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A Cyborgic Christianity: Transhumanism and the Tacit Dimension

"Anyone who carefully pays attention to the arc of Western cultural thought and practice since the rise of modernity will discern a progressively intensifying and spreading pursuit of abstractions as the most trusted means of representing the realities of nature and accessing their truths. Modern science's rise out of the so called pre-modern age of faith was significantly propelled by epic acts of abstraction from the meaning-laden and quality-saturated medieval cosmos. By bidding farewell to the cozy and reassuring medieval cosmos and embracing the cold and abstract world picture of an infinite universe, rife with inert atoms in mechanical motion, the West acquired unprecedented capacities of explanation, prediction, and control of the vicissitudes of matter's ceaseless permutations. The increases in our power to intellectually grasp and materially control nature eventually brought with it stupendous gains in human standards of living for a good portion of Earth's growing population. Yet, in recent decades, it has dawned on many that these improvements in material standards of living came with an unanticipated price: viz a rather steep and almost unbearable reduction of the existential meaningfulness of life."

"I am more than ready to recognize the advances in knowledge that would not otherwise have been possible without this kind of idealization of phenomena. I do, however, think that formatting phenomena as abstract information patterns becomes tremendously problematic when it impoverishes our grasp of embodied personal realities and renders us incapable of taking our own personal agency seriously. These are impoverishments that are harder and harder to avoid as digital mediations have become normalized in our personal and social lives. When abstractive informational idealizations are no longer seen as useful socially constructed heuristic devices but instead are pitched as the deeper realities underlying the personal and social epiphenomena of our human lifeworld, we have become victims of a colonizing ideology that ontologizes abstractions by privileging information above everything else. We must not read the abstractions required by our most successful scientific methodologies into our metaphysics."

"Despite the repeated disavowal of religion by many of its devotees, the ultimate aim of transhumanism is nothing short of delivering on the promises of religion: eliminating aging, illnesses, unchosen and unsatisfied desires, and even death itself. Transhumanists are acutely aware of the limitations imposed by the biological underpinning of our cognitive, emotional, perceptual, and social capacities. However, they believe our technological ingenuity has brought us to the place where we can now begin to break the evolutionary chain linking us to the ancient and ad hoc meanderings of the blind watchmaker that have shackled us to these dubious biological legacies. Transhumanists are convinced that we have matured out of our evolutionary adolescence such that we are now poised finally to take control of our own evolution through our recently acquired technological prowess."

"Moreover, falling in line with the religious tradition in dualistic thought and more recent scientific thought, transhumanism has been infected with a fleshly dis-ease. They clearly betray contempt for the biological body, viewing it (at best) as a temporary and expendable prosthesis, something it is better to be delivered from than to inhabit. For most transhumanists, human flesh is of little concern or use, teeming as it does with corrupted (DNA) codes that get transmitted across generations with "a lethal genetic disease [known as ageing] and other nasty Darwinian legacies. Transhumanists are embarrassed by the painfully slow electro-chemical and neuronal information transmissions taking place within their bodies as compared to near speed of light information transfers within their computers. They are vexed by the small bandwidth of information uptake performed by their miserly five bodily senses. Transhumanists want nothing to do with the corporeal vulnerabilities and inevitabilities of either natality or mortality. Instead of exploring the endless possibilities enabled by human flesh, they tend to be fixated on dreams of radical autonomy and extreme informational purification via relinquishing their bodies and uploading their software subjectivities into supercomputer's databases."

"Polanyi's fundamental claim that there are "bodily roots [to] all thought" (Polanyi, 1983, p. 15; Grene, 1969, p. 147) calls into question the central cognitivist commitment upon which transhumanist fantasies rest, namely, the view that our minds are transferable algorithms and information processing patterns that are capable of multiple realization across any number of platforms/substrates. In Polanyi's view, one's body occupies an absolutely and irreducibly unique place in one's world and plays an utterly essential and entirely inexpugnable role in the rise of mentality and its subsequent expansion. To better appreciate the absolute centrality of the body in Polanyi's account of human mindfulness, we need to take a look at subsidiary and focal awarenesses and the roles he identifies them playing in the human way of being in the world. We will see that the body that modernity's obsession with abstractions effectively left behind, Polanyi brings back into the picture of the human mind."

"On the one hand, the body's self effacing "tacit" motivates the initial plausibility of transhumanism's discarnate computational/informatic metaphysics of bodiless minds. Yet, on the other hand, the body's self effacing "tacit" also undermines transhumanism's quest to isolate in full formal "explicit", the subsidiary underpinnings through which human minds come to expression in the world. To capture these subsidiary underpinnings and prepare them for upload, transfer, and re-instantiation in silico (i.e., in a more efficient, durable and non-biodegradable computational substrate), they would have to be first identified, isolated, and finally abstractly represented as explicit data-structures in

order to be amenable to computational subsumption, processing, and transference. But this is impossible if Polanyi is correct, because the subsidiary-focal "from-to" structure through which our bodies give presence to our minds will be missing, due to the digital formatting constraints of any computational substrate to which the explicit data might be transferred. Hence, the tacit dimension just does not compute."

"Evangelical Christian opposition arises largely from their seeing transhumanism as guilty of an extreme form of "playing God" a charge to which Craig Venter responds "who said anything about playing?". What might be perceived as the more progressive Christian responses recognize that "playing God" is just part of our high calling to be sub-creators or even created co-creators with God, yet, nonetheless, even this more progressive Christians find fault with transhumanism owing to its demeaning of the created material order: its neo-gnostic flight from incarnation. Although I see no hope of comradery between Christianity and bio-relinquishing transhumanism, a partnership with cyborgic-transhumanism seems plausible to me."

"After all, it does not seek to exit human nature altogether, but seeks Homo sapiens enhancement and life-extension through improvements to, not replacements of, our flesh. Moreover, in light of the fact that Homo sapiens has had a 200,000+ year evolutionary romance with artifacts and tools, we can hardly deny that our current way of being-in-the-world has come about, at least in part, as the result of a primordial coupling of flesh and tools. We are, as Andy Clark likes to say, "natural born cyborgs" (2003). Our behaviors, thought, reason, and way of being sapient in the world emerged from eons of looping interactions between material brains, material bodies, material tools, and the cultural and technological environments they created. Thus, our bodies' form and functionalities bear the indelible impress of the techno-mediations of our deep past, which also means (if Polanyi is correct) that our embodied minds and their concepts bear the birthmarks of those tools and technologies that helped evolve Homos into our present sapience."