

18

The New Asceticism: Biohacking the Body for Greater Longevity

Todd Daly, PhD | Fellow

At 5:00am each morning, Jack Dorsey, cofounder and CEO of Twitter, wakes up and consults his sleep monitoring device for irregularities before immersing himself in an ice bath. Instead of strong coffee, he downs a concoction of Himalayan sea salt, water, and lemon. Dorsey sets aside an hour each morning and evening for meditation. His bedtime routine is not for the faint of heart, as he “transitions” from a dry sauna to another ice bath. On weekends, he fasts from all foods, drinking only water. Though raised as a Catholic, Dorsey practices Vipassana meditation, all in hopes of living much longer. Dorsey, now in his mid-forties, considers himself one of a special breed of entrepreneurial tech elites known as biohackers.¹ Dave Asprey, founder of Bulletproof coffee, is another biohacker who follows a regimen that includes biannual stem cell transplants, hundreds of daily supplements, regular visits to his hyperbaric oxygen chamber and meditation float tank, and plenty of time on a muscle-stimulating

vibrating platform.² His recent book, *Superhuman: The Bulletproof Plan to Age Backward and Maybe Even Live Forever* (2019), trades on the growing popularity of transhumanism, a movement dedicated to using technology to greatly extend life and transcend the limits of being human.³

Dorsey, Asprey, and others are exploiting the well-established connection between fasting and longevity.⁴ Valter Longo, a gerontologist at the University of Southern California and self-described “fasting evangelist,” has been actively exploring the science behind caloric restriction (CR) in hopes of developing a regimen exploiting the body’s innate abilities to remain functional longer than normal. Longo’s “programmed longevity” approach combines specific nutrition with an occasional “fasting mimicking diet” (FMD), which is able to spur cell regeneration and activate the body’s own self-healing program—something roughly resembling embryogenesis.⁵ Unlike intermittent fasting,

which entails varying periods of time in which no calories are consumed, FMD is a low-calorie eating plan that effectively fools the body into thinking it is fasting. Mirroring a pescatarian diet, the FMD regimen involves a scientifically developed five-day diet program called ProLon that assists the body in performing a cellular cleanup, which can be repeated every few months throughout the year.⁶ By doing so, he plans on living into his late nineties or early hundreds. Longo distances himself from the likes of fad diets and snake-oil remedies, touting his approach as a “natural intervention” that operates in harmony with the evolutionary development of human metabolism. Many of these prolongevity apologists like Dorsey and Longo have eschewed the encumbrances of family life in order to devote more time to solving the puzzle of extending the human lifespan.⁷

These entrepreneurs and scientists are among the new “secular monks” who “submit themselves to ever more rigorous, monitored forms of ascetic self-control in order to extend the healthy lifespan as long

Todd Daly, “The New Asceticism: Biohacking the Body for Greater Longevity,” *Dignitas* 29, no. 1–2 (2022): 18–22. © 2022 The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity

as possible.”⁸ The language of “monk” or “ascetic” certainly seems to apply to these new elite, though in this particular context these terms are emptied of their richness. Though Christian asceticism has always strived to distance itself from Gnostic thought, which disparaged the material body as evil and hence at war with one’s soul or spirit, we might wonder whether this new asceticism is more openly Gnostic for viewing the body as an enemy to be disciplined (and indeed Gnostic insofar as this particular form of knowledge [*gnōsis*] is available only to the elite and promises salvation from the ravages of time). However, many of these new ascetics distance themselves from the more radical forms of transhumanism that hopes to attain earthly immortality by abandoning the body altogether. While these new ascetics consider aging an adversary, for them the aging body is simultaneously an enemy *and* the locus of salvation. In other words, salvation from decline and death will not come by escaping the body, but through adapting a more nuanced stance towards one’s body that views it as *both* friend and foe. On the surface, this sounds similar to the sentiment of John Climacus, the seventh century Abbot of Sinai, who described the body as both “my helper and my enemy.”¹⁰ Though the final visions of these competing ascetic regimes diverge given their different worldviews, the metaphor of war is common to both. While this new asceticism might be tempting for Christians, especially given its apparent affinity with ancient Christian ascetic practice, I will attempt to show that the secular ideology and ultimate aim of these practices negate foundational concepts regarding the body and the soul and their relationship to one another.

In order to unpack this secular understanding of the body, it will be useful to consider the work of the French philosopher and statesmen Hervé Juvin, who, in *The Coming of the Body*, has considered the political and moral implications of this new ascetic war in what he calls “the advent of the body,” a renewed attention on the significance of human embodiment.¹¹ Juvin claims that in the past the fruits of asceticism, privation, and renunciation served the state by allowing the soldier to release his frustrations on the battlefield “at a single stroke.”¹² However, our present era of peace (if we may call it that) no longer requires such sacrifices, but “opens up new territories—aggression turned

inwards, [a] war on the self.”¹³ The way has been cleared for “the advent of the body, which nothing foreign can threaten now.”¹⁴ In other words, the political and socio-economic situation in the developed world has shifted so radically over the last century that the body, which once demanded attention for survival or service—whether against nature or the enemy—has given way to the body as the locus of individual desire.¹⁵ But, as Juvin observes, this “advent” undermines the very peace that has occasioned its arrival by continuing to draw on the theme of war. In other words, the metaphor of war continues to describe this advent of the body. In the past the soldier disciplined his body in the service of some greater good—the welfare of the state—which would often require sacrifice on the battlefield. Now, however, the discipline of the body is turned inward, where, in times of political peace, one’s own ideal of health and longevity are aggressively turned towards the body as the passive instrument of one’s ideal-fueled desires. Before moving on, it is perhaps worth noting that the metaphor of war against one’s body is hardly foreign to the Christian faith. The apostle Paul could speak of disciplining his body, making it his slave (1 Cor 9:27). But, as we will see, the metaphor of war takes on different meanings when embedded in different worldviews.

If the new asceticism can be described as a “war on the self,” the body *itself* is no less at war. Valter Longo, for instance, describes the human body as “an army of cells at war” in the interminable battle of homeostasis, where proper nutrition is described as rearmament. “Like an army in need of rations, ammunition, and equipment, the body needs proteins, essential fatty acids . . . minerals, vitamins, and, yes, sufficient levels of sugar to fight the many battles raging inside and outside [the body’s] cells.”¹⁶ David Sinclair, director of the Paul F. Glenn Center for the Biology of Aging at Harvard Medical Center, also uses the language of war. He derives comfort from the “armies of chemists” at work in battling the aging body.¹⁷ Through disciplined research, these armies will provide the weapons necessary to realize our desire for longer life, allowing us to wage war on a body already at war with itself. Though the metaphor of war may indeed be appropriate to describe the body’s activities on the cellular level, when it begins to become the dominant metaphor,

aging itself becomes the enemy, and merely reinforces the desire to pursue medicine and ascetic regimes in waging battle against it. Before formulating a Christian response to this new asceticism, we will unpack its moral elements.

Certainly, this “new asceticism”—like all practices—has its own morality. As Juvin sees it, the advent of the body has replaced the older morality of *repression* with *satisfaction*.¹⁸ The good life is the life *we* desire. The advent of the body is the advent of satisfaction, underwritten by the central principles that animate the economy, politics, and morality.¹⁹ This new morality is a marked departure from older forms of Christian morality—most notably asceticism—where the body was subdued or repressed. According to Juvin, western philosophy and religion had once “worked in common to put down a body that was the ‘profane garment of the soul,’ an enemy of eternal salvation being capable of desire, capable of pleasure and folly, hence of sin . . . a body cut off from heaven and from God.”²⁰ He sees the desert ascetic St. Antony (ca. 251–356) as the emblematic figure of this repression. Juvin notes,

Being a good person these days does not mean curbing the sinful longings of the body, mortifying the weak flesh, following your conscience and preparing through constant prayer for your departure from this life here below; it means living well. . . . The libraries of personal development repeat in a competitive litany that to get on well with others, at home, at work, you have first to get on well with yourself.²¹

This is the new religion of the body’s transformation, what he calls the religion behind the demise of Christianity.²²

Whether Juvin has fairly represented St. Antony and the asceticism of the Desert Fathers, he asserts that the curse of the sinful body has effectively been turned inside out. Whereas for the old ascetics the body was something to be overcome because it was viewed as inherently bad, the body can now be improved because it is capable of both giving *and* receiving pleasure. However, the soul ends up getting lost in this new morality of the body. Or rather, the relationship between body and soul is being transformed, with the former assuming more importance than the latter. The desires of one’s soul are taken as an unquestioned *given*. As Juvin

notes, “Recognition of the primacy of the body places muscles, bones, sexual organs, skin, where soul, mind and intelligence used to be: overhanging everything.”²³ Thus,

The *habit* no longer makes the monk; the *body* makes him, by revealing his eating and drinking habits, by showing signs of the attention or neglect given to it, by saying everything about itself, the things nothing else can say.²⁴

The promises of youth and beauty become one’s own responsibility, with the body providing constant feedback on how well (or poorly) one is doing. As Juvin points out, this new asceticism is a new “duty owed to the body.”²⁵ There is a certain irony here, for in reality the new asceticism of longevity hardly does away with habits. Juvin is only pointing out that one’s own morality can be better read off the body than by one’s attitude, desires, or disposition. However, as the brain is increasingly identified as the sole basis for love, fidelity, and faith, when things like belief and the apprehension of beauty are reduced to neuropsychological states that can be manipulated, the body’s liberation from the immaterial is nearing its completion. As Juvin puts it, “the digital revolution, information technology, and artificial intelligence ensure the body’s revenge on the soul, the mind and the other foggy entities in which religion, ideologies, and mysticism used to find a foothold.”²⁶

Thus, in the new asceticism the body becomes *everything*, says Juvin, because nothing else is worth that much. This asceticism confirms “that the body has become a material, a plastic substance that should lend itself to being changed, modeled to project the desired image.”²⁷ This new morality carries its own creed: “my body is my own property, my own responsibility; I choose it, mark it, distinguish it, shape it to my will.”²⁸ The body becomes managed property under the moral imperative of self-improvement.²⁹ In this new morality indeterminacy is the particular form of freedom turned against the self.³⁰ But the weight of responsibility proves no less burdensome than the supposedly conquered regime of repressive Christian asceticism. Rather, the morality of the body simply introduces new categories of good and bad. “The myth of the perfect, untiring, non-corroding body conjures up another myth,” notes Juvin, “that of purity, the obsession with performance, the deadly intoxication of surpassing oneself: of the

superman.”³¹ The irony is that the body, in a sense, disappears. “It [the body] is forbidden to be what it is—tired, dirty, wrinkled, addicted, sweaty rumbling and panting—required to be pure image, odorless, without moods, without excretions.”³² The echoes of transhumanist dogma—whether acknowledged or not—are strong.

Once again, this new morality may very well prove more burdensome than the Christian asceticism it rejects. Juvin describes this new morality as “frighteningly severe,” for the body is worth keeping alive only as long as it is able to bring a certain degree of satisfaction to itself and others.³³ As Juvin strikingly puts it, in order for the soul to reach the surface of the skin itself—which is his way of describing the eclipse of any discrepancy between one’s desired *ideal* of the body and one’s *actual* body—nothing less than dutiful, relentless effort is demanded. The project of self-fabrication is simply “to choose oneself.”³⁴ Here the opposition of soul and body, internal reality and outward appearance, loses all meaning.³⁵

Medicine used sometimes to heal the soul to help cure the body; now the body has to be healed to ensure that the soul is all right. The cult of the self replaces all the others quite handily. It is finalizing the conditions for the advent of the body. My skin says everything about me; it is me.³⁶

But perhaps the most burdensome aspect of this new morality, says Juvin, is the loneliness of such projects. “For to choose yourself by yourself and for yourself is the most unbearable of all choices.”³⁷ In such conditions, one’s lifetime becomes one’s most important asset. Yet, in spite all of our technological advances, our power over nature is extremely limited. The violence of time, fatigue, boredom, age, and disgust eventually show through.

It is not too difficult to see the new asceticism as an example of the advent of the body. Juvin’s critique highlights at least three aspects of the new longevity worth mentioning here.

First, it is clear that this new asceticism of greater longevity is deeply secular. Juvin rightly asserts that in gaining longer life, we have lost eternity: “We have wrested long life from the gods, from sickness, from death.”³⁸ Dorsey, Asprey, Longo, and others embrace what Charles Taylor has called

the “immanent frame,” where “we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order.”³⁹ It requires nothing of the transcendent. Instead, the ultimate, unquestioned vantage point is rooted in the individual will, where one’s view of the world is properly basic, and worth pursuing, whatever one’s ideal of bodily longevity might entail. The body can be indefinitely upgraded as material to be managed by one’s unquestioned desires. This view says “I am finite, time is scarce, and this world is all there is.”⁴⁰ One wonders whether these practitioners aren’t haunted by an existential anxiety and loneliness, especially the likes of Dorsey and Longo who are choosing to forgo family life. Being unmarried and childless used to mark adherence to a particular religious order; now it bespeaks devotion to the practices aimed at achieving the perpetually young body. Indeed, they may very well be described as “secular monks.”

Second, we can describe these projects as Pelagian insofar as the human will is all that is necessary to pursue one’s moral projects apart from divine grace. Though Pelagius was rightly concerned with the morality of the church, he denied any necessary connection between Adam’s sin and the rest of humanity, asserting that the belief that all of humanity somehow shares in Adam’s moral corruption was not only unbiblical, but far too pessimistic.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the new ascetics are Pelagian to the degree that their behaviors, dispositions, and desires are largely things for which they are fully responsible, things they must amend under their own strength. With Pelagius, these new ascetics reject the idea that we are born into any particular condition that would require such a deeply metaphysical word like “sin.” Though the social pressure to pursue this new asceticism will always be present, ultimately, one’s morality is one’s own responsibility, and primarily a matter of one’s will.

Finally, we can describe this new asceticism as deeply indeterminate, a term favored by Juvin.⁴² While he links this indeterminacy to human freedom, there are two related concepts that help underscore the type of freedom Juvin is describing: voluntarism and nominalism. To say this new asceticism of longevity is voluntarist is simply to assert the primacy of the human *will* (Latin: *voluntas*) over against anything else that might oppose one’s will, whether it be rationality

or one's body. In a more formal sense, the human will determines right and wrong with respect to the body. This project also betrays a nominalist (from the Latin *nomen*, meaning "name") bent, which, at its root, asserts that the world is a collection of individual entities that have no necessary, discernable order. Any supposed category that we might use to discern some order, logic, or structure in the world (e.g. tree, cloud, the human body) exist in name (*nomen*) only. In short, nominalism encourages us to see the world, and especially our bodies, as little more than a random collection of cells that have no necessary order or template by which to determine how the body should be. The ideal body is nothing more than an arbitrary template unique to each individual, which may or may not choose to impose on the real body. The body is, in a sense, a lump of clay waiting to be shaped to whatever one desires. There is no discernable order to nature itself that might suggest any limits to our impulses for self-expression.

Juvin's use of the word of "advent" when referring to the body may remind Christians of a prior advent, that of the Son of God, the divine Logos, who did not merely *occupy* a body, but came *as* the embodied Jesus of Nazareth, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Thus, in using such terminology, Juvin does us a favor by encouraging Christians to reflect on the Advent by which all subsequent advents must be measured. Indeed, historically the church has measured the yearly passage of time beginning with the season of Advent in December. More particularly, it was this Advent—the Incarnation—that informed the fasting of the Desert Fathers like St. Antony and challenges the well-worn assumption that Christian asceticism was primarily about repression, as Juvin claims. Though the Desert ascetics did indeed treat the body harshly, Antony's flight to the desert was a moral project in which the body was heavily implicated in the reformation of the soul even as the body also reaped the

fruit of the soul's reformation. The Advent of Christ in the Incarnation bespeaks the appropriateness of being finite, embodied creatures. Contrary to what is often thought, the Desert Fathers were not at war solely with the body, but primarily engaged in battle with the disordered desires of one's *soul*. They sought to bring the soul in submission to God *through* the body, not merely against it. Rather than seeing the body as an instrument of the soul—i.e. as the instrument or mere object of one's thoughts, desires, or feelings—the body and the impulses and desires arising from it were accorded the role of *instructor* in order that one might once again experience a deeper communion with God, as did prelapsarian Adam and Eve.

According to the Church Father Athanasius (d. 373), St. Antony was the paradigmatic figure of the desert ascetic who, in denying the body through fasting, was able to come face to face with his own recalcitrant, twisted will. The goal of fasting was not primarily to transform the *body* to some ideal for longevity, but was a first step in bringing one's body and soul into their proper order: the soul in submission to God and the body in submission to the soul. Unlike the new asceticism, however, which seeks to render the body a slave to one's desire to live longer and reshaping it accordingly, St. Antony recognized that the path towards transformation meant dealing with the bodily needs and impulses that have the potential to drag one away from Christ. Though the body is fallen through sin (Gen 3), having a finite body is nevertheless appropriate to our creatureliness, as attested by Jesus' aging, finite body. If the new asceticism aims at reducing the distance between body and soul by, in the words of Juvin, bringing the soul to the surface of the skin (i.e. the body effectively mirrors one's desires), where the body effectively *becomes* who one is, or merely reflects one's ideal of longevity, the Desert Fathers sought to maintain their distinction and order. Though the body is certainly meant to serve the soul, attention was first

directed towards subduing the impulses and distractions of bodily needs and desires, thereby acknowledging that the body and its limitedness has something to teach us about being human.

Interestingly however, Athanasius and Antony also recognized that such fasting would *transform* one's body, allowing it to become more like Adam's body in the Garden of Eden—specifically, by slowing down the aging process and potentially regaining the longevity enjoyed by the biblical patriarchs (Gen 5; 11). In other words, they believed that a greater bodily longevity was the inevitable bodily byproduct of having a well-ordered soul (i.e. thoughts and desires). Indeed, Antony himself lived to 105 years of age. But it is important to note that this longevity was never the primary goal; it is vastly different than the "new asceticism." Though both the new and the old asceticism involve a transformation of the body, the Desert Fathers' intentions were with the soul, that is, one's character—not to the exclusion of the body, but for its benefit. If the "new asceticism" sees the body as a *project*, the "old asceticism" sees the body as a *gift*, offering the possibility of a longer life, with the moral character to go with it.

From a Christian perspective, we may very well be sympathetic to the concerns animated by this new asceticism, namely, that as embodied beings we are subject to finitude, degradation, and decay. If, as Christians, we rightly celebrate embodied life as a gift from God, as attested to in the Incarnation, it is certainly not wrong to desire long(er) life. But the means by which this might happen also matter. Certainly, there are numerous other questions that might be asked of life extension from a Christian perspective. The Desert ascetics remind us that we must ask who we might become if we engage in life-extension projects, namely, whether or not we are more or less likely to be transformed into the image of Christ.⁴³

Notes

1. Andrew Taggart, "Secular Monks," *First Things*, March 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/03/secular-monks>.
2. The Week Staff, "Can Human Mortality Be Hacked?" *The Week*, March 24, 2019, 11, <https://theweek.com/articles/830455/human-mortality-hacked>.
3. Dave Asprey, *Superhuman: The Bulletproof Plan to Age Backward and Maybe Even Live Forever* (New York: Harper Wave, 2019).
4. Though hygiene has nearly always been associated with increased longevity, the link between longevity and dietary restriction was first confirmed in the modern era by Cornell University nutrition researcher Clive McCay (1898–1967), who discovered that rats lived much longer when placed on near-starvation diets.
5. Valter D. Longo, *The Longevity Diet: Discover the New Science to Slow Ageing, Fight Disease and Manage Your Weight* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 109. In particular, FMD switches all cells into a "protected anti-aging mode" which promotes autophagy—the self-consuming parts of a cell—as well as the replacement of damaged cell components with newly generated cells.
6. Longo's diet actually involves eight guidelines: (1) adopting a pescatarian diet, (2) consuming low amounts of protein, (3) minimizing bad fats and sugars while maximizing good fats and complex carbohydrates, (4) being nourished, (5) eating a variety of food associated with one's ancestry, (6) eating twice a day plus a snack, (7) observing time-restrictive eating, and (8) practicing periodic prolonged fasting with FMD.
7. Emily Shifter, "How Longevity Expert Valter Longo Plans to Live to 120," *Elemental*, January 15, 2019, <https://elemental.medium.com/how-longevity-expert-valter-longo-plans-to-live-to-120-334b508d7b28>. "I'm not married and don't have children, so there isn't influence there. . . . I'm dedicated to what I do and involved in many clinical trials." He has, however, recently written a book on longevity for children and adolescents entitled *La longevità inizia da bambini*.
8. Taggart, "Secular Monks."
9. Asceticism derives from the Greek askēsis, meaning "training," from askein, "to exercise."
10. Kallistos Ware, "My Helper and My Enemy: The Body in Greek Christianity," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 90.
11. Hervé Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2010), 31.
12. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 36.
13. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 31.
14. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 31.
15. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 28–36. But this "advent" undermines the very peace that has occasioned its arrival.
16. Longo, *The Longevity Diet*, 61.
17. Sinclair and LaPlante, *Lifespan: Why We Age—and Why We Don't Have To* (New York: Atria Books, 2019), 145.
18. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 36.
19. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 35.
20. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 36–37.
21. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 34.
22. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 36. Juvin surmises that religion in history should be viewed "as the liberation of the body and of desire, through the resurrection of the body, even though dogma still maintains the fiction of repression of the flesh."
23. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 37.
24. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 100 (italics added).
25. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 101.
26. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 39. And yet, so long as the language of self-improvement remains, it seems impossible that the body can ever gain complete victory. Though metaphysical materialism is rampant in the sciences, dualism—whatever the form—remains alive and well.
27. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 99.
28. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 99.
29. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 123.
30. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 95.
31. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 101.
32. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 101. "The advent of the body is accompanied by a growing phobia for its attributes, its nature, its physiology, a terror of the body's fleshly reality . . . fears assuaged by a radical slimming, the fantasy of a virtual body, the dream of a body without flesh" (p. 101–2).
33. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 102.
34. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 95.
35. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 96.
36. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 102 (italics added).
37. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 102.
38. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 43.
39. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 543.
40. Taggart, "Secular Monks," 17.
41. The apostle Paul discusses our relationship to Adam and Adam's sin in the heavily disputed *Romans* 5:12–21.
42. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 62, 64–65, 68, 70.
43. I've discussed the implications of the Desert ascetics in relation to life extension in much more detail elsewhere. See Todd T. W. Daly, *Chasing Methuselah: Theology, the Body, and Slowing Human Aging* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).