

The Ghost of Transhumanism & the Sentience of Existence

The Ghost of Transhumanism

A spectre is haunting Europe and the rest of our planet -the spectre of Transhumanism. Its priests and familiars inhabit some of our most prominent research laboratories, universities, major corporations and political institutions.

Transhumanism is a negative perspective on human nature coupled with a techno-scientific vision of how we should improve. This perspective is best recognized by a superstitious belief in science as saviour and a distanced contempt for our human nature: our fragility, our mortality, our sentience, our self-awareness, and our embodied sense of 'who' we are (as distinct from a 'what'). Transhumanists confound emotionality with irrationality, dormant potential with stupidity and disability with dispensability. And as a result of this confusion they promote and push for a future that blindly heralds ubiquitously wired, genetically optimized, computing-led societies, in which supposedly fallible humans are manipulated and enhanced by an invisible, presumably controllable and more optimal, robot-driven machinery called the next stage of ostensible “evolution” for humanity.

Transhumanists' visions for our future remain largely unchallenged, because their mindset is a symptom of prominent scientific ideologies that emerged in the wake of modernity. As a result, they feel empowered to dictate what we understand by the term 'progress', and what we respect as rational. They talk as if they knew what the future “will” look like and exhibit stubborn resistance to any rational critique against their outlooks; thereby displaying symptoms of an irrational ideology.

The purpose of this manifesto is to expose transhumanism's irrationality and dangers.

Transhumanism is based on various deeply flawed assumptions. The type of transhumanism we criticise here builds on the following beliefs:

- Reality is the totality of information.
- Humans are nothing but information processing objects.
- Artificial intelligence is intelligence in a human sense.

Based on these three beliefs transhumanists argue that:

- decision-making should generally be based on information and the artificial intelligence that operates on it, because this kind of decision-making leads to better decisions, and
- we should welcome a next phase of evolution, in which humans can be enhanced; for instance by artificial intelligence that is more powerful than human intelligence.

On the Erroneous Assumptions of Transhumanism

Reality is NOT the totality of information

- We do not think that the notion of information is the right one to elucidate life in its entirety. We also find it naïve to accept uncritically the assumption and definition of information as an essentially quantifiable or measurable entity and then proceed to treat this as a complete ontology or account of *all* reality. While the notion of information may be used as a *tool* in the sciences and in technology, the concept is not properly basic and thus insufficient for considering all aspects of human life.
- Information processing might be well suited for discussing basic functional elements of human perceiving, thinking and acting. Other elements of our trans-biological life include emotional intelligence, practical virtues such as wisdom or *phronesis* as an essential *qualitative* capacity for ethical judgment, experiential and phenomenological dimensions of perception, thought and action, prospection and so on.
- The notion of the continuous evolution of all reality from low-level information is also problematic. This is the idea that data merge to form information, information in turn combines to form information objects, objects interact in bigger scenarios and so on, yet all are basically informational. But contemporary physics and philosophy hotly discuss alternative conceptions for reality formation and constitution.
- Summing up, ‘information’ as used especially by transhumanistic doctrines is an expression of the desire to control through calculation. Their approach is limited to reducing the world to data-based patterns suited for mechanical manipulation,
- As long as information is thought of as equivalent to Locke’s “primary qualities” only, while ignoring “qualia”, intrinsic values, and those aspects of our world that make it meaningful and worth living, information theory is essentially lifeless.
- If, therefore, the term information is inadequate to account for life and humanity, then, for the same reasons, the idea that reality might be the “totality of information” is equally wrong.

Humans are NOT Information Objects but Animals of Meaning

- We see ‘meaning’ as the most important aspect in human life as it allows us to understand reality, think further about it, and act within it.
- Meaning emerges when our entire body (including the brain) interacts with the world as it is, or actualizes new realities.
- Technologies and media play an essential role in this emergence of meaning. But this mediation should not be confused with transhumanist assumptions, which presume that meaning is equal to some sum of information.
- Technology can shape but not replace our social relationships, which crucially determine what is meaningful to us.
- Information objects such as machines are marked by different degrees of determinability, oscillating as they do between chance and necessity. But in our quest for meaning we humans routinely escape any such determinability. We are, each of us, like “black swans” whose existence refutes at a stroke the facile, non-provable claim that “all swans are white”.

Artificial Intelligence can NEVER be intelligent in a Human Sense

- Intelligence is to information what a nail is to a hammer. If one only has a hammer, then everything looks like a nail. If one only has information, then everything looks intelligent that is able to process information.

- We believe that the term ‘intelligence’ has been severely abused in this way. For this reason we feel the need to disambiguate and thereby delimit the use of the term ‘intelligence’.
- While the term ‘intelligence’ may be used as an *instrument* in the sciences and in technological practices - we believe that it is more appropriate to consider terms such as 'emotional intelligence', 'nous', 'intellectus', or 'attunement' (“*Gefühl*” in the sense of Schleiermacher) when talking about the act of human thinking,
- Our ‘attuned thinking and acting’ is our unique mode of being as a human species. It is a capacity to experience by paying attention and thereby actualizing and transforming the meaning of things. This human form of thinking and acting is not value neutral.
- Attuned thinking and acting are indispensable to everyday decision-making. They capture the tacit and essential pieces of reality. If we sacrifice them for a calculating reasoning alleged to be “intelligence”, our ability to discern the relevant and make situated ethical judgments and decisions will suffer. We would be replacing untidy, but meaning-rich reality for a manicured, but ultimately sterile world.
- Summing up: Artificial intelligence can indeed be intelligent in terms of information processing. But it does not have the capacity and the mode of existence that is the most essential in life, namely, ‘attunement’ or the ability to encounter, apprehend, and negotiate meanings as humans do.

How it feels to be Human

We have stated above that our human nature is marked by our fragility, our sentience, our self-awareness, and our embodied sense of 'who' we are. These are the characteristics that allow us to be responsive to our environment, to develop a sentience of our mortality and to realize that every instant has a unique past that discloses to us an unprecedented future. It is these that make our existence distinct from the existence of artefacts, bots or other forms of non-sentient entities, because humans *feel* to be. Transhumanists deny this distinguishing quality of human existence, thus reducing our sentient nature to that of a bot. We therefore want to clarify the following:

- We humans are **animals of meaning**.
- We are **enchanted beings** who appreciate our existence, which - despite naturalist claims – is not like being a 'brain in a vat'.
- Unlike machines which merely simulate awareness, we are originally aware and capable of distinguishing between the state of being aware (mental presence) and the contents of which we are (intentionally) aware. In machine terms, this distinction would be absurd.
- Our **attuned thinking and acting** ensures that our life is not only determined by formal procedural rationality (or “*Zweckerationalität*”). Instead many of our most important skills are those dependent on joint attention.
- Through our joint attention we influence the emergence of our environment; thereby being **co-creators** of everything that exists.
- Sentient nature includes **emotionality** as a basic principle of self-regulation and self-orientation. Emotions are either agreeable or disagreeable, either lustful or painful. Emotions thus make us feel what is good and what is evil or bad. By colouring the “how it feels” to be the being one is, they are what our sense of good and evil ultimately relies on. There is no such sense without or outside of sentience.

- As sentient beings we are **attracted to the good**, and seek our own and others' flourishing (the common good), which is convertible with the search for the beautiful, the true and full relationality.
- We should never forget that we are **vulnerable beings**. We live contingent lives. Our bodies, minds, emotions, and overall form as persons (our souls) are liable to damage and deformation; and this is the case both mentally and physically. We therefore need to protect ourselves.

Prof. Dr. Sarah Spiekermann is Professor and Chair of the Institute for Management Information Systems at Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU Vienna, Austria). She is well-known for her work on ethical IT system design and an activist in the field of privacy policy making. She is author of the textbook “Ethical IT Innovation – A Value-based Approach”.

Prof. Dr. Peter Hampson is a Research Fellow at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford where he teaches psychology. He is also Emeritus Professor at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, and Adjunct Honorary Professor of Psychology at NUI Maynooth, Ireland. He is most well known for his work on cognitive psychology and, latterly, on psychology-theology dialogue. He recently co-edited the volume “Theology and Literature after Postmodernity”.

Prof. Dr. Charles M. Ess is Professor in Media Studies, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo. He is most well known for his thinking and writing on applying virtue ethics in both Information and Computing Ethics and Media and Communication Studies. He is the author of the widely used textbook, „Digital Media Ethics“.

Prof. Dr. Johannes Hoff is full professor of Systematic and Philosophical Theology at Heythrop College, University of London. Johannes Hoff is most well known for this thinking on contemporary cultural hermeneutics and late medieval philosophical theology. His thinking is best expressing in his recent book “The Analogical Turn” as well as the forthcoming piece „Magic Machines: Anthropology, Technology and Sacramentality in a Post-Digital Age.“.

Prof. Dr. Mark Coeckelbergh is Professor of Philosophy of Media and Technology at the Philosophy Department of the University of Vienna and most well-known for his thinking on philosophy of technology, in particular the ethics of robotics and ICTs. He authored the books „Growing Moral Relations“ and „Human Being @ Risk“.

Prof. Dr. Georg Franck is emeritus professor for Digital Methods in Architecture and Spatial Planning at the Technical University of Vienna. He is most well known for his thinking on ‘The Attention Economy’ and ‘Mental Capitalism’ on which he has published books of the same name.