

Word Alive 2022 - UCCF Science Network

Session 4 - What's next for humanity?

There are several related but competing visions for the future of humanity which are becoming prominent. All represent repeated themes in science fiction narratives over the last 100+ years.

1. Human enhancement leading to ever greater sensory, cognitive, emotional, and physical abilities. The creation of a physical but almost eternal super-human life-form.
2. A progressive blending and merging of biological human beings with digital technology – the creation of ‘cyborgs’.
3. Uploading of our cognitive ‘software’ so that it can be re-instantiated in another form - either material or non-material.
4. The creation of entirely artificial intelligences which will become ‘superintelligent’ and ultimately replace physical humans as non-biological intelligent life, spreading across the cosmos. We are the biological ‘boot program’ which leads to the ultimate goal of evolution – intelligent self-replicating and self-enhancing artificial life.

There is a strange and continuing ‘feedback loop’ between science fiction and advancing real-world technology. Hence reading and studying science fiction has become an important Christian task!

AI and robotics are changing our understanding of what it means to be human.

The machines are becoming more human, and the humans are increasingly becoming like machines.

“We are not just robots. We’re robots, made of robots, made of robots.... In this digital age of supercomputers and smart phones, surely it isn’t difficult to imagine how a machine made up of a trillion moving parts might just be capable of being human.” Daniel Dennett

“When asked for my thoughts about machines that think, I can't help but reply: Hey, those are my friends you're talking about. We are all machines that think, and the distinction between different types of machines is eroding.” Sean Carroll

“The conventional wisdom among AI researchers is that intelligence is ultimately about information and computation, not about flesh, blood or carbon atoms. This means that there’s no fundamental reason why machines can’t one day be at least as intelligent as us.” Max Tegmark

There appears to be no physical limit to the potential processing power of intelligent machines. If you adopt a strictly physicalist understanding of the human brain, then by definition there is a finite possibility that some time in the future a malevolent superintelligence will be created. So superintelligent AI comes to be seen as an ‘existential threat’ to the future of humankind.

“By any definition of thinking, the amount done by organic, human-type brains will be swamped by the cerebrations of AI.....Abstract thinking by biological brains has underpinned the emergence of all culture and science. But this activity—spanning tens of millennia at most—will be a brief precursor to the more powerful intellects of the inorganic, posthuman era.” Martin Rees

Human enhancement

The idea of using technology to enhance the human body and brain to achieve supra-human capabilities is an idea whose time has arrived. We live in an age of **techno-optimism** in which there is boundless confidence in the possibilities of using advanced technology to overcome any problem – including the limitations of our own humanity.

The concept of never-ending progress towards a better world is a secular distortion of the Christian understanding of the drama of history. But the fundamental force behind progress changes from the river of God's providential purposes, to individual creative human choices. Together we are building the future.

What are the social forces lying behind the drive for human enhancement?

Consumerism - *"I want a better body, better experiences, longer life"*

Moral Relativism – *"What's wrong with enhancing myself or my children?"*

Techno-optimism – *"We can make your dreams come true, but it will cost you...."*

There is an increasing sense of dissatisfaction at the limitations of our human bodies and minds. Why do we have to accept such pathetic, limited existences? There must be more to being human than this?

"He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, **he has put eternity into man's heart**, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Ecclesiastes 3:11

'Low-tech transhumanism'

Cosmetic surgery

Mood and cognition enhancing drugs

Gender fluidity and transitioning

Drug and genetic doping for sports

Anti-ageing therapies

Immersive virtual reality

Christian responses

Are human beings merely biological computers made out of meat instead of silicon?

We must not confuse the difference between a useful *metaphor* and a fundamental *description*. There are many aspects of the human brain which are machine-like, but it is both false and incoherent to say that the brain *is* a machine.

Processing power is not the same as personhood. We are not merely biological machines, we are unique persons who are created to reflect the divine Persons of the Trinity. Personhood is a gift from God, not merely a reflection of information processing. We must hold to and defend the unique status of human beings and resist any blurring or confusion of our humanity with the machines that we have created.

To accord god-like properties to a machine that we have made is a modern version of idolatry, and it is folly.

Christian hope for the future of our humanity

Transformation of every aspect of humanity including the physical human body.

See 1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-49, 53-55

Transformation of human knowledge, awareness and consciousness.

"...When the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.....Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to

face. Now I know in part: then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." **1 Corinthians 13: 8-13**

The ultimate defeat of death, pain and suffering

"Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" **Revelation 21: 3-4**

Transformation of society and human relationships

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." **Ephesians 5: 31, 32**

Sharing in the divine glory

"When he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." **1 John 3:2**

"He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature..." **2 Peter 1:4**

"Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified..." **Romans 8:30**

Cosmic scale

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.... Behold I am making all things new." **Revelation 21: 1, 2, 5**

The centrality of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus

The historic Christian faith makes the claim that Jesus was raised from death as a recognisable, touchable human being. In this way **God has said the final Yes to the original model human person**. He has said that this kind of embodied physical humanity is fit to be transformed, it will become renewed and glorified.

Some preliminary responses

1. Critical vigilance – we need to try to understand the signs of the times. "Watch and pray..."

We need Christian technologists and scholars who will practice 'double listening'.

2. The need for discernment: the parable of the wheat and weeds – good and evil inextricably intermingled. (Matthew 13:24-30)

3. "Don't be afraid". However extraordinary are the challenges of following Christ into the second half of the 21st Century, we can be confident that God's sovereign purposes are being worked out in history and we are called to be bit-players in the great drama which will end ultimately in the destruction of all evil, counterfeits and deceptions, and in the triumph of the Lamb.

Technology is not simply 'neutral', because it represents a source of power and mastery over nature and human nature. In a fallen world there is therefore a continual risk of technology becoming twisted towards power, control, and manipulation of the powerless. However technology can be redeemed and used for God's purposes and intentions, and perhaps it will become part of the 'glory and honour of the nations' that will be brought into the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:26).

Further reading

The Robot will see you now: artificial intelligence and Christian faith, eds John Wyatt and Stephen Williams, SPCK

Transhumanism and the image of God, Jacob Shatzer, IVP

Transhumanism and Transcendence, ed Ronald Cole-Turner, Georgetown University Press

Modern technology and the human future, Craig Gay, IVP

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More resources at ***johnwyatt.com***