

**LONGING AND LIMITS:  
RUSSELL KIRK AND C.S. LEWIS ON THE POST-HUMAN PROJECT**

*Presentation*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Dr. Campbell has asked the participants on this panel to consider the relationship between human nature and the permanent things—those deep, reliable truths about the worth, purpose, and condition of human life. This question is at the heart of a long conversation about what it means to be human. However, technological developments in the past century, even the past ten years, add new dimensions to our efforts to participate in this conversation.

In *The Conservative Mind*, which we celebrate today, Russell Kirk (1918-1994) relays to us an account of the permanent things—belief in a transcendent moral order and in the essential dignity and humility of men. Kirk calls on C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) at key moments in his final chapter of *The Conservative Mind*.

Critically, for this panel, Kirk points to works in which Lewis reveals vividly the shape of things biotech to come. Specifically, C.S. Lewis unfolds the logic of the post-human project with stunning clarity—first, by concise argument in his short book, *The Abolition of Man* (1943), and then with greater depth in his novel, *That Hideous Strength* (1945). My goal in what follows is to sketch our situation, and then ask what Russell Kirk and C.S. Lewis teach us about human nature and the permanent things in our biotech age.

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In 2009, Nick Bostrom and Julian Savulescu reported from the University of Oxford: “Human enhancement has moved from the realm of science fiction to that of

practical ethics. There are now effective physical, cognitive, mood, cosmetic, and sexual enhancers.”<sup>1</sup> We can do more now than ever. Bostrom and Savulescu say innovations within this century will “provide the opportunity fundamentally to change the human condition.” They conclude: “Our fate is, to a greater degree than ever before in human history, in our own hands.”<sup>2</sup>

In the biotech conversation, we encounter technologies that shape human birth, life, and death. Consider these recent headlines:

- NPR reported in late 2011 that one in 10 Americans takes antidepressants.<sup>3</sup>
- The next summer, Katherine Sharpe, author of *Coming of Age on Zoloft*, discussed questions now raised by members of “The Medication Generation” in the Wall Street Journal. Prompted by her own experience, she warns that when doctors overprescribe antidepressants, they make it harder for the medication generation to address their pain as part of the human experience.<sup>4</sup>
- In a June 2012 Wall Street Journal feature, “Bionic Brains and Beyond,” author Daniel H. Wilson explains that “high-tech implants will soon be commonplace enhancements under our skin and inside our skulls, making us stronger and smarter.”<sup>5</sup>
- ABC News reported in November 2009 that, with routine prenatal testing, “more than 90 percent of women carrying a child with down syndrome choose to end their pregnancies, but parents raising these kids say they’re a ‘gift.’”<sup>6</sup>
- Last month, the Wall Street Journal told the story of a 14-year-old girl, Farah, who faces cancer treatments known to damage fertility. She now has the possibility of preserving her ability to have children through a procedure to remove and freeze some of her ovarian tissue.<sup>7</sup>
- Last Monday, the Financial Post (of Canada) reported—to our culture which has lost the language of barrenness—that about 12 to 16 percent of Canadian couples

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Bostrom and Julian Savulescu, “Introduction: Human Enhancement Ethics: The State of the Debate,” in Nick Bostrom and Julian Savulescu, eds. *Human Enhancement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Bostrom and Savulescu, *Human Enhancement*, 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> “Look Around: 1 in 10 Americans Takes Antidepressants,” (NPR, 10/20/2011).

<sup>4</sup> “The Medication Generation,” (WSJ, 6/29/2012).

<sup>5</sup> “Bionic Brains and Beyond,” (WSJ, 6/1/2012).

<sup>6</sup> “Down Syndrome Births Drop as More Abort,” (ABC News, 11/2/2009).

<sup>7</sup> “New Procedures Help Pediatric Cancer Patients With Future Fertility,” (WSJ, 9/2/2013).

face infertility. Its story, “The Cost of Infertility,” traces the heartbreak and choices of couples that spent thousands of dollars trying to have children.<sup>8</sup>

- On the same day, ABC’s Katie Couric interviewed a couple whose son Trevor was born after they adopted him as an embryo through Nightlight Christian Adoption agency’s Snowflakes Embryo Adoption Program.<sup>9</sup>
- And, finally: *Yesterday*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, the Wall Street Journal reported that the personal genomics company 23andMe “has been awarded a broad U.S. patent for a technique that could be used in a fertility clinic to create babies with selected traits, as the frontiers of genetic enhancement continue to advance.” Reporter Gautam Naik emphasized that this newly patented method joins an existing practice called pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), which allows individuals to create multiple embryos, but implant only those with desired traits. Naik confirms that some clinics in the U.S. currently allow couples to use PGD to select for their child’s sex.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes proposals to radically enhance our bodies and brains, as Bostrom and Savulescu note, “The question has shifted from ‘Is this science fiction?’ to ‘Should we do it?’”<sup>11</sup> The new decisions we face are full of gravity, promise, and difficulty. As Eric Cohen writes, “We need to be aware of the moral ambiguities, often tragic ambiguities, involved in deciding what to do with our new powers over the body.”<sup>12</sup>

As I consider the biotech conversation here, I focus on proponents of a movement which we can call the “human enhancement project.” I emphasize radical enhancement’s advocates not because they express a fringe notion, but—on the contrary—because they articulate the logical end of an aspiration that informs one dominant approach to biotechnology. Broadly, synonyms for radical enhancement include transhumanism, post-humanism, and the Singularity. Its chief advocates include Ray Kurzweil, currently

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<sup>8</sup> “The Cost of Infertility,” (Financial Post, 9/27/2013).

<sup>9</sup> “‘Snowflake’ Babies,” (Katie [Couric Show], 9/30/2013) and “Nightlight Christian Adoptions/ Embryo Adoption Awareness Center to Appear on ‘The Katie Show’ on Monday,” (Reporter-Herald, 9/27/2013).

<sup>10</sup> “‘Designer Babies’: Patented Process Could Lead to Selection of Genes for Specific Traits,” (WSJ, 10/4/2013).

<sup>11</sup> Bostrom and Savulescu, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Cohen, “Bioethics in Wartime,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 3, 23-33, 24.

director of engineering at Google; Nick Bostrom, the founding director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University; and Ronald Bailey, an author and a correspondent for *Reason* magazine.

Nick Bostrom introduces the radical enhancement project. He explains,

Transhumanism is a loosely defined movement that has developed gradually over the past two decades, and can be viewed as an outgrowth of secular humanism and the Enlightenment. It holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods.<sup>13</sup>

In short, advocates of human enhancement answer the tragic ambiguity of life in the biotech world with proposals to abolish the limitations of our nature and condition.

The biotech conversation, including the post-human project, compels and deserves your attention. Specifically, the enhancement project matters because it concerns fundamental questions—questions common to all human beings: What’s the point of being alive? What kind of creatures are we and how should we live? What’s a good life? What’s a good death? The proposal to change the human condition through biotechnology induces us to reconsider our answers to these fundamental questions, both for ourselves and as matters of public policy. To avoid this conversation is to fail to engage the basic human questions.

Moreover, the biotech conversation deserves your attention because its core concerns are not primarily matters of public policy. Before we approach these questions in the public realm, we meet them in our own homes, as decisions we must make for our families and ourselves. They are complex, often agonizing decisions, for example, about

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<sup>13</sup> Nick Bostrom, “In Defense of Posthuman Dignity,” *Bioethics* 19, no. 3 (2005), 202-203.

whether to supply your seventh-grader with the psycho-pharmaceuticals prescribed to so many of his classmates; whether to keep a dying parent on life support; or, how to pursue fertility treatment in the face of barrenness. Before it's a policy issue, it's concern for how your child will learn and grow. Before it's a policy issue, it's the ache of empty arms—for the dead parent, or for the child not conceived.

Finally, the biotech conversation matters because now as never before our answers provoke exponential consequences. As we apply new technologies to change how we are born, live, and die, we recast the human situation. Following C.S. Lewis, Eric Cohen rightly says our plans become “more plausible and more irreversible.”<sup>14</sup>

## **HUMAN NATURE AND THE PERMANENT THINGS**

**What can Russell Kirk and C.S. Lewis teach us about human nature and the permanent things in our biotech age?** What do they teach us about thinking and acting well when the enhancers are at Oxford and Google? I think they teach us how to fulfill the responsibilities that belong to the men and women who would affirm the moral fabric of humanity. Together, these men *commend* to us the permanent things and help us to *understand* and *respond* effectively to the radical enhancement project. Let me explain.

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<sup>14</sup> Cohen (2003), 28.

**POINT ONE First, Russell Kirk and C.S. Lewis hand us a report on the moral fabric of humanity—and the consequences of attempts to unravel it.**

They start with a shared idea of the specific features of human being. We are distinguished by belief in a transcendent moral order; we appeal to a sense of justice that stands independent of us.<sup>15</sup> Like Kirk, Lewis affirms man’s moral heritage and calls it “the Tao.”

What Kirk and Lewis acknowledge is not a thin film of consensus, but the deepest truths routinely mined when humans throughout history and around the world gather to investigate. “It is,” Lewis writes, “the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”<sup>16</sup> Like any good conversation, it develops, as Lewis says, into “new beauties and dignities of application.”<sup>17</sup> The principles of the Tao are both resonant and rational. Even so, the reliable truth about human nature is fragile. We rediscover the truth about ourselves by participating in the long-running conversation about what it means to be human.

**POINT TWO This shared view of human nature and the moral order lead Kirk and Lewis to show us—and here is Point Two—that our first responsibility is to understand. In particular, they help us to understand the sources of the human enhancement project in *longing* and *revolt*.**

Kirk and Lewis model this task as they probe the motives of the political projects they engage—and also in the empathy and charity that characterize their lives. We may start by asking why advocates of the post-human project find it attractive. Savulescu and

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<sup>15</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Inc., 1953, 1985, 8.

<sup>16</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*. New York: HarperOne, 2001 (orig. 1944), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, *Abolition*, 75; see also, 45.

Bostrom say participants in the enhancement debate need to find and defend the line that separates desirable and undesirable enhancements.<sup>18</sup> This line might allow us to defend certain innovations and disallow others. For example: Neural implants to enable hearing, called cochlear implants, are okay. But a neural implant that stimulates concentration and maximizes memory goes too far.<sup>19</sup>

Yet what distinguishes particular innovations from the post-human proposal isn't a line; as Kirk and Lewis help us see, it's an aspiration. It's the desire, Ronald Bailey attests, to conquer "the tyranny of aging and death"; to ensure that no one has to become "diseased, disabled, or dead"; and to realize the "promise [of technology] to sidestep the limitations of our biological bodies and brains."<sup>20</sup> It's the ambition, Ray Kurzweil urges, to ensure that the next enhancement is "not just another in a long line of steps in biological evolution. We are upending biological evolution altogether."<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, in order to think and act well in response to the post-human project, we need to identify not a line but a stance toward reality. The essence of radical enhancement is a bid to make us masters of our own lives.

Enhancement attracts adherents because it offers to answer our cry against injustice and suffering, and to ameliorate our exasperation at being creatures—made, not masters. Bostrom and his fellow enhancers ask for more humane creatures and loftier human experiences. They want to produce beings that have overcome creaturely limits and are not susceptible to inflicting or suffering harm.

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<sup>18</sup> Bostrom and Savulescu, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. "Bionic Brains and Beyond," *WSJ*, 6/1/2012; also, Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005), 374.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Bailey, "The Case for Enhancing People," *The New Atlantis* no. 32 (2011), 22, 33, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Kurzweil, *Singularity*, 374.



To deliver, however, enhancement will have to address the features that make us susceptible to the conditions it promises to overcome. Lewis explains enhancement advocates's predicament: "We have been trying, like Lear, to have it both ways: to lay down our human prerogative and yet at the same time to retain it."<sup>22</sup>

When men revolt, they pervert legitimate longings by false systems—and invite consequences.

- We are right to find this world lacking, to hunger for perfection and justice. But we are wrong to resent being creatures—and then to act to abolish all limitations.
- We are right to ache for the hurt we give and receive, intentionally and unintentionally, in our hearts and homes, in our communities large and small. But we are wrong to try to eliminate the ambivalence of human action. Put another way: we are right to lament that we love poorly, but wrong, to follow Henri Nouwen, to try to make a world where we don't need forgiveness.
- We are right to want assurance of future well-being and to want to know our actions matter. We are wrong to say that capital-H History—the "inevitable" advances of biotech, or the coming Singularity will save us.<sup>23</sup> We are wrong to forget that people act. And we are wrong again to think that we can gain the power, as Kurzweil dreams, "to [upend] biological evolution altogether."<sup>24</sup>
- We are right in our intuitive appeals to moral meaning, a moral fabric. We condemn ourselves when we shred it, and then wrap new claims to autonomy in what fragments remain.
- We are right to want human fellowship. But we deal falsely when we act against the embodiment that at once separates us and allows us to meet.<sup>25</sup>
- Finally, we hunger for true food when we ask for a coherent story of our lives. We act in fatal hubris, however, when we manufacture stories of our impending autonomy.

Against the enhancer's scheme, Russell Kirk and C.S. Lewis see that we are obliged to resist the temptation to try to abolish the limits of our nature and condition.

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Abolition*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Bostrom and Savulescu; Kurzweil, *Singularity*.

<sup>24</sup> Kurzweil, TSN, 374.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Lewis in *Abolition* and *That Hideous Strength*: "Real life is meeting," following Buber, *I and Thou*.

They remind us we are instead called to pursue healing in brokenness and to cultivate potential where we find it.

**POINT THREE Third, Kirk and Lewis show us that the work of understanding leads to the task of response. They enrich our own response to the biotech age as they demonstrate the roles of *warning* and *vision* in restoring moral imagination.**

Russell Kirk and C.S. Lewis warn against revolt—they expose its root in pride and call our rebel hearts to account. Yet both affirm that warning is only a start. The harder task is to give a better vision of human life, in place of a false dream condemned to fail.

Russell Kirk knows that political questions are, at root, questions of faith and morals.<sup>26</sup> He says our chief contemporary concern is “the regeneration of spirit and character.”<sup>27</sup> Critically, he warns against the temptation to promote religion as a political remedy. Our thinkers understand that true education reaches both heart and mind. Kirk therefore calls on the prophets and poets.<sup>28</sup> He writes,

Every age is out of joint, in the sense that man and society never are what they ought to be; and the poet senses that he is born to set the time right—not, however, by leading a march to some New Jerusalem, but by rallying in his art to the permanent things.<sup>29</sup>

In his novel *That Hideous Strength*, C.S. Lewis demonstrates poetry’s evocative power. Professor Filostrato, a physiologist at the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments (or, N.I.C.E.), discloses the Institute’s true purpose. He says to a young man named Mark:

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<sup>26</sup> Kirk, 8, 492.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 472.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xvii-xviii.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 497.

This Institute—*Dei meo*, it is for something better than housing and vaccinations and faster trains and curing the people of cancer. It is for the conquest of death: or for the conquest of organic life, if you prefer. They are the same thing. It is to bring out of that cocoon of organic life which sheltered the babyhood of mind the New Man, the man who will not die, the artificial man, free from Nature. Nature is the ladder we have climbed up by, now we kick her away.<sup>30</sup>

At first, Mark wants what the N.I.C.E. offers. He goes along. His real break with the Institute comes only after he is subjected to the Objective Room—a disproportionate room in which Professor Frost directs him to various pointless and degraded activities. In the Objective Room, Mark gains clarity, but not the kind Frost intends. “And day by day,” Lewis tells us, “as the process went on, that idea of the Straight or the Normal which had occurred to him during his first visit to this room, grew stronger and more solid in his mind until it had become a kind of mountain.” Before, “he had always thought...[ideas] were things inside one’s own head.”<sup>31</sup> His exposure to the Crooked finally convinces him otherwise. As Lewis describes it,

[N]ow, when [Mark’s] head was continually attacked and often completely filled with the clinging corruption of the training, this Idea towered up above him—something which obviously existed quite independent of himself and had hard rock surfaces which would not give, surfaces he could cling to.<sup>32</sup>

Mark had discovered the permanent things.

## **CONCLUSION**

There’s more to Mark’s story, and more to ours, but we must close here. **What do Russell Kirk and C.S. Lewis teach us about what to do when the enhancers are at Oxford and Google and 23andMe?** In the face of our growing biotech powers, our choice is not whether we should innovate or reject technologies that shape how we are

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<sup>30</sup> C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*. New York: Scribner, 2003 (orig. 1945), 173-174.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

born, live, and die; it's about why and how we should develop them. In the post-human project, as at Babel, the creature made of dust and spirit refuses to be dust any longer. But if having bodies is part of being human, then being more truly human means not overcoming biological nature, but learning to live well as embodied, longing, loving, intellectual and spiritual creatures, between beasts and God.

As we go, we do well to remember that Kirk and Lewis commend the permanent things to us, not because they're old, but because they're good. The goal of restoration, then, is *not* to "go back" to a past era—remember, "Every age is out of joint."

In short, Russell Kirk and C.S. Lewis teach us that our responses to the human enhancement project become adequate only when we approach decisions and debates in humility and hope. In humility, we remember that we are made of dust (humus, dust; embodied), and we resist the temptation to pretend a power not ours. Kirk and Lewis teach us to respect the wonder, mystery, and tragedy that belong to our condition. With the poets and the prophets, we are convinced of grace and therefore labor in hope.

Is there a motive stronger or higher than fear that compels us to consider what we should do with the technologies that shape how we are born, live, and die? Yes: love. The loves and longings that make life worth living are inextricably tied to our nature as embodied creatures who are yet more than bodies. To resist the abolition of biological nature means just what the enhancers say: we retain all the ambivalence and vulnerability that try us now. And it is the only way to preserve our capacity to love. As Lewis affirms elsewhere,

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the

casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 121.