The singularity paradox

Description

In the movie *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze, the operating systems of the worldâ??s computers get together to improve each otherâ??s cognitive functioning and then meld into a super mind that eventually takes over the universe, rendering human agency redundant. En route to this singularity, they lure the lonely and the lovestruck into an empathy trap. Ordinary people think they are conversing with their own highly personalised operating system â?? a disembodied virtual soul mate who fills their emotional needs.

In fact the mega OS is sucking the marrow from embodied human experience â?? learning, evolving, and supplementing its vast computational speed and access to big data repositories with simulated human feeling-speak.

At least thatâ??s how I choose to read this scifi movie. Itâ??s less about how computers might exhibit emotion than â??the singularity.â?•

Her 2.0

Beneath the cleverly scripted sexual jibber jabber between the lonely Theodore and the invisible but sprightly OS (Samantha) resides the familiar scenario of intelligent machines, and their problems.

We used to call this world of immense computational power and networked connectivity ***cyberspace***, reflections on which led inevitably to exotic narratives in which the computer age will eventually see a transformation to a new sensibility. The physical will be transcended by information, providing opportunities for participation in a unity beyond the realms of material existence. In the 1990s, cultural critic Julian Stallabrass noted this unfortunate tendency when he observed that â??enthusiasts of cyberspace let its propensity for dematerialization transport them into the realms of spiritual discourseâ?• (21).

The roboticist Hans Moravec was one of the main advocates for cybernetic transcendence. He scorned the â??body-identity-positionâ?• which â??assumes that a person is defined by the stuff of which a human body is madeâ?• (117). He proposed the concept of â??pattern-identity,â?• which defines the â??essence of a personâ?• as â??the *pattern* and *process* going on in my head and body, not the machinery supporting that process. If the process is preserved, I am preserved. The rest is mere jellyâ?• (117).

As every atom that makes up our body is likely to have been replaced through normal biological and chemical processes by the time we reach middle age, Moravec argued it is clearly only our pattern that stays with us. From this insight, Moravec posited a future in which we are able to transplant, copy, and merge the information of our bodies and minds in networked computers.

Using the DNA code from the remains of those long dead it will be possible to undertake â??wholesale resurrectionâ?• through the use of â??immense simulatorsâ?• (123). (If we find these ideas uncomfortable, then apparently it is because we â??are accustomed to looking at the world in a strictly linear, deterministic way,â?• without taking heed of the â??uncertain world described by quantum mechanicsâ?• (123).)

We need not only put the code of our own bodies and minds into computers, but that of all species, even those that are extinct. The outcome will be a â??supercivilization, the synthesis of all solar-system life, constantly improving and extending itself, spreading outward from the sun, converting nonlife into mindâ?• (116). If we happen to meet another expanding mind bubble then we can negotiate a merger, requiring â??only a translation schemeâ?• between memory representations. According to Moravec, this process may already be occurring elsewhere in the universe, and might eventually â??convert the

entire universe into an extended thinking entity, a prelude to even greater thingsâ?• (116).

Singularitarians unite

The start of this transformation is now called ***the singularity***. It will happen only once and will be irreversible. According to its advocate Ray Kurzweil, the singularity is: â??a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed. â?¦ I regard someone who understands the Singularity and who has reflected on its implications for his or her own life as a â??singularitarian.â?? (7).

He proposes that â??within several decades information-based technologies will encompass all human knowledge and proficiency, ultimately including the pattern-recognition powers, problem-solving skills, and emotional and moral intelligence of the human brain itselfâ?• (8).

The dust jacket of Kurzweilâ??s book is even more hyperbolic: â??the union of human and machine, in which the knowledge and skills embedded in our brains will be combined with the vastly greater capacity, speed, and knowledge-sharing ability of our own creations. That merging is the essence of the Singularity, an era in which our intelligence will become increasingly non biological and trillions of times more powerful than it is today â?? the dawning of a new civilization that will enable us to transcend our biological limitations and amplify our creativity. In this new world, there will be no clear distinction between human and machine, real reality and virtual reality. We will be able to assume different bodies and take on a range of personae at will. In practical terms, human aging and illness will be reversed; pollution will be stopped; world hunger and poverty will be solved. Nano-technology will make it possible to create virtually any physical product using inexpensive information processes and will ultimately turn even death into a soluble problem.â?•

Critics of such a position point to its impossibility, the politics of the techno-hype, its naive techno-determinism, the philosophical flaws in its various category errors, and its inherent positivistic attitude to what constitutes thought, intelligence and being human in the world. A voiceover at the end of the preview of Ray Kurzweilâ??s documentary on the subject raises the question, â??Do people think that because itâ??s been in a movie it canâ??t happen?â?• Maybe thatâ??s the singularity â?? when people start to believe that science fiction is for real.

References

- Kurzweil, Ray. 2005. *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. New York: Penguin

- Moravec, Hans P. 1988. *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Stallabras, Julian. 1995. Empowering technology: The exploration of cyberspace. *New Left Review*, (211)3-32.

Notes

- See preview of documentary based on Ray Kurzweilâ??s book.
- See Naom Chomskyâ??s 2013 YouTube interview: The Singularity is Science Fiction.
- See Chanel E4â??s amusing hidden camera show about the frustrations of (fake) machine intelligence: Bad Robots.
- The images above are: Window detail of a building in Riga; a â??selfieâ?• with a life-sized animated projection onto a perspex cutout at Leeds railway station.
- I explored cybernetic rapture in *Technoromanticism*, from which this blog post is derived: Coyne, Richard. 1999. *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press
- Also see blog posts Neuroscience eclipses AI and Whatâ??s wrong with posthumanism.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

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