeds that will destroy the natural food chain¹². Unfortunately, some ecological extremists have so exalted the value of the environment that they tended to diminish human dignity. For instance, Alan Gregg exclaims, “The world has cancer and the cancer is man”¹³.

Information technology, abbreviated and better known as IT, has undergone a real revolution in the last thirty years. I have fond memories of the day when my father took me to his company to show me the huge computers with flickering lights and switches that occupied several rooms, yet the laptop with which I am typing now probably has more memory than those colossal machines. I still remember my first computer science class in high school when I had to enter programs by feeding in punched cards. I recall the days, not so long ago, when floppy disks were actually floppy. Today, IT has blossomed in other areas, affecting not only telecommunication but invading the spheres of social relationships, education and research, commerce and politics, religion and culture. The digital world has considerably shrunk our planet. We can access and share information, images and music, chat with strangers, shop, get a degree, find a spouse,

perform virtual surgery, and tour places thousand of miles away without leaving our rooms. However, the negative impact of cybernetics is just around the corner—online gambling, pornography not to speak of child porn, plagiarism and illegal trading, invasion of privacy, spam and virus attacks are prominent examples.

I notice this paradox in two pieces of news that automatically arrived in my inbox. A couple of years ago, the Vatican launched a Facebook portal called “pope2you” with applications for iPhone and iPod Touch and connected to YouTube channel that allows Web surfers to send virtual postcards of Pope Benedict XVI or the latest papal messages to their social network. In the same week, a Scottish bishop sent a letter to be read at 500 Catholic parishes warning against cyberbullying and the danger of “inane chatter” with social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter¹⁴.

One must not forget that many innovations, including internet, GPS and certain surgical techniques were ironically spin-offs from military technology. Like it or not, war has sped up discoveries of nuclear power and penicillin, while Nazi experiments provided knowledge on basic human physiology. Enormous military budgets today continue to stimulate research that may one day be available for civilian use. Experiments on the human body and improvement of soldiers’ performance with drugs or bionic devices may contribute to medical advances. Likewise, the continual search for perfection in espionage, satellites, ballistics, antimissile defense, biosecurity, fighter jets and submarines will have definite impact on the advancement of communication, energy supply, electronics, robotics, architecture, pharmaceuticals and transportation.

The ambivalent attitude toward technology is most acute in medicine because it affects the person more deeply than other advances, providing cures and extending lives. Some authors situate the origin of the bioethics movement in America precisely in the context of diffidence toward medical advances. Many early bioethicists share this hesitancy,

and bioethics becomes a discipline that acts as a buffer between the physicians and scientists who push for unrestricted research and a public that is fearful of abuses¹⁵.

Medicine has undertaken breathtaking strides in the past century. The end of the 19th century sees the beginning of anesthesia, antiseptic practices and X-Rays. We tend to forget that scientists discovered the first effective antibiotics during the Second World War. After that, medical science exploded with an armamentarium of life-saving procedures—blood grouping, open heart surgery, mechanical ventilation, dialysis, organ transplants, and chemotherapy to name a handful. Unprecedented choices have fostered false hopes that medicine can do the impossible, not only radically reduce human suffering, but enhance human performance and make allowance for new and better lifestyles¹⁶.

The undesired effects of these advances are becoming apparent now. Contraception and assisted reproductive technology have promised couples control over their fertility

potential, but they can also affect the marital bond with grave societal consequences¹⁷. Interestingly, even secularists are attributing the rapid deterioration of the Western societies in the last thirty years—increasing crime rate, decreasing trust, changes in family structure, and the triumph of individualism over community—with the advance of fertility control¹⁸. The demographic winter is an all too evident a byproduct of the contraceptive mentality, with significant social, economic and political impact¹⁹. The identity crises of children conceived by procreative technologies are increasingly raising concerns. While prenatal diagnosis or PGD can eliminate the supposed “burden” of unhealthy offspring, they open the way to manufacture of “designer babies” and gender discrimination, a slippery slope toward the eugenic discrimination of GATTACA²⁰.

In vitro fertilization provides the “raw material” of a large quantity of human embryos

for commercialization, experimentation and destruction. Stem cells and cloning jumped on to this bandwagon of regenerative medicine, which together with nanotechnology, cybernetics, and genetic engineering promise to cure the incurable and indefinitely prolong life. Modern day transhumanists advocate the employment of the latest gizmos to reengineer the human race. They argue that these techniques will radically enhance human life and expand the boundaries of humanness. As an inevitable coda to evolution and scientific progress, modern democracies must make these technologies available to everyone²¹. In this vein, geneticist Lee Silver writes: Why not seize this power? Why not control what has been left to chance in the past? Indeed, we control all other aspects of our children’s lives and identities through powerful social and environmental influences and, in

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some cases, with the use of powerful drugs like Ritalin and Prozac. On what basis can we reject positive genetic influences on a person’s essence when we accept the rights of

parents to benefit their children in every other way?²²

Transhumanism may seem extreme, but closer is the optimism expressed by President Obama as he recently signed an Executive Order to lift a ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. Towards the end of his speech he said, “There is no finish line in the work of science. The race is always with us—the urgent work of giving substance to hope and answering those many bedside prayers, of seeking a day when words like ‘terminal’ and ‘incurable’ are finally retired from our vocabulary.” Certainly, he has banked his expectations on a utopian dream of a world free of disease and suffering.

At the other end of the spectrum, lifesaving techniques make it possible to resuscitate biological life, but at the expense of unconscious existence sustained by inhuman machines. Euthanasia and assisted suicide are relatively recent issues that have arisen as pos-

sible responses to the dread of projected suffering in a meaningless existence, as we have seen in the heated polemics surrounding Terri Schiavo, Ramón Sanpedro, Piergiorgio Welby and Eluana Englaro. Without entering into the morality of these cases, these examples serve to point out the undesired effects longer lives can bring.

The fear of death has become the common value of liberal modern societies which turn to medicine for salvation. Thus, healthcare often becomes the most important issue, and correspondingly trillions of dollars are injected into the health care industry to produce new medications, hi-tech surgical and medical treatments, and research to extend the natural lifespan. As a result, most modern societies are facing spiraling healthcare costs without the political strength to begin a reasonable discussion on healthcare budgets²³. Either as elixir of immortality or potion of death, medical science is offering an everlasting kingdom here on earth. In spite of great promises, there are correspondingly great uncertainties on the role of technology in alleviating the human condition. This power can be misused, turn against us and deprive us of our humanity. The paradise that science and technology promise is not only fleeting, but can be disastrous in the long run. Ultimately the question is, can a technological kingdom of man truly replace the eschatological kingdom of God, where every tear will be wiped away?

In the second part of this article, we will make an attempt to look at the answers provided by philosophers and theologians on the subject.

NOTE

¹ C. S. CAMPBELL, "The Ordeal and Meaning of Suffering," *Sunstone* 18/3 (1995), 37.

² See P. HAFNER, *Towards a Theology of the Environment*, Gracewing, Leominster 2008, 4-5.

³ B. PASCAL, *Pensées*, # 347, 397, in www.gutenberg.org/etext/18269 (accessed June 1, 2009).

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, 11 February 1984, AAS 76.

⁵ See C.S. LEWIS, *The Problem of Pain*, Centenary Press, London 1940; N.W. CLERK (pseudonym for C.S.

LEWIS), *A Grief Observed*, Faber and Faber, London 1961.

⁶ E. HAMILTON, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of gods and heroes*, Mentor, New York 1969, 69.

⁷ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gattaca> (accessed June 1, 2009).

⁸ L. KASS, "Defending Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, VV.AA., President's Council on Bioethics, Washington DC 2008, 303.

⁹ See J. H. EVANS, "Religious Belief, Perceptions of Human Suffering and Support for Reproductive Genetic Technology," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, PA, May 25, 2009, in http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p19964_index.html (accessed June 1, 2009).

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, March 4, 1979, n. 15.

¹¹ See P. HAFNER, *Towards a Theology of the Environment*.

¹² See for example, F. W. ENGDALH, *Seeds of Destruction: The Hidden Agenda of Genetic Manipulation*, Global Research, Montreal 2007.

¹³ A. GREGG, "A Medical Aspect of the Population Problem," *Science*, 3150/121 (1955), 682, cited in C. RUBIN, "Human Dignity and the Future of Man," in VV.AA., *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, 162.

¹⁴ See A. DAVID, "Pope 2.0: Vatican launches Facebook application," *The Associated Press*, May 22, 2009, http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/E/EU_VATICAN_FACEBOOK?SITE=WCMHTV&SECTION=US&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT&CTIME=2009-05-22-13-50-00 (accessed June 1, 2009); J. BINGHAM, "Bishop warns Roman Catholics against 'inane' internet Twitterings," *The Telegraph*, May 19, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/scienceandtechnology/technology/twitter/5351212/Bishop-warns-Roman-Catholics-against-inane-internet-Twitterings.html> (accessed June 1, 2009).

¹⁵ See M. L. T. STEVENS, *Bioethics in America: Origins and Cultural Politics*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2000; J. H. EVANS, *Playing God? Human Genetic Engineering and the Rationalization of Public Bioethical Debate*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2002.

¹⁶ See D. CALLAHAN, *False hopes: overcoming the obstacles to a sustainable, affordable medicine*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 1999.

¹⁷ See W. B. WILCOX, "The Facts of Life & Marriage: Social Science & the Vindication of Christian Moral Teaching," *Touchstone*, (Jan/Feb 2005), www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=18-01-038-f (accessed June 1, 2009); M. EBERSTADT, "The Vindication of *Humanae Vitae*," *First Things*, (August/September, 2008), www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/?p=1133 (accessed June 1, 2009).

¹⁸ See F. FUKUYAMA, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, The Free Press, New York 1999, 101-103.

¹⁹ See P. LONGMAN, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to do about*

it, Basic Books, New York 2004; B. J. WATTENBERG, *Fewer: How the new demography of depopulation will shape our future*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago 2004.

²⁰ See for instance, G. C. MEILAENDER, *Body, Soul, and Bioethics*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1995, 61-88; L. R. KASS, "Making Babies: The New Biology and the 'Old' Morality", in ID., *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs*, The Free Press, New York 1985, 43-79.

²¹ See J. H. HUGHES, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future*,

Westview Press, Cambridge, MA 2004; ID., "Embracing Change with All Four Arms: A Post-Humanist Defense of Genetic Engineering", *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*, 6/4 (1996), 94-101; G. STOCK, *Redesigning Humans: choosing our genes, changing our future*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 2003.

²² L. SILVER, *Remaking Eden. Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World*, Avon, New York 1998, 277.

²³ See D. CALLAHAN, *Setting Limits: Medical Goals in Aging Society*, Georgetown University Press, Washington DC 1987.