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**Contact Information:**

Sandra J. Godde

[apologeticscoach@gmail.com](mailto:apologeticscoach@gmail.com)

0407020927

<http://apologeticscoach.com>

*Reaching for Immortality: Can Science Cheat Death?*

*A Christian Response to Transhumanism*

by Sandra J. Godde

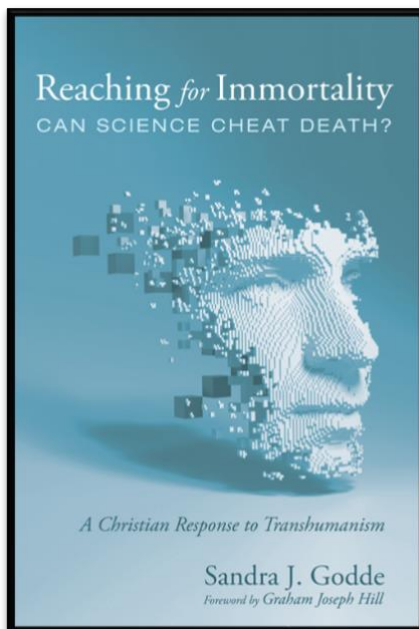
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**New Title from Sandra J. Godde**  
***Reaching for Immortality: Can Science Cheat Death?***  
***A Christian Response to Transhumanism***

At the forefront of science and technology there lie competing ideologies as to the nature of humanity and the future of human flourishing. Will technology become the ultimate savior, or has the work of salvation already been accomplished? Are we only creatures of mind and body or are we spiritual beings at our core?



*Reaching for Immortality* bravely examines the agenda and ideals of the transhumanist movement, and compares and contrasts these with the biblical vision of a physical resurrection and a divine upgrade of the entire created order. Which vision of the future will inspire you, and capture your allegiance? This book is a primer to provoke deep thought about the impact of technological change on human personhood, and asks crucial questions facing our age:

- What does it mean to be human, in light of exponential technological growth?
- What is transhumanism and where is it leading us?
- How important is embodiment for our personal identity?
- How would the biblical understanding of personhood survive in a posthuman future?

**Sandra J. Godde, MA(Theol), LLB(Hons), BA, Grad Cert(Research)** currently lectures in Christian studies at Christian Heritage College, Brisbane, Australia. She has been a Senior Lecturer in Theology at Citipointe Ministry College, Lecturer at Harvest Bible College, and taught religious and sociocultural worldviews. Sandra is also an artist at heart, with a previous professional dance career, including training and dancing with The Australian Ballet, and taking the lead role in a short Australian dance film. Her research interests lie in the areas of Christology, apologetics, worldviews, and the interactions between science and faith. Sandra also runs an apologetics ministry at [apologeticscoach.com](http://apologeticscoach.com).



### **What is transhumanism and where is it leading us?**

Transhumanism is an ideology that advocates for the transformation of humanity by using advanced technologies to either enhance and upgrade human intellectual capacities and/or biological capacities. The transhumanist's goal is to overcome human limitations such as decay, suffering, and even death. Transhumanism is, simply put, man improving himself by merging with technology. Much of today's modern technology such as genetic augmentation, cell regeneration, implantable devices that interact directly with the brain, artificial intelligence, robotics, cybernetics, nanotechnology, cloning, uploading the mind, and other technologies, point towards a transhuman future: that is a belief that we are transitional humans on our way to becoming posthuman.

### **How do the transhumanists propose to achieve immortality?**

Transhumanists often hold out the ultimate prize of a technological immortality to their followers, however there are many different ways and methods being used to extend one's life. At the outset, it is probably good to make an important distinction between embodied radical life extension (RLE), that is extending one's life as long as possible in one's body, and cybernetic immortality (CI), which is a disembodied existence that lives on forever on a non-biological substrate.

There are three broadly different approaches. The first is biological immortality. In this approach, championed by Aubrey de Grey, anticipated genetic and biotechnologies will be able to deal with degenerative mutations and defects in our bodies and genetically boost our immune systems. The second method is bionic immortality. With advances in robotics and nanotechnology, body parts can be replaced with artificial substitutes like synthetic blood vessels or skin, or prosthetics. Neuroenhancers can be inserted into the brain to prevent loss of memory or cognitive function, and nanobots can be injected to replace or repair diseased organs. However, this hybrid host is still vulnerable to accidents and death. The third and most controversial approach is virtual immortality. Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec, leaders in the fields of robotics and artificial intelligence, argue that information contained in a person's brain, including memories, experiences, and personality, can be digitized and then scanned and uploaded into a computer. Once this operation is complete, the information can then be downloaded into a robot or a virtual reality host. In doing so, one's virtual self could remain immortal by updating it with backups, and the uploading and downloading process could be repeated indefinitely. However, this presupposes that only the mind is who and what a person is, and we are merely information patterns.

### **How important is embodiment for our personal identity?**

Not surprisingly, the Christian understanding of what a human is goes beyond being mere data or information patterns. The view shaped by Judeo-Christian heritage regards the human being as a psychosomatic unity. A human person can be said to be an embodied soul, and the mental-spiritual and bodily aspects of a human being are a unity, with the body sharing fully in one's personal dignity.

On the other hand, many secularists or those subscribing to a transhuman ideology view the body, not as an aspect of the personal reality of the human being, but rather as an extrinsic instrument of the mind or self, which is considered the true person. This dualism, setting the body against the person, results in a demeaning of the body as something inferior that is used for purely pragmatic purposes.

The question as to whether we regard the body as either indispensable or disposable has crucial implications for the way we see the future flourishing of humanity and the ethics that will guide it.

### **Would a biblical understanding of personhood survive in a posthuman future?**

Ray Kurzweil's mind uploading or cybernetic immortality ideas are based on the assumption that personal identity is nothing but input and output patterns of information. Kurzweil believes you can reverse engineer the brain and digitally re-master all its functions so that we can then upload our unique self-identity to digital memory devices, and either enjoy a disembodied future or download ourselves into any kind of synthetic body that technology can provide. Yuval Noah Harari also says that we are now hackable animals, not mysterious souls. However, if one manipulates our DNA, tampers with the human design, clones, or augments human persons for greater capacities, are they really human anymore? Even the most perfect simulation of a person cannot capture the incommunicable essence of this unique being that makes us persons.

These depersonalizing techno-visions of humanity contrast sharply with the orthodox Christian view of a human person as a *mysterion* (a Greek term used for sacred mysteries of Christianity) or a sacrament. From a Christian worldview, there is a sacredness about a human person because they are the material site for spiritual presence. Personhood requires a physical body and views each human with an irreplaceable uniqueness. Contrary to the claims of the transhumanists, the human mind is deeply rooted in biological life and cannot function without it. It is argued that neither the brain, nor human cognition, work exactly like a digital computer but rather depend utterly on an organic body and on social interaction with others. Persons skilfully navigate the world as spirited bodies, not as information processing algorithms. Therefore, it would be a profound category mistake to speak of a digital human person with consciousness. A conscious person requires a corporeal body and a unique and circumscribed being; that is, a boundary between itself and other creatures.

### **What does Transhumanist ideology ignore?**

In a nutshell, two important things: the impact of sin on humanity & moral reckoning.

The Christian concept of *imago Dei* (being made in the image of God) is commonly understood to refer to the original uprightness of human nature and its inherent dignity before the "fall" and entrance of sin into this world. Since then we have all inherited a human nature that inclines to sin, is weakened in its capacities, and is subject to the domination of death. This concupiscence of the human heart or "inclination to evil" is humanity's root problem. Accordingly, human persons are in need of redemption: a Saviour who can mediate a restoration of one's nature to its original holiness before God. Such a conception of the human person is uniquely different to the progressively "good" evolution of humanity that the transhumanists espouse. Some even suggest that humans should (or should be permitted to) use technology to remake human nature.

The other idea that transhumanists ignore is a moral reckoning or any sort of divine judgment in the future. Theologians however maintain that there will be a final judgment of God on the accomplishments of human history: both nations and individuals. This is very different to presuming sociological evolution with spiritual progress, as the transhumanists are apt to do. Even a cursory view of history reminds us that sophisticated societies can still invent horrific ways to destroy their neighbours and exalt themselves. Thus, technological progress will not inevitably lead us onto the road to perfection or human goodness either. There is no convincing evidence to think that the current human race can transform themselves into an altruistic one, by themselves or through technology. The history of economic injustice, ecological foolishness, failure to eliminate poverty, racism, and greed are enough to remind us that increased intelligence will not necessarily save us from our “sin.”

### **What is the biblical vision of immortality?**

Christian orthodoxy affirms the essential goodness of creation and the physical world and promises a future reality which includes a renewal and a recreation of the physical universe. This eschatological future includes the resurrection of the body for believers in Christ that is both glorious and in harmony with the promise of a “new heaven and earth,” where all things will be reconciled back to God. The resurrection stands in stark contrast to the cybernetic immortality proposed by the radical transhumanists: that is, mere disembodied intelligence. Regardless if such intelligence could reside in a robotic or virtual body, such a posthuman entity’s body would be qualitatively different from the resurrection hope that the bible holds out for the human being. The creeds stress the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith, believing it is axiomatic, and as 1 Cor 15:12–17 tells us that if we do not believe Christ is raised, our faith is futile.

Belief in Jesus’ resurrection enables and requires us to believe that one day we will be raised in an embodied existence for all eternity, thus our bodies cannot be unimportant or inherently bad. The overall consensus is that bodily resurrection means “that the personal identity established in an embodied history is raised up into a transphysical reality.” Furthermore, resurrection must be understood in the context of “the new creation”: that is, God’s intervention in the world by Christ to inaugurate a new kingdom and a new age which is both “now” and “not yet”.

An Excerpt from *Reaching for Immortality: Can Science Cheat Death?: A Christian Response to Transhumanism*

Immortality is an ideal that humans have always dreamt of and longed for. The Christian gospel promises eternal life to those who believe and follow Christ; Transhumanists however, seek an ideal of their own making, intrinsically bound with technology. In our reach for human progress and immortality, which pathway will lead to our future human flourishing? From ancient civilizations to the present, this inconsolable ache to live forever never wanes. Perhaps this is because “He (God) has also set eternity in their heart.”

The passion for this book was fueled by the singular question: will cybernetic immortality ever trump the Christian hope of resurrection from the dead and the life of the world to come? In attempting to answer this question, the broader concept of what it means to be human, in light of the exponential technological growth envisaged for our future, needs to be explored. How important is embodiment for our personal identity? What is transhumanism and where is it leading us? How does the biblical understanding of personhood survive in a posthuman future?

At the forefront of science and ideology there converges a philosophical movement called Transhumanism. Its proponents advocate a transformation of humanity by using advanced technologies to enhance human intellectual capacities and upgrade our biology. Their goal is to overcome the human limitations of decay, suffering, and even death. Transhumanism is, simply put, man improving himself by merging with technology.

Great excitement surrounds the vision of the transhumanists as some seek to immortalize the mind by cheating death, and replace the natural body with a fabricated one, that is designed to be immune to death. But how far is too far in some of these aspirations? Whilst most would agree that goals such as developing cures for diseases, transplants, alleviating suffering, and developing prosthetics are good and uncontroversial, the goal to modify our human species into a technological hybrid is more controversial. Foremost visionary, Ray Kurzweil, along with other proponents of the Humanity+ movement, plan to do just that. Yuval Harari also describes this as humanity’s vision to self-made gods in his book: *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*.

Who doesn’t want to live in a perfect world, where there is no death, aging and suffering, no war, hardship or conflict, and a promise of eventual immortality? Christians believe the promise of a new creation is real. It is not just a utopian dream, but a destination with a guide and a known path. However, the Transhumanists are a new breed of fellow travelers who also see a Promised Land. They too are confident that they will arrive in a utopian future. They also have a vision and a strategy, with technology as the path and development as the guide. Notwithstanding there are some core convergences between the transhumanist ideology and Christian orthodoxy in terms of aspirations, there are also some core divergencies at a fundamental level between these two worldviews. In particular, I would like to highlight from a biblical perspective, how the body is part of the integrity and uniqueness of the human species, and should be preserved and dignified, not sought to be eradicated in the service of future progress for the human species.

Praise for *Reaching for Immortality: Can Science Cheat Death?: A Christian Response to Transhumanism*

“Communities are often unprepared for conversation about the impact of technological change. Sandra Godde helps prepare Christians to think carefully, using major principles, to consider the challenges and opportunities offered by transhumanism. Should we want to live forever on this earth? What difference will it make to faith, hope, and love? Sandra’s clear theological and scientific explanations provide an accessible, well-referenced, and highly readable primer. Take it up and read it.”

—Dr. John Mark Capper, Stirling College

“*Reaching for Immortality* provides an accessible and interesting engagement with transhumanism. Godde brings together issues arising in popular culture and theological scholarship to provide a fun and enlightening read for anyone interested in reflecting on what the big questions raised by science fiction mean for us as Christians as we consider what it is to be a human person.”

—Dr. Christy Capper, Wollaston College

“Godde presents us with a future transhumanist world where our bodies are nothing but ‘jelly’ and our ‘brains’ can be digitized and uploaded—sounds like a nightmare to me (especially if the computer crashes!). She contrasts this dystopian future with the beautiful Christian vision of an embodied and relational humanity. . . . She writes in clear and beautiful prose, reminding us that technology should serve humanity, rather than humanity being lost to technology.”

—Dr. Terry A. Veling, author of *The Beatitude of Mercy*

