MARGINALIZATION AND TRANSCENDENCE IN TRANSHUMANISM AND MINJUNG THEOLOGY

by Yong Sup Song and Robert M. Geraci

Abstract.   The visibility of transhumanism in pop culture reveals its dramatic advance in twenty-first-century life. The more widespread the movement becomes, the more important it is to consider how transhumanism might be made relevant to global humanity. This article orients technological progress by drawing transhumanism into conversation with minjung theology from Korea. Minjung theology offers global tech culture—and its pursuit of technological salvation—an ethical foundation through attention to *Han* (an emotion specific to those who suffer from individual, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural oppression but have been unable to express it adequately) and the lived reality of those who are often excluded from benefits of technological society. Working in the other direction, transhumanist perspectives on technology offer minjung theology an opportunity to expand its reach through the development of a transcendent theological perspective.

Keywords: Korea; liberation theology; minjung; technology; transhumanism

Anticipating a Transhumanism of Liberation

The visibility of transhumanist thinking in global pop culture—from Hollywood blockbusters to binge-worthy shows on Netflix and Amazon—reveals its dramatic advance in twenty-first-century life. The more widespread that transhumanism becomes, the more important it is to consider how it is or might be made relevant to a broad selection of humanity. While we do not consider ourselves transhumanists—perhaps better expressed with a capital T as indicated by Hefner (2009)[1]—we recognize that to greater or lesser extent all people participate in the transhumanist project of technological enhancement. Furthermore, as we share with transhumanist authors a clear interest in social progress, we argue that this goal is easier met when transhumanists adapt themselves to a global set of needs. The intersection of theology, religious studies, and transhumanism provides opportunities to think about collective human flourishing.

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We propose that one way to serve and orient technological progress is by drawing transhumanism into conversation with minjung theology from Korea. Minjung theology offers global tech culture—and its pursuit of technological salvation—an ethical foundation through attention to *Han* (an emotion specific to those who suffer from individual, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural oppressions for a long time but have been unable to express it adequately) and the suffering of those on the margins of our technological society. Working the other direction, transhumanist perspectives on technology offer minjung theology an opportunity to expand its own reach through the development of what might be called a transcendent theological perspective. Minjung theology exposes the fact that science and technology are not value-neutral, often serving the interests of the rich and powerful rather than those of the poor and the marginalized; but it also understands that contemporary transcendence or salvation from human suffering and finitude will not be possible without science and technology (Shin 2018, 187). In the twenty-first century, science and technology may become one of the major causes of the *han* of the oppressed, while providing the possibility of realizing the dreams and visions of the rich. Minjung theology should provide the theological drive and legitimacy to understand and eliminate the *han* of oppressed and marginalized peoples living in the new world of technoscientifically-driven competition.

Korean theology provides a powerful point of engagement with modern technology precisely because the Republic of Korea (frequently known as South Korea) is a technologically advanced society. While economic and political power are not perfectly distributed, the country is highly developed, with a human development index score of 0.906 (in 2022), and it has seen near-universal dissemination of digital technologies, including Internet access and mobile phones. As such, minjung theology sits at the intersection of political theologies of marginalization and the advanced technologies that encourage transhumanist aspirations.

Transhumanism may comfortably intertwine with high-tech digital life and Silicon Valley start-up culture, but if that remains the limit of its scope then it cannot contribute to the lived reality of people across the globe. Just as trickledown economics has been widely discredited (not to mention pernicious), we must recognize that putting our faith in a trickledown technological salvation looks destined to poor results. But there is no reason that transhumanists—or, more importantly, those inspired by them—need remain myopically focused on the wealthy and the privileged. The underlying motivation of transhumanism to help humanity rise above its limitations is one that can be leveraged for a more global view of human progress.

In this regard, transhumanism mirrors the development of modern experiments in liberative religion. Especially in the twentieth century,

political conflict and increasing attention to the needs of laypeople led theologians to develop a variety of strategies under the name of liberation theology. Primarily a Latin-American Catholic movement at first (e.g., Gutiérrez [1973] 1988), liberation theology quickly became a concern for other Christian traditions and non-Christian religions as well. While transhumanists are generally leery of institutional religions and resistant to being labeled religious or compared to institutional religions, we maintain that in addition to offering philosophical and social contributions, transhumanism fits within more than one reasonable definition of religion (see Amarasingam 2008; Geraci 2020). By adopting principles from liberation theology, transhumanism would become a better partner in the cultural process of human flourishing. Minjung theology, which is liberation theology particular to Korea and which emerged around the same time as that of Latin America, offers clear and powerful ways of orienting transhumanism toward the needs of marginalized communities and thus becomes an important conversation partner for transhumanists and those influenced by them.

While both liberation theology in Latin America and minjung theology in Korea could be good conversation partners for transhumanism, we believe that minjung theology better addresses the contemporary world. Following Brown, we understand "liberation in the Latin American context as centering on liberation for the victims of material poverty, and therefore having a strong emphasis on overcoming the oppressive structures…[within] a capitalist economy. The Korean experience…is, by contrast, a much more widely oppressive situation, in which liberation is needed from cultural, social, political, and economic oppression" (Brown 1988, 37). Minjung theology has struggled for liberation from multilayered oppressions, and thus offers solutions beyond the economic, potentially grappling also with global tech culture.

Minjung is a Korean term for those who are oppressed, suffering, and marginalized sociopolitically, culturally, and economically. However, in the history of Korea, minjung have not remained exclusively "the object of subjugation, control and exploitation" (K. Suh 2018b, 20). Rather, they were also believed to have the potential to transcend their social and political realities. Therefore, Nam-Dong Suh, a first-generation minjung theologian, claimed, "Minjung are the subject of history, of their own destiny, and of their own society" (N. Suh 2018, 287).[2]

Another first-generation minjung theologian, Byung-Mu Ahn, understood and interpreted minjung as *ochlos* ("multitude"), a term borrowed from the gospel of Mark.

> They [*ochlos*] are the minjung who are weary and burdened, the lost sheep, the uninvited, the poor, the disabled, the blind, the crippled, the mistreated prodigals wandering the streets and alleys of towns; they are the

unemployed roaming the streets, the oppressed, the imprisoned, the hungry, the naked, the moaning and the persecuted. In [the] social stratum, they are the fourth class. (Ahn [1975] 2013b, 95)

Just as minjung today can be seen in the *ochlos*, so too may the *ochlos* be identified as minjung. Ahn argued that the minjung who followed Jesus were the ones who transmitted "the Jesus Event" in Mark (Ahn [1984] 2013c, 47). The minjung in Mark, who were unable to write down the tradition "in an official capacity owing to their political situation and the situation of the church," passed it down "in the form of rumor" (Ahn [1984] 2013c, 48). They were a marginalized class who opposed the ruling class of their time (Ahn [1979] 2013a, 53). So they kept secrets and transmitted them surreptitiously to those who needed to avoid being caught, a process resembling today's rumors (Ahn 1980, 11). The story of the multitude allowed twentieth-century Korean minjung to discover Jesus' suffering in their own. This opened the possibility of transcending sociopolitical oppression in their time through the Kingdom of God promised by Jesus.

Minjung theology's emphasis on rumor as a means of conveying the Gospel is not only a unique interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, but also provides insight into effective communication methods that can occur to the poor in the contemporary world. For example, in the movie, *Transcendence* (2014), Will, an Artificial General Intelligence, cured the seriously wounded in a video that was filmed by a member of an antitechnology terrorist group. The video was posted online to warn people and went viral. Rather than fearing Will, however, the crippled, the blinded, and the wounded in poverty came to him in the hope of healing. The video provided a rumor for those who were poor and hopeless. Whether the video had been manipulated or not, they interpreted it as a message of hope and spread it among themselves. Even propaganda efforts by the antitechnology terrorist group that accused Will of playing God served only to pass along to such people a hopeful rumor. In both early Christianity and in the transhumanist movie *Transcendence*, rumor—which contradicted the official pronouncements of the powerful elite or the government—was a key method of delivering messages to the poor and the powerless.

Byung-Mu Ahn's understanding of the story of the minjung in the Gospel of Mark allowed twentieth-century Korean minjung to discover Jesus' suffering in their own (Kim 2013, 200–201). Minjung theology identifies Jesus' suffering in the midst of minjung suffering. It claims that the suffering of minjung would be an event of liberation that transcends its historical reality, just as Christians believe that Jesus's suffering produced the liberation of humanity. Minjung theology argues that the minjung are the subject of a liberation that transcends the realities of oppression and suffering in history (K. Suh 2018a, 615). Byung-Mu Ahn summarizes the relationships between minjung and Jesus' message, or between suffering

reality and transcendental possibility, in the following way: "In a word, what Jesus communicated to the *ochlos* is the advent of the kingdom of God… Apocalyptical declarations such as 'the Kingdom of God is near' and 'the kingdom of God is coming!' mark the end of the old and the beginning of the new age, which gives the *ochlos* a new path and a new hope" (Ahn [1979] 2013a, 63).

In the 1970s, minjung theology emerged based on a theological understanding of suffering and marginalization. With some influence from liberation theology elsewhere,[3] Korean theologians interpreted and reconstructed the politico-economic context of minjung. Starting in the 1960s, some Korean Christians entered urban slums and carried out missionary work while others passionately participated in the struggle for democracy. The combination of such commitment to sociopolitical action with new theological interpretations produced the flowering of minjung theology in the next decade. During the democratization movements of South Korea in 1970–80s, Minjung communities initially played a transformative role, but gradually lost their dynamic power. In the 1990s, there even arose skepticism as to whether minjung played a practical role in history, and thus as to the ability of minjung to bring about transcendence and the community's own salvation. In the decades since, minjung theology has nearly lost its theological, political, and social influence in Korean society, where the sociopolitical and economic situations of minjung have become "complex, diverse, overlayered, and hybrid" in the postindustrial era (Park 2010, 422).

However, worsening socioeconomic inequality demands a revaluation of the importance and implications of minjung theology in the twenty-first century. Economic disparities were exacerbated by the direction of science and technology in the twenty-first century as individuals were drawn into endless competition with invisible others through computer networks. While South Korea swiftly reached the same level of wealth and the technology of the western countries, "the price of this dramatic improvement has been the desertification of daily life, the hyper-acceleration of rhythms, the extreme individualization of biographies, and an unbridled competition in the work market" (Berardi 2015, 194). Although Korean society itself became wealthy and advanced, many Koreans suffer in a highly technological, perfectly connected, extremely competitive, winner-take-all society that concentrates wealth among the few while eroding the middle class and increasing the *han* of the poor and the marginalized.

During the same late twentieth- to early twenty-first-century timespan, transhumanists have generated growing social and theological power. Their influence appears, for example, in policy organizations and corporate culture (Geraci 2010; Nourbaskhsh 2015) and, at increasing pace, in the news media.[4] Papers linking transhumanism to medical ethics, some well-circulated, indicate that medical professionals are not ignoring

transhumanism (e.g., McNamee and Edwards 2006; Brazier, Gillon, and Harris 2012).[5] Many western theologians are critical of transhumanism because it seems to express a sinful pride that humans can be the source of their own salvation, eliminating the grace of God. This sentiment appears in the Southern Baptist Convention's statement on AI (Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission 2019) and in sermons from the pulpit (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2019). But other theologians support transhumanism. For example, Cole-Turner (2011) assembled a cadre of Christian theologians with an interest in the intersections. Other theologians have sought even more substantive connections between transhumanism and Christianity, such as McBride (2022), who sees the possibility of Christian resurrection in cyborg immortality.

Although there are advocates seeking consonance between it and Christianity, transhumanism raises significant challenges to minjung theology because it might offer the possibility of self-transformation and salvation exclusively to those who are wealthy and powerful. In other words, transhumanism without critical and ethical reconsiderations may provide a vision of achieving self-transcendence only for the rich, while minjung are excluded from the benefits. Therefore, minjung theology should discover an avenue by which minjung who were alienated and marginalized from society may emerge again as the subject of self-transcendence and salvation by utilizing the science and technology envisioned in transhumanism.

However, as long as transhumanism remains within the limits of Eurocentric myopia and neoliberal capitalism, it is likely to exploit and marginalize minjung around the world rather than liberate them. Culturally, transhumanism is aimed at realizing western values, presupposing Euro-American populations as the subject and object of transcendence (while typically ignoring the oppressed in the midst of those cultures). As Ali (2019) notes, for example, many transhumanist perspectives include profoundly western and white biases. Socioeconomically, transhumanism thrives under the auspices and support of multinational tech corporations and is poised to exacerbate wealth and power inequalities. In this process, minjung around the world are likely to experience greater exploitation and marginalization. Therefore, in order for transhumanism to truly contribute to humanity, it is necessary to converse with minjung theology (as well as other liberation theologies) and reflect on where minjung should be located in the roadmap of transhumanism.

The Progression of Transhumanist Thinking

Long before the emergence of transhumanism proper, Christians viewed technology as a means of perfecting humanity and incorporated it into their vision of divine providence and human salvation. As many scholars have noted, Bacon ([1627] 1951) describes an imaginary Christian

community that uses technology to enhance plants, animals, and even humanity in *New Atlantis*. American theologian Cole-Turner (2015) sees a clear lineage between contemporary transhumanism and Dante Alighieri coining the verb *transhumanar*. It is profoundly unlikely that any of the early transhumanists deliberately borrowed from *The Divine Comedy*, but late-twentieth-century transhumanists were aware of the usage (see Vita-More 2018, 10). Bacon, however, is just one example of how Christians used technology in pursuit of what Dante evidently saw as an essential human desire to rise above. Noble (1999) has convincingly described not only the medieval and early modern Christian approach to technological salvation, but also the transference of this vision into a variety of secular scientific projects in the twentieth century.

The Christian vision of transcendence, including its legacy of techno-logical transcendence, produced the cultural, philosophical, and religious movements of transhumanism out of the confluence of global interactions, secularization, and the increasing power (both political and practical) of science and technology. Nikolai Fedorov and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin are clear examples of Christian thinkers with significant impact on trans-humanist perceptions of technology (see Teilhard de Chardin [1955] 1959; Steinhart 2008; Burdett 2011; Young 2012; Delio 2020). Mean-while, Haldane (1924) and Huxley ([1927] 1957; 1957) articulated the basic vision of what would become transhumanism—both positioning themselves as atheist (or at least agnostic) but the latter describing hu-man evolution as a specifically religious enterprise and coining the term "transhumanism" (Huxley 1955; 1957, 17, 287–302).

Growing beyond its early speculations, the transhumanist movement now captures the imagination of many people. The emergence of tran-shumanism as a movement has been documented by, among others, Tirosh-Samuelson (2012; 2013), Geraci (2011), More (2013), and Vita-More (2018). It was the work first of mid-century authors like Ettinger (1964; 1972) and Esfandiary ([1970] 1978; [1973] 1977), and later by More ([1988] 2003; 2013), Vita-More (2018), and others. While most thinkers in this period sharply delimited transhumanism from religion, others were more sanguine about that relationship (e.g., Bainbridge 2009; Prisco 2013; 2018). The growth of transhumanism in the mid-twentieth century was certainly slow, but its pace accelerated in the late century and into the twenty-first, especially with the advent of the Internet. Extropian listservs and webpages could be found by a much wider population than old forms of distribution, such as the monthly magazine produced by the Life Extension Foundation (which itself participated in the Internet transition). Magazines like *Mondo 2000* and *Wired* likewise contributed to the transhumanist cause (the former more explicitly).

Internet communication—especially as advanced in the smartphone—brought a digital enchantment to daily life and made obvious the cyborg

aspects of the human experience. Simultaneous advances in robotics, AI, pharmaceuticals, genetic engineering, neuroscience, and other fields contributed to the authority of transhumanist interpretations of technology and of humanity. The clear enthusiasm for futurist speculation in Silicon Valley tech culture and the rapid expansion of transhumanist ideas in pop culture make transhumanism a vital contributor to the modern zeitgeist and thus force reconfigurations in other areas of public life, including religion.

Should transhumanists achieve their goal of overcoming human limits through technology, it is possible that a posthuman species might emerge. Such a species could be produced through radical genetic changes but remain biological, be a cyborg merger of biology and machines, or transition entirely to machine life through mind uploading. All of these processes are, at least in some sense, underway. If any or all of them can be carried through to the ultimate conclusions promised by transhumanist advocates, a radical shift will take place in the history of life. Humanity will have transitioned into a new species. This goal seeks to replace many religious perspectives on humanity and cosmic destiny, while thus prompting a reply from theological directions. Some religious groups thus oppose visions of posthumanity, but others find that those visions prompt a reconsideration of their own central tenets.

Given the heritage of transhumanism, it is perhaps not surprising that its emergence as a kind of secular religion or quasi-religion has rebounded toward traditional religions and has led to new ways of thinking about such institutions. Lincoln Cannon's Mormon Transhumanist Association was probably the first significant effort in this direction (see Cannon 2017); but by the second decade of the twenty-first century, transhumanist approaches found homes in other Christian circles (Butler 2020; Cole-Turner 2015; Thweatt-Bates 2016), Buddhism (LaTorra 2015; Hughes 2019), Islam (Jackson 2020), and secular cultural movements, like Afrofuturism (Kim 2017). For all these intersections with religious thought and practice, still transhumanism has by and large failed to encompass marginalized communities. Doing so would provide new room for analytical and theological maneuvering on all sides.

On the Margins of Transcendence

Transhumanists' disinterest in the plight of the poor marks a departure from the movement's early twentieth-century origins. In his *Daedalus, Or Science and the Future* (1924), Haldane accompanies his surprisingly insightful prognostications about germline engineering, solar power, and neuropharmacology with an explicit opposition to injustice (p. 22) and an interest in the welfare of laboring classes (pp. 20–21, 30–31). Despite such early witness to the needs of oppressed peoples, transhumanist

thinkers have construed economic justice exclusively as a trickledown possibility based on the adoption of advanced technology by the wealthy and powerful.

Importantly, not all of twenty-first-century transhumanism adopts the neoliberal capitalist assumptions that pervade the movement's political sympathies. Hughes (2004) argues in favor of a democratic transhumanism that encourages empathy and supports political uplift of the marginalized. Hughes's position is put into thoughtful conversation with other transhumanist value systems (as well as their opponents) by Agar (2007), who demonstrates the importance of working through the permutations of transhumanist thought. Hughes shows clear and welcome interest in economic injustice and owes a clear debt to Haldane, whom he references more than 10 times. He consistently points toward the injustice of economic disparity and the need to provide social support for the poor to receive technological enhancements (Hughes 2004, 20, 24, 41, 52, 130–33, 151, 178–79, 201–202, 265). He notes that in many cases this would be of greater social utility than the same enhancements for the wealthy—and thus the latter would likely need to pay for the technologies themselves while the poor received them from the social support network (Hughes 2004, 237).

The mid-century pioneers of transhumanism—most notably Ettinger and Esfandiary—showed little interest in building an expansive view of technological salvation, but one can find inklings of a more just philosophy in their work. Both imply or state that the future should resolve the problems of inequality. Ettinger (1972, 9, 165–66, 172–73) supported a universal basic income to end poverty and expected that all humanity will become wealthy. Similarly, Esfandiary ([1973] 1977, 68, 111–12) advocates for ensuring that hungry children are properly fed and argues that automation will end poverty along with the "slavery of perpetual work." After changing his name, he continued to maintain this ideal of public good: "even one single under-nourished person anywhere is one too many" and there can be "abundance for every one of us for millions and billions of years" (FM-2030 1989, 79). Arguably, Esfandiary's desire to break down national, religious, ethnic, and other exclusionary identities reveals a worldview that could be more systematically inclusive.

However, while both Ettinger and Esfandiary are alert to the existence of marginalized and impoverished communities, both authors bury such concerns in a worldview that cannot help but perpetuate those conditions. Their laudable goals are barely developed compared to their more systematic positions on technologically advanced humanity.

Ettinger, for example, asserts that "today there are vast segments of the world population that will not concede it is better to be rich than poor, better to be bright than dull, better to be strong than weak, better to be free than regimented, or even that it is better to live than to die" (1972, 10).

Furthermore, he excludes the poor from a cryonic future because of this emotional failing: "those who are suffering, or who have low vitality, typically are not afraid of death, but only of pain and the demand of others. They just want surcease" (Ettinger 1972, 249). Such statements do little more than blame the victim; they suggest that people are poor because they want to be and they will die because they want to, both of which are manifestly absurd. While he cites our "endless responsibility for one another" (Ettinger 1964, 125), he also promotes a ridiculously unjust distribution of cryonics technology: advanced nations would have liquid nitrogen and the latest chemical preservatives but developing nations would have "pits insulated with straw and cooled with dry ice" (Ettinger 1964, 127). Ettinger rejects the idea of generosity (1972, 137–39) and declares that "it simply isn't feasible at this time, for most of us, to worry overmuch about those mountains of misery in distant places" (Ettinger 1972, 161). This explains why he believes that "from the standpoint of civil order, it will not at first greatly matter how skilfully [sic] the bodies are preserved, so long as *hope* is preserved." (Ettinger 1964, 127, emphasis original). That is, as long as the poor do not upset the apple cart for the wealthy, then perhaps it will one day be possible for them to enjoy the benefits of advanced technology. Perhaps.

Esfandiary's work generally shows not just disregard for, but actual antipathy toward impoverished communities. Early in his work he rejects the idea of redistributed income (Esfandiary ([1973] 1977, 114). Meanwhile, his *Are You a Transhuman*?, published in 1989 after he legally changed his name to FM-2030, directly correlates wealth with transhuman identity. The book, which is an unusual mix of magazine-style quizzes called "monitors" and explanations of transhumanism, includes a variety of wealth measures including "Monitor 4: How Time Rich are You?" and "Monitor 10: How Affluent are You?" Predictably, a reader scores points toward "personal growth" by having lots of free/leisure time and having a high income (FM-2030 1989, 32, 75). Furthermore, you score no points if you believe that it is possible to "*live* a modern life—high values and high-tech—on low income" (FM-2030 1989, 73, 75, emphasis original). Anyone pursuing personal growth is evidently to exclude the poor and marginalized from modernity. FM-2030 goes on to state that "you cannot be poor and live a progressive life" and "if you are chronically poor you will inevitably remain trapped in yesterday [sic] values and lifestyles" (FM-2030 1989, 77).

While Esfandiary acclaims—at least in principle—a world without scarcity in which all of humanity has transhumanist opportunities of self-fulfillment, his eternal return to advanced technology makes this vision unsuitable for communities at the margin (but not for the reasons he believes). It is one thing for the wealthy to see themselves as having no national borders as they jet-set from resort to resort—and even to

advocate that we abolish such borders and welcome migrant communities (see FM-2030 1989, 138–39); but for poor immigrants seeking economic or political asylum, it is precisely the national borders they desire to cross which demarcate the opportunities they seek. Meanwhile, regardless of which side of the border they inhabit, they are ignored by the technoculture that valorizes ever-more-expensive technological interventions, from smartphones to genetic engineering. We do not see in Esfandiary's work a clear approach to how economic and social justice might be developed, only a hard-to-believe trickledown effect whereby sufficient technological and social-structural progress should liberate the impoverished from their circumstances.

Esfandiary's failure to think progressively toward justice is at its clearest in the manifesto by which he ends his early work, *Optimism One*. In that text, he notes "we are no longer content with simply building shelters for the homeless, better houses, towns, and cities. We are on the way to eliminating the very concept of fixed shelters, homes, towns" (Esfandiary [1970] 1978, 168), and

> We can never again be content with civil rights, human rights, the right to self-determination. These rights by themselves are no longer enough.
> We now want cosmic rights.
> We want the freedom to roam the universe.
> We want nothing less than the right to determine our own evolution.
> We want the right to live forever.
> So long as we have not overthrown the tyranny of death no one is free.
> (Esfandiary [1970] 1978, 170)

These may be legitimate goals, but only someone who has little fear about the denial of his or her basic rights could take such a cavalier attitude toward their acquisition; and such a person has little to offer those whose civil and human rights are denied. This incapacity is all the more obvious in the rights Esfandiary claims, none of which are liberatory for the economically and socially oppressed, but speak exclusively to the transhumanist desire to overcome earthly embodiment.

It would be easy to suggest that the social and economic limitations apparent in mid-century views of technology are an artifact of early transhumanist efforts. Unfortunately, however, the same easy affirmation of technocapitalism and the concurrent obfuscation of its built-in prejudices and inequalities remains in the twenty-first century. For example, the essays on "Biopolitics and Policy" in *The Transhumanist Reader*, composed by seven different authors, focus almost exclusively on debates over individual choices about augmentation while showing no interest in the economic injustices that govern who will be able to make such choices (see More and Vita-More 2013, 279–360).[6] For influential transhumanists, the problems of the poor and the oppressed remain susceptible to the

twin cure of technological progress and the neoliberal economic model. Unfortunately for these authors, that very model promotes local and global inequalities that cannot be solved simply through better machines.

Vita-More notes that "throughout the world people are undergoing unhealthy and unfavorable circumstances" and that "transhumanists evoked a future that could be healthy and favorable for all" (Vita-More 2018, 5). She believes that in a transhuman future we would see "poverty disappear and everyone, everywhere living a productive life in good health" (Vita-More 2018, 14). A distant second to Hughes, she is among the clearest contemporary transhumanists on wealth inequality, devoting several pages to the problem. In this, her work is a laudable move toward the kind of liberatory transhumanism we propose in this article.

However, Vita-More too blithely places the blame on the "behavior of governing bodies, institutions, and leaders" without acknowledging the dreadful contributions of economic systems that structurally exacerbate wealth inequality (Vita-More 2018, 14).[7] Existing problems of wealth inequality, stagnant wages, racial disparities in inherited wealth, income gaps among racial and gender differences, and other economic woes of western nations cannot be blamed on socialist or tyrannical governments. As with other transhumanists, Vita-More waves away the sufferings of marginalized groups by stating that "because the advances in technology (e.g., molecular engineering) and automation [sic], supplies will be made at a faster pace and delivered to people around the world without intervention of governing bodies that prevent their own people from receiving help" (Vita-More 2018, 17). This kind of blithe reference to technological vaporware and accusations of government malfeasance does little to change conditions even in developed nations, where—to offer one simple example—the town of Flint, Michigan could still have lead in its water supply pipes many years after the problem was first identified.

Vita-More's commitment to social amelioration, and that of transhumanism more broadly, needs to be more ambitious. While she takes nascent ideas about injustice and highlights them, her solutions are too tightly committed to the very institutional structures that promote discrimination and poverty. Transhumanist authors have had decades to build on the insufficient impressions of Ettinger and Esfandiary, and most have yet to construct a robust approach to social justice. In this, they once again mirror institutional religious groups. The very inspiration for liberation theology was the ways in which the Catholic Church was complicit in unjust power structures and the impoverishment of the disadvantaged. And so it makes sense to ask whether the insights of liberation theology can offer a way forward for transhumanist advocates. Among such efforts, minjung theology engages a broad swath of oppressions and seeks to alleviate cultural and personal suffering along with material suffering, and

effectively speaks both to economic structures and the deployment of science and technology.

A Theological Intervention

Minjung theology can speak to transhumanism and raise critical voices to suggest the direction and ethical implications of the development of science and technology. Minjung theology challenges transhumanism in the following respects: minjung theology (1) is interested in the sufferings of minjung, (2) argues that God experiences the sufferings of minjung, and (3) avers that God is present when people suffer together. Prior to satisfying rosy dreams of a complete elimination of suffering (particularly for the wealthy), minjung theology suggests, science and technology should be used to enable Euro-Americans to become more sensitive to the suffering of minjung, to be more aware of it, and to stand together in solidarity with minjung. This focus upon suffering *together*—as opposed to Ettinger's unwillingness to contemplate the "mountains of misery in distant places"—offers a powerful critique of transhumanism but also a way forward for it.

According to Park, "Minjung theology directly relates the suffering of Minjung with that of God. Christ is present at the scene of the suffering of Minjung as well as God. As long as God and Christ are with the afflicted Minjung, they cannot remain in frustration and dismay, but can have the hope of the kingdom of God" (Park 1995 109–10). The sufferings experienced by minjung will ultimately be transformed by the presence of God. Thus, the suffering of minjung is not simply an obstacle to be eliminated. Rather, the rich and powerful are invited to stand together with minjung in their suffering, and participate in the suffering of minjung through solidarity, because it is the first step toward salvation and resurrection. In this sense, minjung theology presents transhumanism with the ethical orientation and implications of the use of technology. From the viewpoint of minjung theology, transhumanists should not merely try to eliminate the suffering of minjung, but first empathize with minjung, trying to understand their *han*. Only after that, will it be possible to transcend suffering.

Minjung theology matches the suffering of Jesus with that of minjung. Thus, just as people are saved through the sacrifice of Jesus in Christian faith, minjung theology argues that today we are saved by "joining and standing in solidarity with the lives of minjung who suffer. Moreover, minjung themselves open their own salvation through suffering and struggle. Thus, minjung theology refers to 'the suffering Minjung Messiah'" (Park 1995, 110). Byung-Mu Ahn clearly states the relationship between the suffering and salvation of Jesus and minjung:

> He [Jesus] repeatedly told the elites to take note of them [the minjung] because he believed salvation could only be opened through the minjung.

> He died on the cross in order to proclaim that the salvation of all humanity could only be achieved through them. And this death on the cross indicated the height of the minjung's suffering. The death of Christ on the cross signifies not the death of an individual (*individium*) but that of the minjung who were being crushed to death by the rulers…. The minjung of Jesus were a group of people who had, instead of the sense of sin, the awareness that they themselves, despite being thrashed in this way, were truly the sons and daughters of God. Salvation comes through the minjung who are abused and dying on behalf of the world. (Ahn [1986] 2019, 74–75)

Minjung theology argues that Jesus' salvation is related to the salvation of the suffering minjung. It understands that the suffering minjung are the subject of salvation not only for themselves but also for non-minjung by inviting them to their suffering and thus empowering them toward liberation in solidarity. This understanding of minjung theology challenges transhumanists to seriously consider the suffering minjung as a partner in their pursuit of salvation and self-transcendence.

Jae Soon Park contrasts the suffering of Jesus on the cross with the characteristics of today's mechanical civilization:

> The cross symbolizes the solidarity of a community of suffering. The emphasis on suffering is both challenging and unfamiliar in the mechanical civilization that avoids suffering. Mechanical civilization is distant from suffering and *Han* because it pursues pleasure and convenience. In particular, Western culture is a capitalist industrial culture with a tendency to avoid suffering and death. Western politico-cultural history is a political culture achieved by political and military rulers, victors and imperialist perpetrators from the Greek and Roman ages to modern Europe. Therefore, they hate and avoid suffering and death. Western culture basically lacks the sensibility of suffering. I don't think Westerners, who shun hardship and death, have properly embodied the faith of the cross and resurrection in Christianity. (Park 1995, 112)[8]

Park's criticism of contemporary mechanical civilization may be reflected constructively in the transhumanists' efforts to achieve transcendence and salvation through science and technology. While atheist or agnostic transhumanists are surely disinclined to embody the cross or resurrection of Jesus, they can still appreciate and actualize the emotional and political attunement of those who suffer and can form common cause with theologians committed to this cause.

In order to find solutions to minjung, and thus human, suffering, we need to understand that the suffering and marginalization of minjung are multilayered and learn to see this from various perspectives (Kim 2013, 209–10). According to Kim, "the concept of social exclusion is an important topic of study for Minjung theology in a globalized age; it is more than the exclusion of economic or political level. The mechanisms of exclusion work variously in global, capitalistic society today, even in a civil society.

Even beneficial systems such as social welfare are becoming a mechanism of exclusion" (Kim 2013, 209).

For example, despite the development of science and technology in the age of artificial intelligence, social crises widen the gap between the rich and the poor. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a vivid example: limited access to vaccines unquestionably worsened the quality of life of impoverished people, especially in developing countries. In the development and distribution of vaccines, western COVID-19 vaccine technology was utilized mainly for the health and social benefits of the rich and the citizens of wealthy nations. The global north thereby excludes poorer countries through their social system. Wealthy western countries monopolized and hoarded vaccines, and the people of poor countries in Asia and Africa were largely bereft of immediate access. According to Oxfam, "wealthy nations representing just 13 percent of the world's populations have already cornered more than half (51 percent) of the promised doses of leading COVID-19 vaccine candidates…nearly two thirds (61 percent) of the world's population will not have a vaccine until at least 2022" (Tabacek 2020).

Kim rightly points out that "in a globalized society the tightly knit power net of social exclusion brings about endless deprivation of belonging and sense of self-respect" (Kim 2013, 210). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the dignity of minjung has been negated by both economic interests of international companies delivering vaccine technology and the social welfare systems of wealthy nations. Even when science and technology try to eliminate suffering, the issues of exclusion and alienation may reemerge and be repeated, revealing a problematic ethical tension in the development of science and technology. The implications of this for transhumanism should be obvious.

In the midst of exclusion and suffering, minjung theology indicates that science and technology should be used first for solidarity with minjung. Minjung theology implies that those who are alienated from the benefits of technological development and thus are building up *han*, are, in fact, the suffering Minjung Messiah who will save those willing to join and stand in solidarity with them. For example, as minjung lose their jobs and become poorer due to automation, their *han* accumulates and spreads over society. Minjung theology informs us that the *han* of minjung must be resolved, which is presented through the concept of *dan*. *Dan* means "what we might call 'self-denial,' and in collective terms this means cutting off the vicious circle of *han* as it permeates the structures of society" (Brown 1988, 36). By *dan*, it is possible to prevent *han* from being repeated and accumulated. Transhumanists enter the process of salvation when they empathize with the suffering of minjung and help eliminate the *han* of minjung. As Seo remarks, "Minjung theology allows non-Minjung to face up to the suffering of Minjung and to help them realize that such sufferings are

caused by an unjust system, and that they are also responsible for the suf-
ferings. By doing so, Minjung theology enables them to join the sufferings
and resistance of Minjung. Salvation is achieved through this realization,
determination, and the process of praxis" (Seo 1995, 18). Thanks to ad-
vancing science and technology, transhumanists can join minjung in their
suffering and their alleviation from it. Thus, minjung theology subverts
the subject of transcendence in relation with transhumanism. It suggests
that the subjects of salvation are the socioeconomically disadvantaged who
are marginalized and alienated from the benefits of the development of
science and technology. In other words, it implies that transhumanists of
western society can only experience self-transcendence in the true sense
when they join in the suffering of minjung.

   Minjung theology argues that the apocalyptic hope of minjung was em-
bodied in the advent of the Kingdom of God. If transhumanism presents
"the Virtual Kingdom" as its vision for the future (Geraci 2008, 146), how
can it meet the apocalyptic hope of minjung today and in the future? Ac-
cording to minjung theology, minjung described in the Gospel of Mark
"approached Jesus according to their own needs. In this sense, Jesus was
passive, and related to them from a standpoint of equals rather than seek-
ing to be their ruler, rabbi, or leader" (Ahn 2013b, 63).

   If minjung with an apocalyptic hope for salvation try to approach
transhumanists as the subject of salvation equal to them, several ques-
tions arise. Will transhumanists be willing to meet the needs of minjung
through science and technology? Will they relate to minjung as equals—as
theologically and ethically exemplified by Jesus in minjung theology? The
development of science and technology—especially in a neoliberal mar-
ket system—often widens economic disparity, causing marginalization and
alienation of minjung, treating people on the margins as "nonhuman" or as
disposable goods. Given this, will transhumanists have the ethical drive to
transform those who have been treated as "nonhuman" into "transhumans"
like themselves? Or will minjung be degraded further, to be disposed of at
any time by godlike posthumans in the "free" market?

   No definitive answers are possible at present. However, minjung the-
ology argues that the poor and the oppressed are the subject of salvation
rather than resting all such authority in the hands of the leaders or the
elite or the rich. Furthermore, minjung theology rejects unjust systems in
solidarity with minjung. Those who have power, money, and technology
too often oppress those without, unable to empathize with the suffering of
minjung.

   If transhumanists pursue salvation through science and technology,
they should understand what is offered by minjung theology and stand
together with minjung. Minjung theology can guide transhumanists who
hope to improve the socioeconomic and political status of the "nonhu-
mans" or to eliminate the suffering of minjung through technoscientific

transcendence. Transhuman technologies will come at enormous cost to local and global societies. So in order for the ethical work of transhumanism to be humane and practical, rather than dogmatic or misleading, transhumanists will have to be able to negotiate with minjung theology. This requires a sensitivity to and participation in the suffering of minjung with whom it stands in solidarity. Without empathizing with the suffering of minjung, without understanding the *han* of minjung, without collaborating to cut off the *han* of minjung, and without solidarity with minjung, the salvation that transhumanists seek, though it may be achieved, resembles cheap grace rather than the lived reality of human salvation.

Conclusion

The ethical use of technology is a concern for academics, religious practitioners, and the general public. Given this, the academic interrogation of minjung theology and transhumanism provides a clear and compelling opportunity. In this intersection of social justice, liberation, transformation, and technoenthusiasm, we see an opportunity for the public participation of scholars to help interested groups find common ground and advance together. There can be no doubt that transhumanists have routinely spoken up for ethical use of technology. Vita-More rightly points toward the decades-old stance in transhumanism that technology should be used ethically and humanely (Vita-More 2018, 5). But their conceptual interest in human justice has always foundered against the rocks of neoliberal economic interests, individualism and the valorization of the elite, and the institutions of privilege that largely limit transhumanism to white communities in developed nations. Helping transhumanists—who have significant sway in twenty-first-century tech development—to identify and collaborate with people on the margins would be scholarly labor with impact on the ground.

Verdoux (2011) argues that the future of philosophy is dependent upon emergent technologies at a root of transhumanism; and his approach may be relevant to theologians as well. For Verdoux, many philosophical problems have proven intractable by nature, but he suggests that "there is…a vast panoply of diverse technologies currently being developed that is certain to change the cognitive contours of philosophical scholarship" (Verdoux 2011, 702). If Verdoux's argument has merit—and others have similarly claimed that a posthuman species might be more ethical than present humanity, thereby solving one of our current philosophical troubles (e.g., Schaefer and Savulescu 2017)—then might we not ask how much theology has to gain from transhumanist aspirations? Observably, humanity has trouble executing its higher moral injunctions in consistent and universal fashion. Perhaps posthumanity will promote a better form of theology, one

more compelling in its empathy for all life and more convincing engagement in building a better world.

Obviously, the relationship between transhumanists and marginalized communities is bidirectional. Some theologians already wrestle with the significance of transhumanist themes, often interlocking theological insights from around the world. Kaunda, for example, draws on American theologians and African forms of spirituality to suggest that intelligent machines might one day participate in a Christian *imago dei* (Kaunda 2020). In the United States, Butler proposes that adopting transhumanist perspectives on technology can lead to a liberation theology for the Black community, which might thereby advocate freedom in "unrelenting concern for the human" while remaining "spiritually grounded" (Butler 2020, 13, 144). In keeping with such important work, it befits religious communities to harken carefully to the technological winds and to pursue conversation with transhumanist groups. Again, scholarly engagement can help facilitate such conversation.

The opportunities that arise in our study of minjung theology and transhumanism show the importance of using scholarly methods in the study of religion and science to intervene in significant biopolitical concerns. Whatever benefits may accrue from transhumanist interest in human progress and technological development will be hampered if transhumanism remains confined to the dialogue of the rich and powerful. Human progress must begin first and foremost with progress among those most in need. If scholarship can reveal myopic perspectives and open doors for conversation about human flourishing, then we anticipate better days to come.

Notes

1.   The lead author of this article is Christian and the second author is Jewish and agnostic. The second author has leanings toward transhumanism but has—at best—only modest faith in the promises that transhumanists make.

2.   Translations from this and other Korean sources are by Yong Sup Song (except where noted in the reference list).

3.   By the 1960s and 1970s, the influence of "the liberation theology of Latin America and the Third World" influenced a small number of Korean theologians (Lee 2010, 27). Despite some influences from liberation theology, contemporary minjung theologians in Korea emphasize the unique theological identity in the formation of minjung theology. They argue that minjung theology was formed out of the politico-economic context of minjung and their political struggles for democracy in 1970s. Despite many commonalities, "minjung theology is distinguished from other theologies [such as liberation theology] in its radical concept of minjung" (Kim 2009, 29).

4.   Lexus-Nexus search data indicate that from January 1, 1995 to 2021, there are 988 results for "transhumanism" in the news category, of which 869 appear after January 21, 2012 and 740 of these after January 1, 2016. Presumably, the rapid explosion of the term's appearance reflects a similar escalation in conceptual awareness.

5.   According to Google Scholar (January 4, 2022), the paper by McNamee and Edwards had been cited 123 times, which is sufficient to indicate widespread interest.

6.   It is worth noting that in his essay, Miah (2013) acknowledges that a publicly funded program might be a worthy goal (though he offers no insight into how that would unfold across global financial disparities) but rejects it as unlikely (p. 300). Worse, Bailey (2013) in the same volume—somehow disregarding the massive disparities already existing in healthcare—suggests that as soon as pharmaceutical enhancements become possible they "could be distributed to nearly everybody who wanted them" (p. 337). He then blithely goes on to assert that "genetic engineering in the long run is more likely to ameliorate than to exacerbate human equality" (p. 338) without any economic justification for the widespread distribution of what will be, mostly, likely, very expensive interventions.

7.   Many transhumanists, including Hughes (2004, 9), also suggest that authoritarianism endangers the fair distribution of technological enhancement; but it remains the case that democratic societies, especially in their economic model, also lend themselves to injustice. For example, the world's ten richest men during the COVID-19 pandemic profited enough during the first two years of the chaos to fund the entirety of the world's vaccine needs (Tan 2022). They chose inaction. Alas, there is no universal mechanism for distributing wealth—including technological developments—to ensure availability. Meanwhile, there are plenty of mechanisms for the wealthy to profit from what sociologist Merton (1968) labeled the "Matthew Effect" in science: "for to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Matthew 25:29).

8.   It is worth noting that Park's position seems to represent the very thing that Ettinger rejects—a will toward suffering and death. Obviously, Park's theological position as a Christian demands that he recognizes and values suffering because it is a lynchpin of Christian salvation. Despite this, we believe that transhumanists recognize the existence of suffering (and possibly the impossibility of fully eradicating it), and recommend a more expansive view of that—one that argues suffering can be recognized and engaged together as we pursue a better world. Indeed, it is not that Park wants to suffer (Christian redemption promises otherwise) but that only through truly experiencing and identifying with the suffering of marginalized can we find a path out of that suffering.

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