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Why HEAVEN Is Not About Saving Lives at All

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In their article, Ren and Canavero (2017) discuss in detail a technique that will supposedly allow them to soon perform a head transplant. Aside from other controversial aspects related to their way of portraying this operation—many in the scientific and medical community are skeptical about the feasibility of the operation—we think it is particularly important to highlight the way in which they relate this surgical intervention to a larger project: that of life extension. We believe that this connection is not coincidental and should not be underestimated.

Life extension is one of the main goals of Posthumanism and—though camouflaged as a therapeutic operation—HEAVEN could be the Trojan horse through which it would become acceptable to keep on “staying alive” by changing bodies to our heads (assuming, for the sake of argument, that our identity resides only in the latter). This overlooked scenario makes the operation even more controversial.

FROM TREATMENT TO IMMORTALITY

According to Posthumanists (it should be clarified that when referring to Posthumanism we mean the ideology as it is most commonly used in bioethical circles—not the more political version of it) such as Nick Bostrom (Bostrom, 2005) and similar thinkers, we should enhance ourselves (becoming Posthumans as a result) through all the available biotechnologies. This would include becoming stronger, becoming smarter, and, of course, living longer—or forever.

Hence, in this brief commentary, we wish to highlight the specific dynamics that a head transplant would trigger if linked to a parallel process of life extension. We do so by focusing on how Ren and Canavero engage with this central issue of their vision. Interestingly, life extension is mentioned by the authors as a keyword, and in the abstract they write: “HEAVEN can help patients with no other course of *curative* treatment available. At the same time, we highlight the true contentious points: (1) life extension, (2) gender reassignment, (3) cosmetic body swap” (our emphasis).

Yet the topic is only covered (along with the other three contentious points) in a brief paragraph toward the end of their article, where they hint at the socioeconomic impact of their project and at some drastic changes that might occur in a surprisingly casual fashion: “At this point, the question that comes to mind is whether HEAVEN might be exploited as a life extension device by wealthy, old men and women, and, later this century, even for cosmetic reasons . . . If, speculatively, cloning technology, along with genetic engineering, will ever be able to produce anencephalic clones, then ‘body swap’ will become a familiar term later in this century” (203).

Let us follow Ren and Canavero’s scheme. To begin with, they refer to life extension as a curative treatment. This affirmation is perfectly in line with the views of another Posthumanist supporting life extension: Aubrey de Grey. In fact, de Grey (2007) defines aging as yet another disease (like cancer) that needs to be cured. To him, approaching aging—and death—differently is irrational and we should actively resist the temptation to follow this outdated social dogma.

Ren and Canavero’s agreement with de Grey’s approach later becomes even more evident, and the authors try to address the practical problem of socioeconomic disparities in relation to the fact that HEAVEN might only be available to the wealthy. To this end, they speak of a more egalitarian “neutral” use of human clones (maybe forgetting that these, too, will be extremely expensive—at least in the beginning).

To incentivize the parallel development (and moral acceptance) of human clones to be used to transplant our heads/selves, however, the authors need to ensure one thing. Their argument has to convince us that using someone else’s body—even if that of a clone—will not jeopardize our continuity with who we are. The split between head and body is thus necessary to put forward a larger project: that of quasi-immortality, a project that Canavero has openly embraced on a number of occasions in a more direct way, framing the issue along the lines that our consciousness, our selfhood, is not in our brain (Canavero 2014). However, Ren and Canavero try to do so by only

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stressing that the operation will not affect this continuum at all, without providing a compelling argument.

PROBLEMS WITH LIFE EXTENSION

Even aside from the issue of psychological continuity in a subject undergoing head transplant, there are many ethical questions about the idea of using the latter as a method of life extension or even a way to achieve a quasi-immortality in line with a Posthumanist view. To criticize the HEAVEN project, it is not enough to resort to an intuition about the supposed unnatural dimension of the process and its outcomes. As rightly noted by Paul Root Wolpe (2017) in his reply, if all the important issues about the feasibility of a head transplant were solved, there would be no reasons to oppose it in principle. Indeed, the technique would help make any form of human enhancement (the other goal of Posthumanism) more acceptable: “The metaphysical separation of the body and consciousness is desirable not only to allow the claim that a head/body transplant has no impact on selfhood, but to allow the pursuit of body enhancement as well” (209).

However, a life extension project initiated by a head transplant could pave the way to a problematic framework. Extending life beyond its “normal” time span carries numerous questions about its environmental sustainability (Di Paola and Garasic, 2013; Callahan, 1990). Among others, the spread of life extension techniques through head transplant (whether based on clones or not) could intensify overpopulation problems and especially inequality. Canavero and Ren’s technique would increase the gap between rich and poor and could lead to the need to limit the population growth rate, or to redistribute the resources available differently.

Among others who have warned against the risks of overimplementing technology in our lives, Hans Jonas (1992) has also made some persuasive considerations about the so-called “blessing of mortality.” According to Jonas, death is primarily the engine of natural selection, something that may still be indispensable to the human species in order to adapt to extraordinary environmental changes, even though the progress of genetic editing techniques may perhaps give us some tools that can play the same role (in any case, part of the population would not be able to resort to head transplant). There are also considerations about the legitimacy and the desirability of a prolongation of existence, both from the point of view of the common good of humankind and from the point of view of the individual’s own good.

One could certainly argue that the common good of humanity is closely linked to the process of civilization that is triggered (also) by the succession of generations. In non-biological evolution, made of acquisition, transmission, and accumulation of knowledge, natality plays an important role, as emphasized by Hannah Arendt (1958). Natality gives a new look to the world as opposed to those who already inhabit it and guarantees a source of innovation, diversity, and uniqueness (arguments that, not accidentally,

also go against cloning). And the death of old people makes room for young people, who bear a repertoire of ideas and solutions (progress) that often prove to be helpful in regard to aging—not the aging of neurons but that of the ideas of those who have long faced unresolved problems.

It can, however, be argued that the individual’s interest differs from that of humanity and that many people would want to benefit from life extension once it is available. A first critical point, in this case, could be the huge burden of anxiety that every enhanced person would have to carry. In fact, even in view of the quasi-immortality achieved with head transplantation, there would still remain the physical danger of an accident or an act of violence (provided that the physiological or pathological degenerations of the brain are neutralized) that would irreparably damage the head itself. Such anxiety could be much more crippling than the fear of mortality that we all currently have. But according to Jonas the greatest risk is that is of being psychologically overwhelmed by an ever wider and more complex past, without the stimulus of action given by the awareness that the time at our disposal is limited.

Another relevant issue is that of social attitudes in a world that is not prepared for the de facto immortality of some of its inhabitants. Furthermore, there are great difficulties related to Posthuman ideals in general, as this culture of eliminating finitude, defect, and fragility may have extremely unpredictable, highly destabilizing, and possibly negative consequences. For all these reasons, being the spearhead of a set of Posthumanist goals and values that certainly need further, careful, consideration, the HEAVEN project, beyond its practical difficulties, seems to be more problematic than beneficial. ■

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