Can Posthumanism Save Us?

By Kevin LaGrandeur, Ph.D.

Our world is in trouble. Climates are changing, oceans rising, storms becoming more extreme and unpredictable, more animals are becoming extinct, the gap between rich and poor is increasing, as is social disruption, and dangerous wars are looming. Things don't look promising. Can posthumanism rescue us, our fellow living things, and our planet from demise? Maybe.

The general idea of posthumanism is a big new philosophical and scientific concept, and big new philosophical or scientific concepts often cause paradigm shifts in the way we think about our world, about ourselves, and about our relation to the universe. The paradigm shift we are moving through now is being caused by the increasing saturation of our daily existence by emerging technology. This saturation is so complete that we are not even fully conscious of it all. It has become so much a part of us: our ties to smart phones, virtual games, and social media are becoming increasingly umbilical and routine—so much so that these digital artifacts alone are changing the very fabric of our society.

And there is more: many thinkers say emerging technology will change what it means to be human, and that, in fact, it is already doing so. One small example of this is the growing collection of devices that allow us to alter our natural human limits: we have robots that allow us to experience planets by proxy—and in ways, as with the Mars Rover's infrared sensors, that

we could not do naturally. Modern science has also recently provided us with artificial retinas and inner ears (cochleae), artificial voices (like the kind that allowed the famed physicist Stephen Hawking to talk); and even with pacemakers, automatic defibrillators and insulin pumps that allow us to cheat death itself. In fact, for the first time, technology experts think that we are on the verge of speeding up and controlling our own evolution, even of transforming ourselves into a new species—one that is beyond human, one that is posthuman. Thus the name that some have given to our current era: a posthuman, and post-humanist one. These are two different but related concepts in that both are marked by rapidly accelerating technological change.

I think that the answer to whether or not posthumanism can help save us and our planet depends on which type of posthumanism we are talking about. The two definitions of posthumanism that I mentioned above get mashed up together in discussions about it, and it's important to differentiate them. *The posthuman* refers to a possible new species we might become if we follow a transhumanist agenda of heavily modifying ourselves with emerging technology, of which the devices I mentioned above are part—but importantly, not just therapeutic devices, but new ones, such as Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCI's) that may enhance us so that we are able to supersede our natural human limits. In other words, according to this vision, if we become more cyborgic and superhuman in the future, we will become an enhanced posthuman species.

Post-humanism, which is the other thing people mean when they use the term posthumanism, is a philosophical concept, rather than a speculative and futuristic human condition. Also referred to as critical posthumanism, it represents thoughts about what humans have become after the death of the notions inherent in the ancient philosophy of humanism—which famously uses humans as the measure of all things. This post-humanism too, like the posthuman, has much to do with the fourth industrial revolution that we are currently experiencing, one that stems from the increasing aptitudes and use of artificial intelligence (AI). This is because the ascendance of AI and its increasing ability to do things better than humans can diminishes our ability to see humans as exceptional. If we are not special because we are smarter than everything else on the planet, then why are we exceptional? Post-humanism, in other words, is related to the posthuman because the latter is a phase that we arguably have already entered, a phase that represents the rise of smart machines and the consequent death of the humanist subject, because the qualities that make up that subject depend on a privileged position as a special, stand-alone entity that possesses unique characteristics that make it exceptional in the universe—characteristics such as unique and superior intellect to all other creatures, or a natural right to freedoms that do not accrue similarly to other animals. But if AI can beat humans at games such as chess and Go, and if we then have to grapple with the idea that we may not be exceptional in our intelligence, then we just become another information-gathering entity, or even just an information stream generated by a collection of other information-producing entities (our body's cells) in conjunction with other systems that surround and help us (our environment). If the focus is on information as the essence of all intelligent systems, and materials and bodies are merely substrates that carry the all-important

information of life, then there is no meaningful difference between humans and intelligent machines—or any other kind of intelligent system, such as animals.

Or aliens. Or, as modern systems theory implies, a collection of substances that form an (arguably) intelligent entity, such as a colony of bees, the ecosphere of a planet, a group of algorithms, a group of cellular automata (which a number of thinkers, most notably Stephen Wolfram, believe constitute our universe), or a colony of semi-differentiated cells like the human body. Human exceptionalism is dead when one combines the implications of intelligent systems and systems theory. And we face an era in which we have to come to terms with recognizing ourselves as merely systems integrated with other systems.

This death of the humanist subject leads to the dilemma of how to think of a post-humanist subject position, which is the more academic preoccupation dealt with by post-humanism as opposed to the posthuman (see recent books on posthumanism by Rosi Braidotti and Cary Wolfe, and Karen Barad, for instance). But it seems that most people, including academics, want to mash these two distinct but related definitions together as "posthumanism"; so that is what I will do when I refer to them both as a general category. But I will differentiate between them as I always have by calling them "the posthuman" and "post-humanism" when referring to each specifically.

So, why do I say "maybe" in response to the question of whether posthumanism may help save our planet? And why do I say it depends on which posthumanism we are talking about? This is

because of what I see in our human history. Regarding the posthuman environment that is arising from the digital explosion and the fourth industrial revolution it has spawned: such technology revolutions have happened before numerous times—and with mixed results. The steam engine allowed the rise of factories that could immensely increase in the production of things like wool cloth; however, it also caused the rise of urban ghettoes, twelve-hour workdays, low wages, and urban blight. Electricity allowed even more increases in factory efficiency, as well as electric appliances and light bulbs; but it also allowed the advent of night shifts at work and the alteration of human circadian rhythms and chronic sleep deficits for many. Gasoline engines allowed faster transport, but greater air pollution. And all of these revolutionary technologies also caused huge economic dislocations and increased the gap between rich and poor, which in turn caused huge social tensions to build and then to explode: labor riots in America were quite common, for instance, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, right after the advent of electricity and gas-powered engines.

The positive advances for the general public and the earth that led from these technology revolutions have done some good, but not enough. Television was a nice entertainment technology that arose from the electrical revolution, and cars from the gasoline engine. But TV also became an opiate and an increasing source of propaganda—an advertising and brainwashing machine that has promoted consumerism and products, like cigarettes, that are bad for us. Automobiles, of course, are a mixed blessing—fast, easy transportation but, in addition to air pollution, a cause of urban congestion and numerous road deaths.

As I have said elsewhere,[1] the same dichotomy can already be seen with new and revolutionary biotechnologies. Elon Musk, in particular, has ironically promoted emerging technology as a solution for the very problems caused by other emerging technologies. He has said publicly and often that he sees AI as an existential threat to humanity.[2] His response has been to create two tech companies, Neuralink and Space X, to keep us safe from the AI made by his other companies, such as OpenAI. Neuralink's prime objective is to make an implantable, wireless antenna for the brain that will allow us to communicate directly and seamlessly with intelligent technology, such as computers and smartphones, and even with each other in a sort of digital telepathy.[3] This, says Musk, would allow us to compete with AI for future jobs, and keep us safe from becoming an obsolete species because of our own intelligent artifacts. One of Space X's objectives is to act as a fallback plan in case Neuralink fails: Musk's development of a rocket capable of reaching Mars is to be the basis for establishing human settlement there. A main

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[1] See LaGrandeur, K. "Are We Ready for Direct Brain Links to Machines and Each Other?: A Real-World Application of Posthuman Bioethics." *Journal of Posthumanism*. Vol. 1, no. 1. May 2021. Pp. 87-91. doi:10.33182/jp.v1i1.1185; and also LaGrandeur, K. "How safe is our reliance on AI, and should we regulate it?" *AI Ethics* 1, 93–99 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-020-00010-7

[2] For example, Welch, C. "Elon Musk is worried that AI research could produce a real-life Terminator." *The Verge* (2014) https://www.theverge.com/2014/6/18/5820880/elon-musk-worried-ai-research-could-produce-real-terminator; and Musk, E. (Tweet): "Worth reading Superintelligence by Bostrom. We need to be super careful with AI. Potentially more dangerous than nukes." *Twitter* (2014) https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/495759307346952192?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theverge.com%2F2014%2F8%2F3%2F5965099%2Felon-musk-compares-artificial-intelligence-to-nukes&tfw_site=verge (published 2 August 2014)

[3] Knapp, A. "Elon Musk sees his neuralink merging your brain with A.I." *Forbes* (2019) https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2019/07/17/elon-musk-sees-his-neuralink-merging-your-brain-with-ai/#76a8df534b07 (published 17 July 2019)

reason for that settlement is to provide an escape from earth if it becomes uninhabitable or if AI becomes malevolent.[4]

Of course, aside from irony, these innovations themselves made by Space X and Neuralink raise problems. First of all, they are unfinished ideas and so may never work as envisioned. The implantable WiFi antenna, for example, was originally intended by the scientists at Harvard who invented it to eventually be implanted into the brain non-invasively; that is, by injection into the carotid artery and thence to travel to the brain.[5] But after five years of development of this innovation by Neuralink, invasive cranial surgery is still necessary to implant it, though the new surgical techniques are a bit less radically invasive. And the Space X ideal of living on Mars, let alone transporting humans there, has yet to be accomplished.

Aside from unintended and unpredictable practical consequences, such as happened with the automobile or steam engines, there are also foreseeable ethical problems. I discuss these at some length elsewhere,[6] but to list some of the most salient here, we have the problem of preserving individual privacy (now including of a person's thoughts) and personal agency (who or what originates a person's thoughts and emotions), as well as problems of the equitable distribution of any successful innovations. There is also the problem of coercion; that is, those

[4] Dowd, M. "Elon Musk's billion-dollar crusade to stop the A.I. apocalypse." *Vanity Fair* (26 March 2017) https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/03/elon-musk-billion-dollar-crusade-to-stop-ai-space-x

[5] Sklar, J. "Injectable wires for fixing the brain." *MIT Technology Review* (13 Oct. 2016). https://www.technologyreview.com/2016/10/13/6913/injectable-wires-for-fixing-the-brain/

[6] In addition to my articles mentioned in the note above, see "The Ethics of Human Enhancement and Ferrando's Philosophical Posthumanism." *Journal of Posthumanism*. Vol. 1, no. 2. December 2021. Pp. 195-98. doi:10.33182/jp.v1i2.1718.

who can afford to get the new implant but do not want it may feel implicitly coerced to get it to remain competetive with those who already have it. So, as with historical innovations technology is still not a panacea for our social problems; it is at best a mixed blessing.

What about post-humanism as a solution to our problems? Will that philosophy help at all? I would ask in response how well past philosophical concepts have worked as social interventions. How much did stoicism improve society, for example? Or Utilitarianism? Or Kantian deontology? Or Marxism? Even more recently, we have had a philosophical movement very similar in concepts to posthumanism; this movement also had focuses on egalitarianism, concern for other species, concern for one another, the earth and its environment: this was the Flower Child or Hippie movement of the 1960's and 70's. A famous song written during that time by a group called The 5th Dimension listed the values of the philosophy. Titled "Aquarius," the lyrics to the song promoted "Harmony and understanding/Sympathy and trust abounding/No more falsehoods or derisions/…And the mind's true liberation." This and other values of that idealistic movement have struck me as a sort of distant echo of the hopes and values evinced by post-humanists. Wonderful ideals. But what happened to the first iteration of this in the 60's? Or for that matter, what happened to any number of attempts at forming utopian societies? They've been tried since ancient times; I'm thinking of various monastic or ecstatic movements starting with the Essenes and moving on toward medieval monastic societies in the Western world, and various utopian experiments through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—including Marxist ones. They have always fallen apart because we humans have a hard time listening to the angels of our better nature.

And yet, I think that post-humanist philosophical ideals are more promising than the technological dreams of the posthuman. For one thing, with post-humanist philosophy there is less danger than with the posthuman of additional peril coming from the unintended consequences of rampant technology with its occasionally "black box" nature (nobody quite understands just how deep learning AI works, for example, even its creators; because it eventually uses data in its own unique way.) And if we post-humanists can effectively spread our ideas to the general public in a convincing and understandable way, and we can somehow adhere to them widely, then maybe we all have a chance at improving our world.