

***Transhumanism, Christianity and Modern Science: Some Clarifying Points Regarding Shiffman's Criticism of Fuller***

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Mark Shiffman recently published a review of Steve Fuller's *The Proactionary Imperative* in the *Journal of Religion and Public Life First Things* ("Humanity 4.5", Nov. 2015). While the main synopsis of Fuller's argument regarding transhumanism seems fair and accurate, there are a number of points where the author likely does not entirely get Fuller's views within a broader context—namely, that of Fuller's previous work. Also, Shiffman does not clarify features of his own theoretical context that later trigger some amount of confusion.

**On Heresy and Christianity**

In all justice to Shiffman, his evident knowledge of the religious underpinning of current science is a welcomed breath of fresh air that reminds one of authors like David F. Noble and Robert K. Merton. I refer to this as "fresh air" because the said authors were not afraid of blurring an allegedly clear line dividing science from religion. Shiffman knows better, and he shows it—all the way to acknowledging Francis Bacon's religiosity (about which only one serious treatise has been published in English: Stephen A. McKnight's *The Religious Foundations of Francis Bacon's Thought*).

One of the main sources of trouble in Shiffman's article emanate from his lack of specificity regarding what he understands by both "heresy" and "Christianity". Shiffman argues that Fuller commits the error of referring to the heretic doctrine of Gnosticism as Christianity: "[Fuller] is nevertheless right that the transhumanist agenda is a logical consequence of Gnosticism (which he and many others mistake for Christianity)" (27). This assertion is problematic at multiple levels.

First, the obvious question that arises here is, "heretic for whom?" If the author refers as heretics to the equation of Christendom minus the Catholic (and perhaps the Orthodox) Church, he should be honest on that. In that way—the way that puts both Gnostics and indeed Protestants in the same heretic bag—one would at least know *clearly* what he means by "heretic". The canonical understanding of this word points to a person who is outside the Catholic communion due to doctrinal (and not schismatic) differences. If the author would claim that the fact that he published his piece in a Catholic journal entails that the audience is obviously Catholic—and that the common understanding of heresy is a tacitly Catholic one—then my point perhaps would be deflated. Still, coming clean would not hurt [Full disclosure: I recognize Catholicism as my own tradition].

The second issue comes out of his understanding of Christianity vis-à-vis its splinter groups. Shiffman's quoted sentence above seems to imply that once a Christian group becomes heretic, it loses its ontological status as "Christian". This is obviously problematic. The Council of Trent perpetually defined Protestantism as heretic. Yet hardly anyone would deny its Christian status. To put it bluntly, a heretic Christian is still a Christian. Further, a heretic Christian might no longer be a Catholic Christian, but Christian she remains. Now, if the author is of the view (which I doubt) that only a

Catholic Christian is a Christian, and that non-Catholic Christians actually are non-Christians, then he should say it. Somewhat disturbingly, only in this last position the elements of this part of his argument become *consistent* with each other.

A third issue, related to the previous two, refers to Shiffman's views on Gnosticism in terms of the consequences of standing anywhere near it. Shiffman chastises Fuller for putting his transhumanist hopes on such a crooked version of Christianity, given that "[t]his, in fact, is not Christian orthodoxy at all, but rather Gnosticism, one of the great heresies" (26). Not many good things for humanity (transhuman or not) can come out from the gravely dualistic view of the human person that gnostics maintained. Indeed, "[g]nostics wanted to purify and detach their spirits from material existence by ascetic disciplines, including abstention from sex and procreation. It was the culture of death calling itself Christianity" (26). This sort of hardcore Platonism, extremely severe with the body in particular and the empirical realm in general, was compensated with the gnostic trust in the causally efficacious cognitive abilities of the mind. Gnostics relied on the "mind's capacity to construct models that will unlock the powers trapped within the given order of beings, so as to release their infinite possibilities and make them subservient to our needs and aspirations" (26). Shiffman is pulling a "fruit of the poisonous tree" card to advise the reader that given the inherently twisted roots of transhumanism, nothing good can come out of it—ever.

### **Puritans and Gnostics**

One could remind Shiffman that Protestant Puritanism has very similar (if not the same) takes on the body and materiality as sources of disorder, distress, and perhaps evil—as spin offs from Martin Luther's bleak views on both the nature and consequences of the Great Fall. Although Puritanism is a fairly well known and not unusual occurrence among Christian Protestants, one would hardly be willing to assert that Protestantism as a whole has nothing good to offer to humanity, or that in any case, the bad outweighs the good. Further, Catholicism experienced its share of puritanism too, when Jansenism flourished in France and spread to its colonies. It would be strange to conclude that Catholicism was contaminated by it beyond salvation. These fringe groups (if one can call them that) have, far from destroyed the "tree", further enriched it, by means of a forced self-awareness of its main roots and identity, with a subsequent better preparedness for the uncertainties of the future.

Regarding Shiffman's suspicion of the gnostic emphasis on the epistemic powers of the mind—instantiated in a model constructability that would be later picked up by transhumanism—one could kindly suggest the author to contemplate the operative framework of Modern science. Francis Bacon's "mechanical arts" act as a device that would return to man his mastery over nature, lost due to Original Sin. Perhaps more strikingly, the previous quote ("minds capacity to construct...") looks like a verbatim excerpt from Giambattista Vico's *The New Science*. Vico, an ardent (albeit heterodox) Catholic, was aware of Bacon's explicit anti-Catholicism, which he denounced. However, he recognized the tremendous power of Bacon's proposal, and elaborated his work upon it. Now both are regarded as pioneers of Modern science. Perhaps more interestingly (although unsurprisingly) for us, Vico is seen as the patron saint of neo-cybernetic

emergent technologies, nanoscience including (Malapi-Nelson 2014, “Humanities’ metaphysical underpinnings of late frontier scientific research”, *Humanities* 214, no. 3). Shiffman disapprovingly states that “[t]his model-building approach underlies the view that the scientific method is the only reliable way of knowing” (25). It certainly is not. The scientific method is the only reliable way of knowing *scientifically*. Model constructability might well lie at the very core of the nature of science, which itself constitutes one of the most important pillars of Western Civilization. Modern science, the West and Christianity are so fundamentally interconnected that if you remove one, the other two are left with glaring holes. And these “heretics” are partly (but substantially) to be thanked for that. This brings me to the next point.

### **Gnosticism and Transhumanism**

Shiffman laments that the sources of transhumanist thought—sources that Fuller accepts—are “not Christian orthodoxy at all, but rather Gnosticism, one of the great heresies” (26). That much is clear. However, Fuller not only recognizes the Christian gnostic—and Christian “heretic” in general—roots of much of the scientific impetus that leads to transhumanist thinking. He celebrates it. Fuller, himself a Catholic, does not mince words for expressing his admiration towards, say, the more risk-oriented Franciscan theology as opposed to the more orthodox Dominican one, as they developed in rivalry during the Medieval Ages (Fuller 2011, *Humanity 2.0*). Indeed Shiffman somewhat regrets that Duns Scotus’ doctrine of univocity prevailed over Thomas Aquinas’ doctrine of analogy, denouncing that this should not be understood as Aquinas’ doctrine being inferior:

[Fuller] never pauses to consider how one might adjudicate the controversy between Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy and Scotist univocity. In this he is in good company... Michael Gillespie, simply assumes that nominalism attained victory over the older tradition because of an intrinsic superiority (26).

Shiffman should perhaps consider the possibility that univocity prevailed not due to its “superiority”, but because it seemed friendlier or even more convenient to (post 17<sup>th</sup> century) Modern thought—profoundly suspicious of an Aristotle-based scholastics, particularly after Francis Bacon’s attacks against the Greeks. It would seem that Shiffman is not only uncomfortable with a Catholic nominalism that later morphs into an entity inimical to the Church. He seems to recoil at the idea that heretics—Gnostics, Protestants, etc.—might be seen in the bigger picture as the primal contributors to Modern (and Contemporary) scientific thought.

In the two books preceding his *Proactionary Imperative* (*Humanity 2.0* and *Preparing for Life in Humanity 2.0*), Steve Fuller, who proudly asserts his Jesuitic academic upbringing, goes out of his way to remind his readers how the Catholic Church contributed in no small way to the flourishing of the Scientific Revolution. This is done by, say, exalting the work of the Augustinian Gregor Mendel, or by pointing out at the scientific feats accomplished by the Jesuits. Acknowledging the role of the Church in the development of Modern science does not negate the widely accepted view that the

Scientific Revolution probably was triggered as a consequence of the Protestant Revolt/Reform. Interestingly, Shiffman's issues with Fuller (and perhaps with transhumanism at large) might have to do with his own take on both the nature and history of Modern science.

### **How Many Enhancements?**

The last part of Shiffman's review gives the name to his piece: *Humanity 4.5*. Shiffman argues here that Fuller got it wrong, "recognizing that Fuller's arithmetic is faulty" (27). Fuller fails to see that humans were already enhanced several times throughout history, and that the humanity 2.0 that Fuller talks about is actually humanity 4.5. Shiffman goes on to provide a panoramic view of the development of the human ethos, from prehistory to our times and beyond, under the light of reason and indeed of Christianity. One has to give it to Shiffman; his writing is inspirational. His account of the evolution of humanity is one of the most beautiful things I have read in a long time.

All this beautiful stuff occurs inside human craniums, however, and Shiffman should be reminded of that. During an interview by Prof. Babette Babich from Fordham University, Fuller disclosed the reason behind his gradual turn in emphasis from his famous "social epistemology" to all matters transhuman. He confided that at a certain point in his academic life he began to be interested not only in the development and evolution of ideas, but in the development and evolution of the *seat* of those ideas—the human body; the hardware, as it were. The profound alteration (not merely prosthetic) of the human body is part and parcel of transhumanism. Lacking that, we are talking about intra-cranial mental (perhaps even spiritual) phenomena—the only locus of change for humanity 1.0.

This part of Shiffman's argument might be fixed with a simple algebraic replacement of variables. What Shiffman calls humanity 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 3.5, and 4.0, are all in fact just humanity 1.0 at different points in history. What he calls humanity 4.5 is simply humanity 2.0. To put it succinctly,  $(H1.0, H2.0, H3.0, H3.5, H4.0) = H1$ ;  $H4.5 = H2.0$ . The epic enhancements that Shiffman describes are all part of humanity 1.0. If one regards an "enhancement" in human self-understanding as somehow equivalent to what transhumanism regards as "enhancement", then one has confused two distinct levels of discourse (maybe a neologism should be coined so that this ambiguity comes to an end). Thus Shiffman's title would more appropriately be something along the lines of "The beauty of humanity 1.0 and the perils of humanity 2.0". Less catchy, but more accurate.

Shiffman finishes his piece venting a concern regarding the markedly libertarian cues present in transhumanist thinking—libertarianism that might at the end betray the possible goodness present in the transhumanist agenda, with nefarious consequences for humanity as a whole. In this I have to tell Shiffman: Fuller is with you. In fact, this might be the stuff that drives his later work and keeps him awake at night.

*A Post Scriptum:* I recently read the reply from Fuller and the answer from Shiffman in the subsequent issue of *First Things*. To my knowledge, the concerns presented here were not addressed.

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