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(Sensitive) Consciousness and Time: Against the Transhumanist Utopia

Hegel and Leibniz

Two pan-logical projects tower above the history of modernity: the recombinant project of Leibniz and the teleological project of Hegel. In Leibniz's, the world is preordained as a computational program, while in Hegel's the order of the world is the final result of historical conflicts that pave the way for the realization of the Absolute Spirit.

But as Baudrillard writes in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: "Finalities have disappeared, models are generating us."[1]

So, at the end of modernity the historical project of Hegel has collapsed and now lies torn apart in the chaotic geo-scape of the postmodern century.

Simultaneously, at the intersection of biotechnology and artificial intelligence, a transhumanist utopia is emerging as a Leibnizian dream (or nightmare): the reduction of the human world to computation, the prescriptive potency of a recombinant computational god.

The transhumanist utopia feeds on the rotting of humanism, and on the current catastrophe of critical reason that Yuval Harari outlines as a dissociation of intelligence and consciousness.

As I know that the word "consciousness" is gravid with spiritualist and idealist abuse, I have decide to replace this word with "sensibility," in order to define the kind of mental activity that cannot be reduced to computation or biological determinism. In this sense, consciousness implies sensibility.

Chaos and the Automaton

Two actors on the stage of the imminent: artificial intelligence and natural dementia. When we speak of new technologies converging toward the implementation of the cognitive automaton, we should not forget that this process develops amidst spreading psychosis and identitarian obsession.

Inorganic intelligence, incorporated into social life through a network of techno-linguistic info-devices, is governed and applied by a demented social organism: artificial intelligence in the hands of the ferocious stupidity that prevails on the political stage.

The self-building automaton emerges in the context of global chaos, and in the process, sensibility is separated from intelligence. The sensitive organism does not comply with the computational perfection of the automaton.

Artificial intelligence and social dementia coalesce in the imminent scene.

Techno-Totalitarian Reich

The shame and disgust of being human (of having human bodies, and bodily minds) is the psycho-epistemic premise of transhumanist ideology.

Max de Esteban, *Twenty Red Lights,* 2008-2018. Pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

From Baudelaire to Huysmans to Bataille to Houellebecq, repugnance towards the sexual body (especially relevant in French literary culture) meets California techno-culture and gives birth to the transhumanist eternity of the frozen extra-bodily techno-brain.

Ray Kurzweil argues that the miniaturization of computers will result in nanobots that can enter and repair the human body. Human life could thereby be prolonged to the stage where it would become possible to download the human brain onto a computer, making humans immortal.

I do not know if this project (recalling Marvin Minsky and his idea that minds are simply what brains do) is technologically well-founded (I don't think so), but that's not my point here. My point is that this technological project is based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of "human."

Kurzweil writes:

The power (price-performance, speed, capacity, and bandwidth) of information technologies is growing exponentially at an even faster pace, now doubling about every year ... Human brain scanning is one of these exponentially improving technologies ... Nonbiological intelligence will be able to download skills and knowledge from other machines, eventually also from humans ... We will be able to reengineer all of the organs and systems in our biological bodies and brains to be vastly more capable ... Nanobots will have myriad roles within the human body, including reversing human aging (to the extent that this task will not already have been completed through biotechnology, such as genetic engineering).[2]

Following the Cartesian pathway, transhumanist thinkers take a dualistic approach to the mind–body problem, and assume that the human mind can exist, independently from the body, in a computer.

What is interesting in this dystopian utopia is not the technological anticipation (which may or may not be true), but the political and philosophical implications.

The transhuman vision is based on the reducibility of conscious life to artificial intelligence: this techno-determinism outlines the prospect of a techno-totalitarian empire that obviously reminds one of the German experiment in Übermensch civilization.

I want to abstain from any ethical or political scandal on this point: I do not consider Nazism the absolute evil, just a particular example of the cruelty of history. My only focus here is the philosophical coherence of the techno-determinist view, regardless of its ethico-political outcome.

In 1958, Günther Anders wrote:

We can expect that the horrors of the Reich to come will vastly eclipse the horrors of yesterday's Reich. Doubtless, when one day our children or grandchildren, proud of their perfect "co-mechanization," look down from the great heights of their thousand-year reich at yesterday's empire, at the so-called "third" Reich, it will seem to them merely a minor, provincial experiment; one which, in spite of its enormous effort to spread itself everywhere ("tomorrow the whole world," they said), and its cynical extermination of everything it could not use, was nevertheless unable to remain standing. And doubtless, they will see what happened there as simply a dress rehearsal for totalitarianism, adorned with a foolish ideology, into which world history had ventured prematurely ...

A new age began on August 6, 1945: the age in which we are able at any moment to transform any location, in fact the entire planet, into a Hiroshima. Ever since this day we have become *modo negativo* almighty. However, since we can now be exterminated at any moment, this also means that since this day we have become totally powerless. No matter how long it takes, even if it lasts an eternity, this age will be the last. This is because its *differentia spezifica* – the possibility of our self-extermination – can never end, unless it be through this end itself.[3]

It is time to fully understand the core of Anders's argument: Nazism should not be seen (only) as a traditionalist and reactionary movement, but also (and mostly) as a cult of functionality, the anticipation of the functional potency of the automaton.

The implementation of transhuman entities that can perform inhuman tasks without the participation of humans: this is the perfection of Nazism. The absolute priority of the functional, the rebuilding of the social world based on the principle of economic functionality. The world we are going to irreversibly inhabit.

The Inhuman and the Collapse of Euro-Centered Humanism

The new technologies of the XXI century may reverse the humanist revolution,

stripping humans of their authority, and empowering non-human algorithms instead.[4]

In "What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment?," Yuk Hui remarks that the thread linking humanism to the Enlightenment is "the full realization of a single global axis of time in which all historical times converge into the synchronizing metric of European modernity. It is the moment of disorientation – a loss of direction as well as of the Orient in relation to the Occident. The unhappy consciousness of fascism and xenophobia arises from this inability to orient: as a response, it offers an easy identity politics and an aestheticized politics of technology."[5]

The process of digital globalization has broken this synchronizing metric of European modernity and the cultural supremacy of West-centered Reason; we dwell in the aftermath of this cultural collapse.

Because of connective mutation, and because of the psychotic explosion of the unconscious of the media-enhanced social mind, the anthropological dimension that the modern age identified as "human" is dissolving.

The crucial effect of this mutation is the dissociation of consciousness (sensibility) and intelligence in the cognitive activity of the social brain.

Decoupling, Divergence

In economics and war, intelligence is mandatory: if you want to survive, if you want to beat the competition, you need to be more intelligent than your competitor. Consciousness is superfluous, and even detrimental in many cases. The less intelligence is limited and slowed by sensibility, the more it can pursue automatic goals. The more intelligence is free from the limitations and ambiguity of sensibility, the more an intelligent organism will be effective in the struggle for survival and supremacy.

The transhumanist project is based on the premise that technology is going to enable a perfect simulation of intelligent life. The tacit implication of this project, however, is that intelligent life can be decoupled from sensibility, because from the point of view of the evolutionary economy, sensibility is an unnecessary residual quality, a factor of slowness and inexactness.

The history of social civilization in the last two centuries may be read as an attempt to escape the inflexible law of the survival of the

fittest. Social solidarity has been the attempt to transform the world into an anti-natural place of no competition. The autonomy of politics and ethics from the natural law of evolution was based on the conscious limiting of the power of intelligence. When intelligence is not restrained by sensibility, it deploys as brutal force.

The ontological autonomy of human knowledge and human action is the core of the humanist breakthrough. Simultaneously, however, modernity has asserted the economic criterion of evaluation, and has reduced knowledge to the economic principle of competition for survival: effectiveness as power.

Modernity, in fact, is the sphere of permanent conflict between the Christian principle of compassion and the Darwinist principle of survival of the fittest.

If we wonder who the fittest is, the answer is unequivocal: the fittest is the organism that deploys the strength of intelligence without the limitations of sensibility.

The social meaning of democracy results in an attempt to shelter human life from the laws of Darwin: this attempt has been successful up to a certain point, as long as intelligence and sensibility were combined. This convergence reached its high point in May 1968, then it broke

down, and sensibility started to diverge from intelligence.

As democracy has submitted to financial capitalism, and solidarity has been overwhelmed by competition, social civilization has been dismantled and the law of competition has taken the upper hand in the daily business of life.

So, the subjection of technology to capitalist competition has paradoxically paved the way for the comeback of Nature: the principle of natural selection. The philosophical core of Darwinist science has broken the restraints and shelters built by the autonomy of ethico-political action – restraints that constituted the legacy of humanism.

Nature is back, and technology has been the instrument for its triumph.

Ex-Perience, Duration, and Death

In the past there were many things that only humans could do. But now robots and computers are catching up and may soon outperform humans in most tasks … Humans are in danger of losing their economic value, because intelligence is decoupling from sensibility.

Until today high intelligence always went hand in hand with a developed consciousness. Only conscious beings could perform tasks that requested a lot of intelligence, such as playing chess, driving cars, diagnosing diseases or identifying terrorists.[6]

At this point we need to define the meaning of the words "intelligence" and "consciousness."

My definitions are the following: intelligence is the ability to make decisions about decidable alternatives. Consciousness is the ability to decide about undecidable alternatives. Intelligence implies computation and combination, while consciousness implies sensibility (aesthetic and erotic) and ethical judgment.

Nevertheless, I feel that this answer is too succinct, and I need to go deeper. I need to develop the implications of the concept of intelligence starting from Leibnizian computational ontology, starting from the conceptual distinction between the discrete and the continuous in the transmission of information, and in the evolution of life.

By the term "discrete" (in opposition to

"continuum") we refer to individual entities that can be reduced to finite information. By the term "continuum," on the other hand, we refer to the flow of experience that cannot be reduced to information. The flow of experience is essentially the self-perception of the becoming-other of the sensitive organism. Sensibility detects the infinite variations of becoming in time, as it is based on the self-perception of an organism whose existence is in time. The etymology of the word "experience" implies death: *ex-perire.* Therefore, the conscious organism perceives reality as becoming-other against the background of the destiny of expiration of the conscious and sensitive organism.

Modern philosophy, since Descartes, has based the self on the *cogito*, so certainty is based on intellection.

This Cartesian reduction of the self to the intellectual ability of the mind has blurred the border between intelligence and consciousness.

Reason is a projection of measure, a reduction of the world to what is measurable in discrete terms. This reduction of the self to reason as the ability to measure lies at the origin of the late-modern catastrophe (Adorno and Horkheimer recognized this point in the preface to the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*).

Descartes finds proof for the existence of the "self" in the unquestionable existence of thought, but it is more useful and more comprehensive to find the foundation of the self in sensibility: I feel therefore I am.

But self-perception has no logical meaning, nor is it measurable or reducible to discrete minimal units. There is no measurement for self-perception, as self-perception happens in the sphere of the infinitely divisible, that is, in the sphere of the continuum.

Existence does not correspond to reason. Only sensibility allows for an integration of intellection and judgment (ethical judgment, and in the end, aesthetic judgment).

Time and Temporality
Assuming the infinite divisibility of physical matter, Leibniz is aware of the duplicity of matter in time. It is simultaneously "actual discrete divided infinitely," and also a continuum of experience.[7]

The continuity of experience is the perception of the continuum, a flow that deploys through time – or rather emanates through time as duration. The continuity of an aggregate of extensive discrete states is intensive. This is consciousness as sensibility – the intensive elaboration of the extended world. Extended realities draw their perceptual consistency and their experiential continuity from the intensive vibration of becoming in time.

This means that death, the ultimate destination of time, is the source of the intensity.

As Carlo Rovelli writes, "Quantum theory does not describe things as they evolve in time, but it describes how things are evolving in mutual relation."[8]

Since the time of Zeno and the tortoise, the problem of the infinite divisibility of matter (and of time) has been crucial. To define the relation between intelligence and consciousness, let's say that intelligence is the ability to acknowledge an aggregate as a combination of discrete units (i.e., the ability to compute a temporal extension in terms of discrete units of conventional time).

Consciousness as sensibility, on the other hand, is the ability to experience the continuous quality of matter, and of temporality.

In *Durée et Simultanéité,* Henri Bergson writes:

> We cannot speak of reality as duration without introducing consciousness … The mathematical person will not take notice of it, because rightly she is interested in the measure of things, not in their nature … Duration is essentially the protraction of something that exists no more into something that does exist.[9]

Mental activity is indissociable from the perception of time, from the subconscious awareness of body–mind decomposition: the subconscious of death, inasmuch as death means becoming other to the conscious sensitive organism. Therefore, we can define consciousness as the cognitive implication of death.

Bergson distinguishes computational time, objectified in clocks and the economic value of goods, from lived temporality (*temps vécu*), a duration that is not reducible to computation.

Computational time is the subject of mathematics and economics, but society lives in the incomputable time of death as destination (not as destiny). Ethics and aesthetics are suited to think this incomputable time. But ethical and aesthetic judgments have little to do with intelligence, and nothing to do with certainty and truth.

Transhumanism is an ideology that mistakes computation for existence, and therefore is a philosophical deception. It is the other face of the inhuman dementia that grows in the shadow of the forced computabilization of the incomputable.

Here we should start to reflect on extinction, on death as the condition for the perception of time, and on consciousness as the vibrational situatedness of the self.

Rovelli:

> Fear of death seems to me as an error of evolution: many animals have an instinctive faculty of terror and escape if a predator approaches. It's a healthy reaction, as it allows them to avoid danger. But selection has generated hairless apes with hypertrophic frontal lobes who have an excessive ability to predict the future. This is a helpful privilege, but the risk is that we permanently see the inevitability of death, thus igniting persistent terror and a need to escape.
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> Hence I think that the fear of death is an accidental and silly disturbance that blends together two independent evolutionary pressures: a product of bad automatic connections in our brain. Everything has a limited time of existence. Including the human race.[10]

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1
Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993), 9.

2
Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (Viking Books, 2005), 25, 28.

3
Günther Anders, *Die Atomare Drohung: Radikale Überlegungen zum atomaren Zeitalter* (Taschenbuch 2003), 93.

4
Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus* (Penguin Random House, 2015), 397.

5
Yuk Hui, "What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment?," *e-flux journal* no. 96 (January 2019) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/96/245507/what-begins-after-the-end-of-the-enlightenment/.

6
Harari, *Homo Deus*, 361.

7
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, letter to Burchard de Volder, referenced in Stefano Mugnai, *Introduzione alla filosofia di Leibniz (*Einaudi, 2001), 114, my translation.

8
Carlo Rovelli, *L'ordine del tempo* (Adelphi, 2017), my translation.

9
Henri Bergson, *Durée et Simultaneité* (Presse Universitaire de France, 1922), 48.

10
Rovelli, *L'ordine del tempo*, my translation*.