


# Transhumanism as a positional good, economic inequality, and a response from Christian ethics



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Ethical responses to transhumanism, even from secular points of departure, often use religious language in debating the merits of discussion, and phrases such as 'playing God' or 'hubris' are not rare. Having Christian ethics and theology as one of the respondents to the ethical and moral issues that are raised by biotechnological developments such as transhumanism, is therefore perhaps easier than in other ethical concerns. In this contribution, the discourse on transhumanism will be approached by defining it in economic terms as a positional good. The focus will further be on the notion of economic inequality, and why it should matter in an ethical discussion on transhumanism, particularly from the perspective of Christian ethics. In making this case, the notion of solidarity will especially be drawn on as articulated in liberation theology as a theological resource. Social community is part and parcel of the Christian moral imperative and, as such, within the context of the discussion on economic inequality and transhumanism, the theological theme of solidarity forms an integral part of responding.

**Contribution:** This article aims to contribute to the Christian ethical discussion on transhumanism by including an economic definition of transhumanism and situating the discussion within the field of liberation theology. The contribution also lies in centring the ethical issues around the theological theme of human solidarity and social community as a Christian moral imperative.

**Keywords:** transhumanism; positional good; inequality; solidarity; bioethics.

## Introduction

The opening statement of the *Transhumanist Manifesto* (World Transhumanist Association [*now Humanity Plus*] 2008) proclaims: 'Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future'. This statement can be rewritten in the present tense: Humanity is already being deeply impacted by continuous development in the fields of science and technology, including biotechnology. These developments, on which the media tends to report selectively and often in a sensationalist manner, occur at a rate which is often too quick for thorough ethical reflection. Many of those involved in the development would prefer those ethicists 'get out of the way' of research and not conduct this ethical reflection at all.

Pinker, a cognitive scientist writing an opinion piece for the *Boston Globe*, reproaches those concerned with the ethical implications of biotechnological research of slowing progress down. Pinker (2015) argues that ethicists and concerned parties flood research with 'red tape, moratoria, or threats of prosecution based on nebulous but sweeping principles such as "dignity," "sacredness," or "social justice"'. In engaging with transhumanism, any response – also those within the field of Christian ethics where this article is situated – would then do well to guard against such vague notions to frame the issues at hand in more concrete ways to make a contribution to the discussion. To a certain extent, responding to transhumanism as an ethical issue can be easier from the perspective of Christian ethics than from another ethical field, given that ethical responses to transhumanism, even from secular points of departure, often utilise religious language in debating the merits of discussion, and phrases such as 'playing God' or 'hubris' are not rare. Moula (2015:162) remarks, for example, that the idea of "'Promethean hubris" cannot be understood without a religious worldview'.

Transhumanist Buchanan (2011) clearly states his disdain for the natural processes of evolution:

The human organism is not a finely balanced whole because evolution did not create harmonious 'complete' organisms; instead it produced tentative, changing, perishing, cobbled-together *ad hoc* solutions to transient design problems, with blithe disregard for human well-being. (p. 2)

As a result, in this view, human beings should step up and correct the weak efforts of nature to construct human beings as soon as it is possible to do so. For transhumanists, this is then especially through the utilisation of technology.

Bostrom (2003a:4) describes transhumanism as a way in which to view the future, based on the presupposition that the present shape of the human species 'does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase'. As a movement, it has been gradually developing since the 1980s, supporting an interdisciplinary method in which prospects of enhancing human beings and the human condition through the development of technology is understood and evaluated. This includes both technologies that are already in existence, such as genetic engineering and information technology, as well as technologies that are anticipated to arise in the future, such as artificial intelligence and molecular nanotechnology. In their scope is included the radical extension of human lifespans, disease eradication, and enhancing attributes such as human intellectual, physical, or emotional capabilities. Other subjects include colonisation of space, the creation of superintelligent machines, and 'other potential developments that could profoundly alter the human condition' (Bostrom 2003b:493).

Nozick, the father of libertarianism, coined the phrase 'the genetic supermarket' already in 1974, when he used it in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. For Nozick (1974:304), the great virtue of a genetic supermarket is that it is free from a centralised decision that fixes the future of human type(s). In this genetic supermarket, genetic engineers meet 'the individual specifications (within certain moral limits) of prospective parents. What these moral limits would consist of, Nozick does not elaborate on, and almost 50 years later, biotechnology has developed in ways that perhaps he never imagined.

There is little argument to be made, however, against the statement that not everyone will be able to shop at the genetic supermarket, and that, if even some of the biotechnological interventions' transhumanists dream of, become realised, this would not be available to all. Most transhumanists acknowledge this freely – an aspect that will be returned to later in this article. For a technological intervention to be classified as an enhancement, a baseline is necessary. If everyone can, for example, raise their IQ level by 20 points, the standard has shifted with it and the aggregate IQ level becomes simply 'the new normal'. Opinions diverge on whether this inequality of access and affordability is simply inevitable or something desirable. Transhumanism, however, can be said to raise questions of economic inequality. This notion will be returned to later in this article.

The destructive consequences of income inequality in developed countries, Walasek and Brown (2015:527) remark, are extensively documented and include examples such as increased homicide rates, lower life expectancy, higher levels of infant mortality and teenage pregnancy, declining savings rates, increased consumer debt, greater spending on status

goods, and working hours that are longer than average. In addition, it has been put forward that unequal societies have shown a greater inclination to participate in damaging social appraisals, along with an amplified focus on social hierarchy and rivalry for social standing.

It can be said that a greater concern with outward status can be a logical reaction to greater income inequality, according to a social-rank hypothesis, as discussed by Walasek and Brown. Income and wealth, they (Walasek & Brown 2015:527) note, offer more trustworthy indicators of social status, and accordingly, in societies with greater levels of inequality there should be more concern with boosting 'apparent income-related social status when income inequality is high'. A more particular expectation of the social-rank hypothesis is, that in such societies where there are greater levels of income inequality, there will be greater focus on positional goods, given that such goods serve as an indicator of higher social status (Walasek & Brown 2015:527–528).

Carlsson, Johansson-Stenman and Martinsson (2007:586) indicate that one of the central features of behavioural economics is that it values the effect of social context. One of the features of social context is that people often compete with one another, which is also the case in terms of social standing. One of the ways in which this competition can play out, is through obtaining goods that serve as outward indication of status and position, in other words, positional goods.

In this contribution, the discourse on transhumanism will be approached by defining it in economic terms as a positional good. Structuring the discussion in this way, can go some length to avoid Pinker's accusation of the vague ways in which ethicists discuss technological developments. In the second part of this contribution, the notion of economic inequality, and why it should matter in an ethical discussion on transhumanism, particularly from the perspective of Christian ethics will be strongly emphasised. In making this case, the notion of solidarity will especially be drawn on, as articulated in liberation theology as a theological resource. However, before any such discussion can be entered, it is necessary to first clarify what is meant by positional goods. The following section attempts to address this topic.

## Positional goods

A 'good' in the simplest terms, is 'something people want, and for which they will exchange other things and/or labor' (Blosser 2024:2). For example, a good that is greatly desired at present, is money, with the assumption that more money will result in people being better off. While this could be true for an individual, in economic terms the more money becomes available, the more its value decreases. This is because money is a positional good, using Fred Hirsch's term (Blosser 2024:3).

Certain things, Ben Shahar (2018:103) indicates, 'are good for the individual who has them wholly in virtue of his relative standing compared to others'. She makes a distinction

between what she calls ordinal positional goods and cardinal positional goods. While all positional goods are affected by how much other people possess of the relevant good, the only affect for ordinal positional goods are whether one has more than others. Cardinal positional goods, on the other hand, are sensitive to the degree to which others have more (Ben Shahar 2018:103–104).

It is not a new idea that 'relative income and consumption are important for people' (Carlsson et al. 2007:586). Frank (2008), writing on consumption externalities in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, refers to a statement made by Karl Marx, who notes: 'A house may be large or small; as long as the neighboring houses are likewise small, it satisfies all social requirement for a residence. But let there arise next to the little house a palace, and the little house shrinks to a hut' (cited in Frank 2008:164). In other words, it is only in comparison with something that is seen as better, that the consumer desires to obtain the 'better' goods.

Given that a relative concern suggests that increasing the income or level of consumption of one individual might impose adverse externalities on another, it would also be possible to construct an argument that favours policy interventions, that respond to over-consumption of goods where the primary reason for consumption is an indication of wealth or success.

The same idea is raised by Duesenberry (1949), who put forward his *relative income hypothesis*, contending that the framework for a person's spending is influenced both by their own standard of living in the recent past, as well as the standard of living of others in the same time. Accordingly, Duesenberry argued that in the short run, consumption is more stable than income and the poor save at lower rates because they will probably come across others with desired goods that are challenging to pay for. Given that, this will remain the case regardless of the growth of national income: negative comparisons will always take place more regularly for the poor. At the same time, he continues to argue that consumption is more stable than income because when income falls, consumers still compare their current standard of living with their own standard of living in the recent past, which makes cutting back when income decreases much harder. While Duesenberry does not make use of the term *positional goods*, the measuring of standard of living against others that he raises, is important for this discussion.

While traditional economic models are based on individual utility, depending only on absolute consumption and the claim that pursuing individual self-interest supports collective welfare, relative consumption and models that focus on positional goods identify an essential inconsistency between individual and collective welfare.

Frank (2008) discusses this conflict through two thought experiments, where someone must decide between two worlds that are completely identical, with one difference. In world A, you will live in a house that is 4000 square feet and others in

houses that are 6000 square feet. In world B, your house will be 3000 square feet, but others will live in 2000 square feet houses. There is no opportunities in this thought experiment to change your house and move to a bigger or smaller house in these worlds once you have made your choice. According to models that favour absolute consumption, world A will be the obvious choice, as here you end up with the larger house. However, Frank (2008:165) indicates that most people choose world B, where their house is smaller, but the relative size is larger, and those that choose world A can see why someone might be more fulfilled in world B.

The second thought experiment poses remarkably related questions regarding vacation time, and indicates that while house size might be a positional good, vacation time is not. Most people would prefer more vacation time, regardless of the amount of vacation time that others have; this then, is a non-positional good (Frank 2008:165).

In an extended empirical study, Carlsson et al. (2007) measured the awareness people hold of how important relative income and consumption is. Through a series of questions, they prove the following hypotheses, which are closely related to Carlsson et al. (2017) thought experiments:

- H1:** Income is more positional than leisure.
- H2:** Visible goods and their characteristics, such as the value of cars, are more positional than less visible goods and their characteristics, such as car safety.
- H3:** Leisure is completely non-positional.
- H4:** Status-signalling goods, such as cars, are completely positional. (p. 588)

For the purposes of this contribution, the second and fourth hypotheses are significant, as they relate to visible goods as signifiers of social status. The technological interventions that transhumanists have in their scope will most likely be visible indicators of the ability to have paid for them and, as a result, of social standing. It is also possible that those who have not been technologically enhanced in some way, would find their social status negatively impacted by it.

Returning to Ben Shahar's distinction (2018) between ordinal and cardinal positional goods, she also notes that within the category of cardinal positional goods, where it is not only important whether one has more of the goods than others, but also to which degree:

[S]ome positional goods ... are more sensitive to the size of inequality than others; sometimes, the effect of inequality depends on its location along the scale of distribution ... sometimes inequality is especially consequential around specific thresholds that determine access to certain social categories or classes. (p. 104)

While not explicitly referring to positional goods, Hirschfeld (2019) mentions the notion that one of the most important driving forces behind the pursuit of wealth, is to be able to afford goods that serve as status markers. As Hirschfeld (2019) mentions, these Markers of social distinction can result in:

[T]he economically and socially ambitious to attenuate their proper concern for others to the point where they might actively harm the vulnerable in their zeal to climb the socio-economic ladder. (pp. 274–275)

Where these markers of social status are more permanent than luxury cars or designer handbags, such as genetic therapies and transhumanist interventions, this becomes a real concern. In the following section, transhumanism will be placed within the framework of positional goods discussed thus far, indicating that the necessary inequality that is inherent in this philosophy and movement, can be viewed as positional.

## The positionality of transhumanism and inequality

Bostrom and Savulescu (2009) indicates that some enhancements can be described as:

[O]nes whose goodness for those who have them depends on other subjects not possessing them. An enhancement that had no effect other than making the user six inches taller would provide no net benefit if universally applied. It might, on the contrary, result in net losses in as much as food consumption would increase, vehicles would need to be redesigned, etcetera. (p. 11)

In other words, although they do not use this terminology, some enhancements would be positional.

Singer (2009:280) advocates strongly for genetic and reproductive freedom, and notes, following Mill's principle that the state is only justified in restricting its citizens to prevent harm to others, that as long as decisions are made by competent adults, they remain private decisions that should be left to the private sector, as they do not harm others. However, Singer (2009:281) notes that, '[i]f we switch from an individualistic perspective to a broader social one, the negative aspects of a genetic supermarket become more serious'. One of these negative aspects he (Singer 2009:282, [author's own emphasis]) highlights, is that many of the enhancements people would seek for their children 'will be advantageous for them only in *comparative*, not absolute terms'. Again, they will be positional.

Many authors have indicated the potential of enhancement technologies to exacerbate the existing economic inequalities of the present. Transhumanism holds the potential to create not only the haves and have-nots, but also the never-will-haves. It is not difficult to imagine transhumanist biotechnologies, when available, exacerbating the inequalities we already have at present. Children born to wealthier parents already have an advantage. They have environmental privileges, better education, access to social networks, and better healthcare. Others, rich and poor alike, also enter the world with genetic advantages, courtesy of what is commonly known as the 'genetic lottery'.

Gavaghan (2007:182) notes one argument that, those lucky enough to 'win' the genetic lottery, should be enabled to

profit from it, 'provided everyone had a roughly equal chance of emerging from that lottery as a winner'. Within this understanding of genetic inequalities, what makes the genetic supermarket and transhumanism unfair, is not that some people receive unearned advantages. This happens of course without technological interventions in genetic makeup. What would be unfair, is 'that some people had the odds stacked overwhelmingly in their favour from the beginning' (Gavaghan 2007:182).

It is thus impossible and even undesirable to have complete equality, also in terms of genetic makeup. This is applied when we are economically speaking. The question is therefore rather, as Hicks (2015:436) puts it, '[H]ow much economic inequality is consistent with, or acceptable for, establishing the social conditions for realizing moral equality?' Correia underlines the way in which transhumanism consists of 'academics, entrepreneurs and financiers linked to the army and the world of multinationals' (Manzocco 2019:42). Accordingly, he argues that they would represent 'a "fig leaf" that hides the economic and strategic interests of these subjects and the intention of the latter to perpetuate social inequalities' (Manzocco 2019:42).

Earlier, Ben Shahaar's distinction between ordinal and cardinal positional goods was noted, specifically the explanation that one of the attributes of cardinal positioned goods can be consequential regarding borders to certain social categories or classes. In brief, this is the way in which I would like to frame transhumanist interventions within the context of positional goods and economic inequality. Enhancement requires that only some are enhanced; if there was an opportunity to (and used by) all people, the baseline of 'normal' would simply shift. Transhumanists are acutely aware of this. Some hides behind the reality that the world we live in already has vast gaps between rich and poor and, accordingly, this is not a new issue raised by enhancement technologies that should therefore be responded to. Others admit to the possible implications mentioned above that transhumanism would most likely further exacerbate these divisions but, as Harris (2007:62) remarks, that 'it is doubtful ethics to deny palpable goods to some people because we cannot provide them for all'.

Others argue that even if as a human species we become divided, those who 'advance' would be benevolent to those 'left behind'. While there are clearly different responses, all transhumanists appear to be on the same page regarding the reality that the technological interventions and enhancements they strive toward, will only be available to those willing and able to access and pay for them.

Sutton (2015:125) also mentions such a divided species, indicating that not only might the unenhanced be viewed as inferior and made to serve the enhanced, the enhanced could feel superior, particularly if their enhancement are 'thanks to their own efforts'. On the other hand, she (Sutton 2015:126) also notes that the opposite might become true and the enhanced could rather come to see themselves as inferior, as their nature had been altered by others.

Equality contributes to what is identified by numerous scholars, ethicists, and theologians alike, as solidarity (Hicks 2015:437). Hirschfeld (2019:265) for example, notes that the notions of solidarity and the common good are a central element of Christian teachings on economic justice, and a vital part of the well-established concern of the church on equitable distribution. She (Hirschfeld 2019:272–273) further remarks on the statement of Pope Francis on the exclusion of the poor, and highlights the social element of economic inequality as tied to human flourishing, which includes being a recognised and valued member of a community. In other words, human solidarity is a prerequisite to human flourishing.

When this understanding of solidarity and relationship with others is absent and the only aim an individual has, is in pursuing their own good, thereby enjoying their status and the goods that serve as a marker thereof, part of that enjoyment involves representing those with lesser status to be socially invisible (Hirschfeld 2019:276).

The distribution of society's resources, when viewed from theories of distributive justice, Axelsen and Nielsen (2023) indicate, are marked by two key features. In the first instance, distribution is unfairly unequal, and in the second instance, many people do not have enough and have insufficient opportunities (Axelsen & Nielsen 2023:5). In terms of transhumanism, this has profound implications for any ethical discussion. In the following section, the question of why this economic inequality matters, will be discussed.

## Why does inequality matter?

There are different views of egalitarian thought: some argue in favour of sufficiency, that having enough is what matters, regardless of comparisons to what others have, while others attempt to assist those who are the worse off.<sup>1</sup>

Accusations against calls for greater equality include that it calls for levelling down: offering a pie that is equally divided, but where these equal pieces are smaller than the smallest piece of an unequally divided pie would be. Brighthouse and Swift (2006) address these allegations by referring to positional goods:

The very fact that one is worse off than others with respect to a positional good means that one is worse off, in some respect, than one would be if that good were distributed equally. (p. 472)

1. Also here, opinions diverge. The argument that those who are the least well off should receive priority, requires much further elaboration. Different ways this could be approached, include the difference principle set out by Rawls (1985), or in contrast, other interpretations of the Priority View.

Brighthouse and Swift (2006):

'First, although Parfit's seminal discussion presents the difference principle as prioritarian, the Priority View holds that benefiting a person matters more the worse off she is absolutely, whereas Rawls's difference principle contains irreducible reference to relativities. For Rawls it is because they are worse off than others that benefits to the worse off matter more, whereas on the Priority View the value of the benefit depends only on how badly off they are in absolute terms. This creates scope for terminological confusion: some regard the ineliminability of relativities on the Rawlsian view as grounds for deeming that view "egalitarian". We prefer to restrict the term "egalitarian" to those, like Temkin, who believe there is value in equality that gives us reason to level down, on which construal neither the difference principle nor the Priority View are egalitarian. Second, the difference principle urges us to maximize the absolute position of the worst off, but it seems more plausible to regard the claims of the worst off as particularly weighty without their being that weighty. The Priority View, while holding that benefits are more valuable the worse off someone is, more modestly leaves open the issue of how much more valuable they are'. (p. 471)

Accordingly, rather than an equal distribution, it is those who are least well off who would benefit more from a levelling down in terms of positional goods.

Inequality, Jackson and Segal (2004) note:

[U]ndermines social cohesion and causes the disappearance of a shared public realm ... High inequality allows the wealthy to dominate political decision-making and to reduce political support and funding for public services. (p. 6)

One of the reasons they formulate in their working paper, titled *Why inequality matters*, is based on social solidarity, which is undermined by prominent levels of economic inequality. Individuals become separated into different social classes, which is a mild version of the fears offered by the exacerbation of this inequality that transhumanism offers.

McRorie (2019:232) notes that from the perspective of religious and theological ethics, it has become an expected occurrence to argue that certain forms of economic inequality should be described as unjust and dangerous for both the rich and the poor on a moral and social level. In the following section, this issue is framed from the perspective of Christian ethics, especially using a liberation theological framework. Many other approaches would be possible and could yield fruitful results. Several theological doctrinal loci<sup>2</sup> could be taken as the point of departure, as well as in the discussion.

The reason I have chosen to position this approach rather within liberation theology is threefold: in the first instance, the poor is prioritised in liberation theology. While there are differences in the discourses on economic inequality and the notion of positional goods, there are also considerable overlap between these and the phenomenon of poverty, especially extreme poverty. The preferential option for the poor (also emphasised in the priority view mentioned earlier) is an important feature of liberation theology. It is also stressed in the Confession of Belhar,<sup>3</sup> where the church confesses 'that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged'.

2. Some examples, but by no means an exhaustive list, could include: (1) Transhumanism poses questions about what it means to be human, and accordingly, one approach could be to approach the topic from the perspective of Christian anthropology in which themes such as the *imago Dei*, human dignity, human vocation, and bodily existence could be explored. (2) Another prolific lens through which to view the issues, could be found in the doctrine of creation, where different interpretations of stewardship, co-creatorship, human creatureliness, and God's providence could feature. (3) The doctrine of sin could be utilised in two arguments on opposite sides of the spectrum, arguing either that transhumanism is a demonstration of the sin of pride, overstepping boundaries that we should not be crossing, or instead arguing that not utilising everything we have at our disposal to improve, would be the failure to accept our responsibility and vocation, a manifestation of the sin of pride. (4) Eschatology could also add to the discussion, where Christians confess the eschatological resurrection of the body, which is in conflict with the attempts by, especially, the branches of transhumanism seeking cybernetic existence and 'eternal' life as a disembodied virtual presence.

3. The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa. This "outcry of faith" and "call for faithfulness and repentance" was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) under the leadership of Allan Boesak. The DRMC took the lead in declaring that apartheid constituted a *status confessionis* in which the truth of the gospel was at stake. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church formally adopted the Belhar Confession in 1986. It is now one of the "standards of unity" of the new Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). Belhar's theological confrontation of the sin of racism has made possible reconciliation among Reformed churches in Southern Africa and has aided the process of reconciliation within the nation of South Africa' (Prologue: The Belhar Confession 1986).

This is echoed in the Accra Confession (2004),<sup>4</sup> with the declaration:

We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a distinct way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused. (n.p.)

The Accra Confession (2004) also describes the economic reality of the poor at the time of its conception:

We live in a scandalous world that denies God's call to life for all. The annual income of the richest 1 per cent is equal to that of the poorest 57 per cent, and 24 000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition. The debt of poor countries continues to increase despite paying back their original borrowing many times over. Resource-driven wars claim the lives of millions, while millions more die of preventable diseases. The HIV and AIDS global pandemic afflicts life in all parts of the world, affecting the poorest where generic drugs are not available. The majority of those in poverty are women and children and the number of people living in absolute poverty on less than one US dollar per day continues to increase. (n.p.)

In the second place, liberation theology transcends the boundaries of denomination and can be termed thoroughly ecumenical. While it has its roots in the Catholic tradition, Dominican priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, is widely regarded as the father of liberation theology. However, it has since grown in all three of the main branches of Christianity, including the Catholic, Reformed and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Lastly, the notion of solidarity, which was mentioned earlier, is also an important theme within liberation theology and it is on this concept that I would like to focus in responding to transhumanism as a positional good within the framework of liberation theology. Solidarity as a theological concept, as found in liberation theology, will be discussed in the last section of this contribution.

## Solidarity: An approach in liberation theology

Gutiérrez (1973:110–116) remarks that how we react to society's poor is closely related to how we react and respond to God. Hicks (2015:440) further notes that Gutiérrez 'initiates his analysis not from a moral ideal but from the social situation in which marginalized persons find themselves'. Gutiérrez (1983) indicates:

4. The Accra Confession was adopted in 2004 by the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana. The first two paragraphs of the Accra Confession explain its origin:

1. In response to the urgent call of the Southern African constituency which met in Kitwe in 1995 and in recognition of the increasing urgency of global economic injustice and ecological destruction, the 23rd General Council (Debrecen, Hungary, 1997) invited the member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to enter into a process of "recognition, education, and confession ... break the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free", as they heard the cries of brothers and sisters around the world and witnessed God's gift of creation under threat.

2. Since then, nine member churches have committed themselves to a faith stance; some are in the process of covenanting; and others have studied the issues and come to a recognition of the depth of the crisis. Further, in partnership with the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and regional ecumenical organizations, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has engaged in consultations in all regions of the world, from Seoul and Bangkok (1999) to Stony Point (2004). Additional consultations took place with churches from the South in Buenos Aires (2003) and with churches from South and North in London Colney (2004).

The nub, the nucleus, of the biblical message, we have said, is in the relationship of God and the poor. Jesus Christ is precisely *God become poor*. This was the human life he took – a poor life. (p. 13)

Aguilar Ramírez and De Beer (2020) remark that:

[I]n the origins of liberation theology, the epistemological point of departure was the suffering of the poor and the theologian's own solidarity with those living in conditions of poverty and suffering. (p. 4)

Both this point of departure and the level of solidarity has since been extended (Aguilar Ramírez & De Beer 2020:4).

Boff (1989:23) notes that the option of the church is 'a preferential option for the poor, against their poverty'. The poor, he (Boff 1989:23) continues, are 'those who suffer injustice. Their poverty is produced by mechanisms of impoverishment and exploitation, their poverty is therefore an evil and an injustice'. Earlier, it was indicated that transhumanism holds the potential to further exacerbate the already deep socio-economic divides and inequalities that already exist between people. From this statement by Boff, it could then be argued that transhumanism could be one of these mechanisms that result in impoverishment and exploitation. As Hicks (2019) states:

God's preferential option for the poor translates into a social ethic that should have a focus on the ways that current social, political, and economic injustices disadvantage some persons over others, and some groups over others – and on ways to remove those injustices. This ethic has personal, ecclesial, and public-policy implications. (p. 441)

Hicks (2015:442) indicates that the Christian moral imperative is more than combatting poverty, but that it includes addressing 'economic inequality as an aspect of social community'. Social community is part and parcel of the Christian moral imperative and, as such, within the context of the discussion on economic inequality and transhumanism, the theological theme of solidarity forms an integral part of responding.

## Conclusion

Having Christian ethics and theology as one of the respondents to the ethical and moral issues that are raised by biotechnological developments such as transhumanism, is perhaps easier than in other ethical concerns, given that also outside of theology, religious language is used in debating the merits of transhumanism. Phrases such as 'playing God' are often used in secular discussions.

Volf (2011:59) notes, 'The central pillar of its vision of the good life [*is*] a universal beneficence transcending all boundaries of tribe or nationality and extending to all human beings'. Accordingly, Taylor (2007:19) speaks about 'exclusive humanism'; this is not a notion that excludes or disregards other human beings. As Volf (2011:59) states, 'the flourishing of each [*is*] tied to the flourishing of all and the flourishing of all tied to the flourishing of each'.

The best contribution theology can make in such debates, according to Cole-Turner (2003), is when it is aware of the

reality that we live in pluralistic and often irreligious or secular societies:

[A]nd therefore not when it offers answers, much less insists that its answers become law, but when it invites citizens of every perspective and persuasion to reflect on the nature and meaning of human life in its many relationships and possibilities. (p. 192)

It is as one part of this reflection, especially on human relationality and solidarity, that this contribution wishes to present itself.

In this article, transhumanism was approached as a positional good in economic terms to offer a contribution to the ethical discourse. The notion of economic inequality, particularly from the perspective of Christian ethics, was discussed. I further drew on the idea of solidarity as found in liberation theology to situate the discussion. The contribution of this article is found in taking the concept of a positional good as point of departure in terms of the discussion on transhumanism, as well as centring the ethical issues around the theological theme of human solidarity and social community as a Christian moral imperative.

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### Competing interests

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### Ethical considerations

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### Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article

### Disclaimer

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