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## Bionic Wings

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Title: Bionic Wings

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**Biography:** Jacob Bruggeman is an honors student in his third year at Miami University with majors in history and political science, and a combined BA – MA program in political science. Jacob was recently honored for his research as one of fifteen national recipients of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History’s 2017-2018 History Scholar awards. Jacob’s writing has been published on the American Enterprise Institute’s Values & Capitalism website, for which he is a contributing writer, by the Foundation for Economic Education, and in *The New Herald*—a journal he founded.

**Abstract:** In an infinite expanse such as the one we inhabit, we are mere mites in the soil, “creatures weak and fragile, small and helpless, finite and mortal” (Tucker, *First Things*, online). Our eyes always fixed upon the future, blooming *ad infinitum*, we will “run faster,” “stretch” ourselves farther, yet never fail to fall back to the ground. Our hands in the dirt, our fingers moving upon blades of grass, we still hunger for a future of our own design. We are born without wings and bogged down by both our human history and our only true human birthright: to fail, always,—in trying to make sense of it all.

“Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And then one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

“Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . .,” tomorrow we will fly. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* ends with one of his protagonists, Nick Carraway, gazing outward toward a far-off green light, the glowing potential in humanity’s dreams of the future, how it might unfold, unfurling before today’s inheritors as a flower in bloom. So sweet a nectar the future has to offer, yet, however hard we try, we know not how to harvest it.

In an infinite expanse such as the one we inhabit, we are mere mites in the soil, “creatures weak and fragile, small and helpless, finite and mortal” (Tucker, *First Things*, online). Our eyes always fixed upon the future, blooming *ad infinitum*, we will “run faster,” “stretch” ourselves farther, yet never fail to fall back to the ground. Our hands in the dirt, our fingers moving upon blades of grass, we still hunger for a future of our own design. We are born without wings and bogged down by both our human history and our only true human birthright: to fail, always, in trying to make sense of it all.

Transhumanism, a movement dedicated to using technology “to re-design the human form of life to fund its vision of technological advancement,” thereby “bringing us to a virtually immortal posthuman future” and unburdening us from both the weight of our past and our birthright, the human condition’s confines (Doede, *Appraisal*, 166). Transhumanism aims to give us wings, promising to propel us upward, promising *progress*, toward that green light, toward an infinite future of human planning. Humanity+, a prominent Transhumanist organization, proclaims as its motto “don’t limit your challenges, challenge your limits,” imploring readers to join them in creating and promoting “technologies that intervene with human physiology” to “increase human performance outside the realms of what is considered to be ‘normal’” (Humanityplus.org, online). Tragically, Transhumanists fail to realize the impossibility of so radically transcending human limitations, for to achieve such a sea change in human capability and condition—to become immortal demigods—would require the equally impossible total obliteration of the mysteries and limitations inherent in human life. Transhumanism, then, does not improve humanity, but, by surgically removing and leaving behind the human condition, destroys it, replacing the human race with an ever-improving series of semi- or totally robotic Übermenschs.

Transhumanism transforms the meanings of good living, good company, good order: humanity is immortalized, forever in the company of cryonic and bionic beings, and a new world order is created after the supposedly not-so-far-off moment when man meets machine, the moment Ray Kurzweil has called “the singularity” (Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*, book title). United in our flight into the future—humanity’s mechanical wings humming in unison—we shall boldly go where no man has gone before. A bionic colony now in flight—our heritage, so heavy it always was, left rotting in the dust—that flower is in reach.

At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick realizes that Jay Gatsby, a mysterious, obsessive millionaire, not unlike Silicon Valley's billionaires, met his life's end like so many others throughout our history—Gatsby died in flight, reaching for an always-receding goal, for a future of his own intricate design. Gatsby is not alone in his failure to grasp the future, his portrait hangs in a gallery with countless others, some grand, but most ordinary. Indeed, every individual human being begets elaborate plans for the future, each plan an attempt to master the unknown, to drive out the mystery inherent in the “yet to be.” We have always pitifully jumped into the air, flailing our arms, gasping at the whiff of that elusive flower. Wooden wings, parachutes, balloons, gliders, flying cars, jetpacks, rockets—all of these inventions, and those who perish wielding them, betray a simple, yet tragic truth of our existence: we scale ladders, though slowly, with ease.

The tried-and-true way of living is to content ourselves with the mystery inherent in the future, to recognize, as Marcelo Gleiser asserts in his new book, that as “we strive toward knowledge,” we must also “understand that we are, and will remain, surrounded by mystery” (Gleiser, *The Island of Knowledge*, xiv). To do so is to dutifully accept the shortness of our reach, the slowness of our legs, learning to take pleasure in the sight and smell of that flower's sweet nectar, leaving its taste to the imagination—after all, it might be poisonous. Looking up from the ground, we will find beauty in the sound that flower makes as it bends with the cosmic winds of change.

If society decides, in the end, to try and taste that nectar, let us reach for it slowly, cautiously, warily, even, avoiding all those thorns running up the flower's stem. Instead of, in Walter Benjamin's words, blasting “open the continuum of history,” leaping in history's “open air,” hoping for the improbable miracle of flight—of Transhumanism's promise—we ought to put out the fuse, and put down our biomechatronic wings (Brown, *Politics out of History*, 157). For now, let us cast the thought of transcending the human condition aside, continue laboring to make the Earth a better home, and leave flight to the realm of wonder.

To be sure, the Transhumanist movement has its appeals. Some Christians, for whom one would think Transhumanism is anathema, are even grafting their faith onto the movement through the Christian Transhumanist Association, a group that believes Transhumanism will “restore, through science, the transcendental hopes that science itself has obliterated” (Christian Transhumanist Association, online). On the whole, though, public opinion data show that Americans are wary of self-enhancement (*Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, “U.S. Public Wary of Biomedical Technologies to ‘Enhance’ Human Abilities,” online), and the debate on the ethics enhancement still rages. These concerns, among others, are consistently reflected in today's popular culture, Neill Blomkamp's *Chappie* being one of many recent examples of how the convergence of human nature and technology may go horribly awry.

“NOW!” screams Transhumanism—obsessed like Gatsby—refusing to take heed of others' objections and so many warnings in the canon of science fiction and the timelessness of Murphy's Law. *Time*'s magazine cover, “2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal,” makes this clear (Grossman, “2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal,” *Time*, online). The rest of us are left with a choice: wing-up, or have dust blown in our faces at the takeoff. Most of humanity, though, will have no such choice, for most of us will not have access to these technologies. And so who gets the wings becomes part of a larger series of ethical questions. Undeniably,

transhumanist rights will become the civil rights of the 21st century. Will we wing-up? or shall we take the safer option and grab our ladder?

Transhumanists are racing toward that green light. They are a wealthy sliver of humanity, however small, that refuses to wait. They will soar into the future, flying “against the current,” driven “ceaselessly” into an enhanced future, the rest us watching, like Nick, their silhouettes speed across the bay, fading into an unknowable, blinding future.

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