

Transhumanism and the Metaverse

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1. The Gospel of Progress

Ever since the archaic divergence of humanity from other hominids, our systems of tools and symbols have developed at an accelerating pace. We depend less and less on the physical capacities of our bodies. We operate more and more in the realm of information: data, words, numbers, and bits.

Quite naturally then, we have conceived an idea of progress that celebrates this development, and a destiny narrative that foresees its endless continuation. Its future is one where we integrate technology ever more fully into our bodies, until we become something more than just bodies. It is one where we immerse ourselves so fully in representation, that virtual reality becomes more compelling to us than material reality. The first is called transhumanism, the second is the Metaverse.

Here is a typical example of this vision, courtesy of [The Guardian](#):

Ageing cured. Death conquered. Work ended. The human brain reverse-engineered by AI. Babies born outside of the womb. Virtual children, non-human partners. The future of humanity could be virtually unrecognisable by the end of the 21st century

The title of the article is “Beyond our ‘ape-brained meat sacks’: can transhumanism save our species?” In it one can see a kind of anti-materialism, an ambition to transcend our biology, to transcend our very selves which are, the article suggests, little more than sacks of meat with a brain inside. We are destined for more, better. This anti-materialist prejudice also shows up in the aspiration to end work—to end the requirement that we use our physical bodies to move matter—as well as in the ultimate ambition, to triumph over death itself. We will have then indeed transcended biology, with its cycles, We will have transcended matter, with its impermanence.

That goal has always been implicit in the ideology known as progress. It equates the advancement of the human species with improvements in our ability to control nature and make its functions our own. When we replace the shovel with the bulldozer, that’s progress. It aspires to a Godlike estate of lordship over nature. Descartes, arguably the most important preceptor of modernity, put it famously in his declaration of human destiny: to become through science and technology the “lords and possessors of nature.” The passage following it prefigures the ambitions of The Guardian article quoted above. Descartes says,

And this is a result to be desired, not only in order to the invention of an infinity of arts, by which we might be enabled to enjoy without any trouble the fruits of the earth, and all its comforts, but also and especially for the preservation of health... and that we could free ourselves from an infinity of maladies of body as well as of mind, and perhaps also even from the debility of age...

Transhumanism is nothing new. It continues a prehistoric trend toward increasing dependency on, and integration with, technology. When we became dependent on fire, our jaw muscles shrank and our digestive enzymes changed. The subsequent

development, hundreds of thousands of years later, of representational language transformed our very brains. The material technologies of domestication, pottery, metallurgy, and finally industry created a society wholly dependent on them. Visions of silicon-brain hybrids operating digital control centers, served physically in all respects by robots, living wholly in an artificial reality, represent merely the culmination of a trend, not any change in direction. Already and for a long time, humans have to some degree lived in a virtual reality—the reality of their concepts, stories, and labels. The Metaverse immerses us in it still further.

Since transhumanism represents progress, it is no wonder that progressives tend to support it. A key tenet of progressivism is to bring the benefits of progress to all, to distribute them more fairly and universally. Progressivism does not question its own foundations. Development is its religion. That is why the Gates Foundation devotes so much of its resources to bringing industrial agriculture, vaccines, and computers to the Third World. That's progress. It is also progress to move life online (work, meetings, entertainment, education, dating, etc.) Perhaps that's why Covid lockdown policies met so little resistance from progressives. By the same token, ready acceptance of vaccines makes sense if they too represent progress: the integration of technology into the body, the engineering of the immune system to improve upon nature.

What leftists seem not to notice is that these versions of progress also enable the encroachment of capitalism into more and more intimate territories. Do you think the immersive AR/VR experience of the Metaverse will be free of advertising, perhaps so subtly targeted as to be invisible? The closer our integration with technology in all aspects of life, the more life can become a consumer product.

Again this is nothing new. The Marxian crisis of capital (falling profit margins, falling real wages, evaporation of

the middle class, proletarian immiseration—sound familiar?) has been forestalled only by the constant expansion of market economies through two main vehicles: colonialism and technology. Technology opens up new, high-profit domains of economic activity to keep capitalism running. It allows more of nature and human relationship to be converted into money. When we depend on technology for such things as clean drinking water, resistance to a disease, or interacting socially, then these things swell the realm of monetized goods and services. The economy grows, return on financial investment stays above zero, and capitalism continues to operate. My dear leftists—if ye indeed remain leftists (and not authoritarian corporatists; that is to say, crypto-fascists)—can you please reevaluate your political alliance with the ideology of progress and development?

The promoters of the transhumanist Metaverse describe it as not only good, but inevitable. It may seem so, given that it is an extension of an age-old trend. I hope though that by making its underlying myths and assumptions visible, we can exercise a conscious choice in embracing or refusing it. We need not continue down this road. Other paths fork out in front of us. Maybe they aren't as well lit or obvious as the eight-lane superhighway toward transhumanist technotopia, but they are available. A portion of humanity at least can choose to depart this particular axis of development and turn toward another kind of progress, another kind of technology.

2. Flavors Spoil the Palate

Colors blind people's eyes; sounds deafen their ears; flavors spoil their palates.

— the Tao Te Ching

Years ago I took my son Philip with his friend to see a movie. We put on 3D glasses and were treated to all kinds of objects seemingly bursting out of the screen. “Wouldn't it be awesome if the real world were 3D, just like the movies?” I jokingly

asked.

The boys thought I was serious. “Yeah!” they said. I was unable to explain my irony. On-screen reality was so vivid, stimulating, and intense that it made the real world seem boring by comparison. (Read full story [here](#).)

Well, it seems my 11-year-old was in good company. Consider these words from Julia Goldin, LEGO’s chief product & marketing officer:

To us, the priority is to help create a world in which we can give kids all the benefits of the metaverse – one with immersive experiences, creativity and self-expression at its core – in a way that is also safe, protects their rights and promotes their well-being.

Wowee, an “immersive experience.” Sounds great, doesn’t it? But hold on here—aren’t we already in an immersive experience called 3D reality? Why are we trying to recreate what we already have?

The idea, of course, is that the artificial reality we create will be better than the original: more interesting, less limited, yet also safer. But can the simulation of reality ever match the original? That ambition rests on the further assumption that we can convert all experience into data. It draws on the computational model of the brain. It assumes everything is quantifiable—that quality is an illusion, that anything real can be measured. The recent to-do about the Google employee, Blake Lemoine, who leaked transcripts of conversations he had with an AI chatbot who asserts its own sentience taps into the computational theory of the brain and consciousness. If even consciousness arises from the disposition of zeros and ones, then what is it for something to be real?



Vespertina. by Greg Spalenka.

Neural net AIs seem to us to be modeled after the brain, but it may be more the reverse: we impose the neural net model onto the brain.¹ Certainly the brain has superficial similarities to an artificial neural network, but there are also profound differences that our computationalist prejudices ignore. A catalog of neural states is much less than a full brain state, which would also include all kinds of hormones, peptides, and other chemicals, all of which relate to the state of the entire body and all its organs. Cognition and consciousness do not happen in the brain alone. We are beings of the flesh.

It is not my purpose here to offer a detailed critique of computationalism. My point is to show how readily we accept it, and therefore believe that one could engineer any subjective experience by manipulating the appropriate neurons.

Even if it cannot equal reality, the simulation is usually a lot louder, brighter, and faster. When we enter the intense “immersive experience” of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and extended reality (XR), we become conditioned

to its intensity, and suffer withdrawal when limited to the (usually) slow predictability of the material world. Conversely, it is the stripping of intensity from real world experience from within our safe, climate-controlled, insulated bubbles that makes AR/VR/XR attractive in the first place. Something else that happens with our habituation to intense stimuli is that we lose the capacity to exercise other senses and other modes of sensing. Orienting more and more toward that which shouts the loudest, we no longer tune into quieter voices. Accustomed to garish colors, we no longer perceive subtle hues.

Fortunately, all that is lost may be recovered. Even standing silently in the woods for half an hour, the slow and the quiet come back into my reality. Hidden beings show themselves. Subtle thoughts and secret feelings rise to the surface. I can see beyond the obvious. What lies beneath the loud rumbles and roars of today's ubiquitous engines? What unmeasurable and unnamable things lie betwixt the numbers and labels of modern science? What colors do we miss when we call the snow white and the crow black? What lies between and outside the data? Will our attempts to simulate reality leave out the things we already do not see, and thereby amplify our current deficiencies and biases? I foresee a danger: that in building a transhumanist Metaverse we will construct not a paradise but a hell. We will incarcerate ourselves in a controlled and bounded finitude, deluding ourselves that, if we pile up enough of them, our bits and bytes, our zeroes and ones, will someday add up to infinity.

3. Chasing a Mirage

Transhumanism is anti-natural, in that it does not recognize an innate intelligence in nature, the body, or the cosmos, but seeks rather to impose human intelligence onto a world it believes has none. Everything can be improved through human design (and ultimately, human-created AI design). Yet, confusingly, many transhumanists deploy ecological arguments

in their futuristic visions. We will reduce our numbers and absent ourselves from nature, leaving the planet to rewild itself as we retreat into bubble cities and the Metaverse, subsisting off robotified vertical farms, precision fermentation factories, animal cell culture meat, and artificial milk ("Mylk").

Some conspiracy theorists point out that some prominent advocates of transhumanist technologies also advocate eugenics or population control policies. The connection is quite logical and needn't imply monstrous evil. If robots and AI can replace human labor in more and more domains, then we need fewer and fewer humans. This, they believe, will have the added benefit of lessening the burden of humanity on the planet. The same engineering mindset that "improves" the body and brain translates naturally into optimizing society, the genome, and the earth.

That humanity is fundamentally a burden on the planet is an assumption partaking of the same exceptionalism that motivates the transcendent ambition to begin with. Perhaps if we conceived human destiny differently, we would not be such a burden. If our ambition were not to transcend matter and the flesh, but rather to participate in the endless unfolding of more and more life and beauty on earth, we would be like other species: integral parts of an evolving wholeness.

Transhumanism holds a different ideal. As we bring tighter and more precise control to the human realm, we separate off from the natural. Transhumanism is an expression of the much older idea of transcendentalism, which holds human destiny to lie in the transcendence of the material realm. The Metaverse is the modern version of Heaven, a spiritual domain. It is a realm of pure mind, of pure symbol, of complete freedom from natural limits. In the Metaverse, no fundamental limit pertains to how much virtual land you can own, how many virtual outfits your avatar can wear, or how much virtual money you can have. Whatever limits exist are artificial, imposed by the software

engineers to make the game interesting—and profitable. Today there is quite a market for virtual real estate in the Metaverse, but its scarcity, and therefore its value, is completely artificial. Yet that artificial value is substantial. Bloomberg [estimates](#) that annual revenues from the Metaverse will be \$800 billion by 2024. Already, [according](#) to Vogue magazine ([paywall](#)), the online game Fortnite sells over \$3 billion in virtual cosmetics annually, ranking it among the worlds largest fashion companies.

I wonder what the parents of the world's 200 million stunted and wasted children think about that.

That last comment points to the dirty secret beneath all of humanity's transcendentalist striving. Always, it visits great harm upon those it renders invisible. When one enters the Metaverse, it seems like a reality unto itself. Its material substrate is nearly invisible; therefore, one easily believes that it has no impact on the material world outside its precincts. The more immersive it becomes, the more one might forget that anything exists outside it.

The same thing can happen any time we immerse ourselves in symbols and abstractions and forget their material substrate. So it is that economists, hypnotized by economic growth numbers, do not see the dislocation, misery, and ecological ruin that accompanies them. So it is that climate policymakers entranced by carbon math, do not see the devastation caused by lithium and cobalt mines. So it is that epidemiologists, obsessed with case fatality rates, seldom consider realities of hunger, loneliness, and depression that fall outside their metrics.

It has long been thus with any reality we create for ourselves—we forget what lies outside it. We even forget that anything lies outside it. So it was in the metropolises of the 20th century. Immersed in urban life, it was easy to

forget anything else existed or was relevant, and easy to ignore the social and ecological harm entailed in maintaining them. The pattern repeats on every scale. Enter the world of the super-rich, and again it exerts the same logic. The cost to the material and social world that maintains it is hard to see from inside the mansions and yachts where everything looks so beautiful.

Let us indulge in some metaphysical logic. Well-being is impossible in separation, because being is fundamentally relational. Separating reality into two realms, both become sick—the human as well as the natural.

That is why I believe that the technological program, in its new extreme of transhumanism and the Metaverse, will forever chase a mirage. The mirage is Utopia, a perfect society in which suffering has been engineered out of existence and life gets more and more awesome every day. Just look at the technological program's track record. We have made enormous strides in our ability to control matter and manage society. We can alter genes and brain chemistry—shouldn't we have conquered depression by now? We can surveil nearly every human being at all times—shouldn't we have eliminated crime by now? Economic productivity per capita has increased 20-fold in half a century—shouldn't we have eliminated poverty by now? We have not. Arguably, we haven't made any progress at all. The technocratic explanation is that we haven't finished the job, that when our control is total, when the Internet of Things links every object into one data set, when every physiological marker is under real-time monitoring and control, when every transaction and movement is under surveillance, then there will be no more room in reality for anything we do not want. All will be under control. This would be the fulfillment of the program of domestication that began tens of thousands of years ago. The entire material world will have been domesticated. We will have finally arrived at the oasis on the desert horizon. We will have finally reached the pot of gold

at the end of the rainbow.

What if we never reach it? What if misery and suffering are a feature not a bug of the program of separation? What if the mirage recedes just as fast as we race toward it?

That is how it looks to me. I cannot be sure the human condition has worsened since Dickensian times, or Medieval times, or even hunter-gatherer times. Some version of all our dramas and suffering seems to pervade every human society. However, I am quite sure that the human condition has not improved either. Our seeming progress toward transcending matter and the suffering of the flesh has not brought us any closer to its goal. At best, the suffering has only changed form, if indeed it has not grown worse. For example, thanks to air conditioning, we need no longer suffer extreme heat. Thanks to automobiles, we no longer need to tire ourselves to travel a few miles. Thanks to excavators, we no longer need to suffer aching muscles to dig a house foundation. Thanks to all kinds of pharmaceutical drugs, we no longer need to feel the pain of various medical conditions. Yet somehow we have not banished pain, fatigue, suffering, or stress, even in the most affluent parts of society. If you pay attention when you are in public places, you will become aware of enormous, pervasive suffering. Our heroic brothers and sisters bear it well. They hide it. They bear it. They do their best to be civil, to be kind, to be cheerful, to get by. But pay attention, and you will notice a lot of secret anguish. You will notice physical pain, emotional pain, anxiety, fatigue, and stress. Each person you see is divinity incarnate, doing its best under conditions that little serve its flourishing. Yet even so, the beauty is still there, the divinity seeking relentlessly to express itself, life seeking to live. On those occasions when I am blessed to see that, I know myself as a Friend.

4. Virtual Children of a Virtual World

Perhaps it is human destiny to forever chase the mirage of

total control, the conquest of suffering, the conquest of death. And despite the futility of that chase, it could be that we suffer no more than we ever have, albeit no less either. It is not my purpose here to put a stop to the transhumanist agenda, repugnant though I find it. I write this essay for two, related, reasons. First is to illuminate the basic character of that agenda, its origins and ambitions, and especially its ultimate futility, so that we might choose it or not choose it with open eyes. Second is to describe an alternative that is viable whatever choice the bulk of humanity makes. Third is to pose a scenario of peaceful and amicable relations between the two worlds that diverge from this choice-point in the Garden of Forking Paths, looking toward the day eons in the future when all the sundered souls of humanity reunite.

All right, that was three reasons not two. The third one became visible only after I wrote down the first two. I could go back and change it and delete this entire paragraph, which is now getting comically self-referential. Doh! But sometimes I like to share the process of my thought.

It occurs to me that the colloquial use of the term “meta” to refer to self-referentiality is also an aspect of a dissociation from matter, which casts us into a realm of symbols. Cut off from the infinity-wellspring of the animate, material, qualitative world, we cannibalize the symbolic world that originally budded off from it. We make stories about stories about stories. We make movies about toys based on movies based on comic books. Symbols come to symbolize other symbols, devolving into endlessly involuted self-reference. Underneath its whimsical playfulness, its witty word-play, its countless levels of abstraction lurks a horrible truth: We don’t care. A creeping cynicism pervades post-modern society, a numbness that whipped-up enthusiasm for the hyped-up Metaverse can dispel only temporarily.

Take for example the wonderful new innovation of virtual

children. Yes, you read that right. Also known as “Tamagotchi children,” they are autonomous AI software bots programmed to flourish if they receive enough digital care and attention (and, presumably, purchased accessories). Mainstream media touts them as a solution to loneliness, overpopulation, and climate change. A recent [Daily Mail](#) headline reads: Rise of the ‘Tamagotchi kids’: Virtual children that play with you, cuddle you, and even look like you will be commonplace in 50 years – and could help combat overpopulation, AI expert predicts. These articles are curiously devoid of reservations about such software (see [here](#) and [here](#)). I don’t get it. Are we already living in two separate reality-bubbles? Do people really think this is OK? To me the most disturbing, the most flabbergasting thing about Tamagotchi children is their seamless normalization. Though I must confess, the same thought has occurred to me with each step of the ascent into virtuality. Reality TV, for example. “Can people actually accept this as a substitute for involvement in each other’s stories in community?”

For all the hype though, for all the blithe acceptance, still I detect the aforementioned cynicism, detachment, and despair beneath it. Are people actually excited about parading their avatars through online games, meetings, and orgies in the Metaverse? Or is it just the best available substitute for what is missing in post-modern society?

I use the term “post-modern” here deliberately. As an intellectual movement, postmodernism dovetails with immersion in a world of symbols detached from matter. The Metaverse reifies the postmodern doctrine that everything is a text, that reality is a social construct, that one is whatever one asserts oneself to be because is-ness is a mere discourse. So it is in the world of online avatars: Appearance and reality are one and the same. Reality is infinitely malleable, arbitrary, a construct. So it seems to anyone immersed in the realm of representation. The symbol, forgetting it once

symbolized anything, becomes real in its own right. Commercial brands assume a value detached from the material substrate that gave them value in the first place. (Call it Gucci, and the handbag becomes valuable regardless of its quality.) Eventually the product may disappear entirely into virtual reality, leaving only the brand.

In politics much the same thing is happening. It's all about optics, perceptions, image, the signal, the message. It is as if we are voting for digital avatars of politicians, not the real thing. No one takes the campaign promises of politicians at face value, but hears them as signifiers. That is why no one is surprised when none of the promises are redeemed. Do you even remember any of Joe Biden's campaign promises? I certainly don't. Maybe something about canceling student debt? No one got excited about it, because we discount and disbelieve politician's words as a matter of course. Unfortunately, that allows them to enact horrible policies that few people would vote for—if they were voting for the policy itself and not the images obfuscating it. The more symbols absorb our attention, the more easily those who control information can manipulate the public.

Finally, let us not ignore the king of all symbols: money. It too is real only by convention, completely dissociated from anything material. It no longer symbolizes a measure of gold or a donation of wheat to the temple granary. It symbolizes nothing but itself. Thus it suggests that wealth need have no relation to matter, to material productivity; nor need it suffer any material or ecological constraint. (I speak here not only of so-called "fiat currencies" like the US dollar but, cryptocurrencies as well.) As with other systems of symbol, towers of abstraction rise upon the foundation of money: financial indexes, derivatives, and derivatives of derivatives.

At the present moment it looks like the whole tower of abstraction is about to come crashing down, as the orphaned

material world intrudes upon the pretend reality of money, protesting its neglect. Since the orphaned material world includes all those the current system has dispossessed of their illusions along with their material security, we will undoubtedly face social turmoil. And it won't just be the financial system that comes crashing down. There are many other rooms in the tower of abstraction. Fewer and fewer people will find comfortable abode within them. At this point, the elites—whoever remains in the few undamaged bunkers of the old normal—will face a choice. Either they retreat further into their bunkers, tightening their control over the growing ranks of the dispossessed, or they too flee the tower and join the rest of us in the real world. Practically, that means letting go of the entire global financial system; it means the cancellation of debt; it means the end of dollar hegemony and colonial extraction.

The elites faced a similar choice in 2008. They chose to extend and intensify their control, continuing to accumulate wealth by hollowing out the middle class, the global South, and the natural world. Financial collapse will not by itself deliver us unto a new world. We can choose to continue pursuing the transcendental program. Each aspect of it supports the rest. The dislocation of finance from matter is of a kind with the Metaverse's dematerialization of experience and transhumanism's separation of people from their bodies. All contribute to the same hollowing of substance. It is therefore no wonder that their ideologues cohabitate with the financial and political elite in institutions like the World Economic Forum. They hold a future in which we continue the path of Separation. But it is not the only future.

5. Separation and Interbeing

Let us return for a moment to the broad question of whether simulated reality can ever truly supersede material reality. On one level that is a technical question, dependent on computational capacities and so forth. On another level it is

a metaphysical question: Can the universe be reduced to data? Is it discrete or continuous? Is the basic doctrine of the Scientific Revolution true, that everything real can be measured? Certain philosophers and physicists say yes, because, they believe, our material reality is itself a simulation, a program running in some inconceivably mighty computer. Personally I doubt it. Ever we apply the devices of our time metaphorically to the body and the universe. In the machine age, the body was a complicated mechanism, and the universe a deterministic machine composed of separate parts. In the computer age, we decide that the brain is a digital wetware computer, with CPU and memory banks, and the universe is a software program.

If it is true that the simulation will always fall short of the reality, that quality will always escape quantity, that an AI baby programmed to mimic the developmental trajectory of a child will never equal a real human, then the void beneath the digital Metaverse, the cynicism and despair, will never go away. But honestly, my wariness of the Metaverse does not depend on metaphysical doctrines.

I can be fair-minded and say that maybe there is nothing wrong with increasing machine-human, brain-computer integration; that maybe there is nothing wrong with people living in bubbles, interacting wholly in a digital gaming universe with virtual friends. But actually I don't think it is OK at all, or perhaps I should say, it doesn't feel OK. Anguish tears at me when I see today's children immersed in the physically safe digital world, having virtual adventures while never leaving their bedrooms, unable to throw a ball or skip rope, never experiencing unsupervised imaginative group play. I do not blame the screen-addicted kids for their affliction, nor do I blame their parents. When my grown sons were younger, I remember sending them outside to play. They didn't want to stay outside for long, because there was no one there for them to play with. Already, as a culture we were forgetting how to

play, at least with our bodies, in materiality.

I remember one neighbor who wouldn't let their children outside because there had been a case of Zika virus in the state. Obviously, that fear was a proxy for an unconscious fear of something else. Few of us feel truly safe in modern culture, for we suffer the existential insecurity that comes from the modern displacement from the material world. We feel ill at ease, not at home. The world has been made Other, hostile, something from which to insulate oneself. To such a person, the digital world—contained and safe, fully domestic—exerts an irresistible appeal. Seated in front of the screen, indoors, my child is safe.

Or so he seems. Eventually, the separation from the world will manifest as physical and emotional disease. Significantly, the real pandemic of our time is autoimmunity, allergies, and other immune dysfunctions—maladies that cannot be conquered by controlling something external to the self. There is nothing to kill or to keep out. Thus they mirror to us a forgotten truth: that the Nature we so cavalierly destroy is also a part of ourselves. We are more than interdependent with the rest of life, we are inter-existent. What we do to Nature, we do to ourselves. That is the truth called interbeing. We will never escape that truth, no matter how far we retreat into our virtual bubbles.

Quite the opposite. The further we retreat into virtual bubbles, the greater our sense of displacement, the more ill at ease, and the further from home we feel. Lacking embodied relationships, one feels a stranger in the world. The root crisis of our time is a crisis in belonging. It comes from the atrophy of our ecological and community relationships. Who am I? Each relationship tells me who I am. When someone knows not the stories behind the faces he or she sees every day, or the names and uses of the plants, or the history of a place and its people; when the outdoors is just so much scenery populated mostly by strangers; when one has no intimate

companions outside the nuclear family; when one does not know well and is not well known, then one can barely exist, for existence is relationship. The insecure, isolated individual that remains is always anxious, susceptible to manipulation, and an easy target for marketers selling tokens of identity. He or she will eagerly take up whatever politically generated identities are available, aligning with an us against a them to gain a fragile sense of belonging. And, the comfort of the digital world will easily seduce that person into replacing lost material relationships with digital ones.

I just said that we can never escape the truth of interbeing no matter how far we retreat into our virtual bubbles. We cannot escape it, but we can postpone it. Maybe, paradoxically, we can postpone the inevitable forever. Collapse will not save us from our choices. Each new dysfunction, each new physical, mental, or social disease, can be palliated with yet more technology. Tamagotchi children may fail to assuage the loneliness of life in a bubble, but fortunately modern neuroscience has identified the precise arrangement of neurotransmitters and receptors that create the feeling of loneliness. We can modulate those—problem solved! And if that causes some other deficit, why, we can fix that too. Someday, when our control over genes and brain chemistry and body physiology is perfected, finally we will have achieved heaven. There is no limit to the power of technology to fix the failings of technology, just as there is no limit to the aforementioned tower of financial abstraction that uses debt to finance payments on previous debt. Yet never do we arrive in heaven.

In all these instances, the tower is none other than the Tower of Babel: a metaphor for the attempt to attain the infinite through finite means. It describes the quest to perfect virtual reality, to create improved versions of everything natural (synthetic mylk, for example, or genetically modified strawberries, or artificial wombs, or online adventures). We

devote tremendous efforts to this tower-building project, but we never get any closer to the sky. Granted, we are no further from the sky either. We have risen high indeed and have a long way to fall. Precarious, rootless, many begin to question the project and the enormously complicated edifice that sprawls across the ruins of original cultures and ecosystems.

What would civilization look like if we built for beauty and not for height? If we did not use the things of earth to attempt to leave earth behind?

The Zika scare, of course, was but a foreshadowing of the social calamity that was to follow in 2020. Whole families barely ventured out of their homes for weeks and months at a time. Life accelerated its flight into the digital realm. Work, meetings, school, leisure, entertainment, dating, yoga classes, conferences, and more moved online—a small inconvenience, it was said, to save millions of lives. Whether many lives were actually saved thereby is a matter of dispute; my point here focuses on the other part: the “small inconvenience.” Was it really so small? Was it a mere inconvenience? Is the digital life a near-adequate substitute for in-person life? (Soon to become adequate as technology advances?) That depends largely on the metaphysical questions I raised earlier.

Here again though, I would like to appeal not to the mind but to the body to answer the question of whether digital life can be an adequate substitute for real life. During the lockdowns, I could feel myself withering. To be sure, an initial period of retreat was welcome for many people, a break in the routines of normalcy. Over time though, many of us began to show signs of emotional and social malnourishment. Even the politicians who imposed the most draconian mandates violated them themselves. Why? Because lockdowns were inhuman. They were anti-life.

Now I suppose some people were totally fine with lockdowns and

social isolation, and would prefer it if we never went back to normal. They might say it is for safety, but I suspect something else is at work. During Covid I became accustomed to my little cage and developed a kind of agoraphobia. I wasn't worried about getting sick; I was freaked out by the medical rituals of masking and distancing overtaking society. So, albeit for different reasons from the Covid-orthodox, I too retreated partly into a digital world. When I emerged, it was with a bit of trepidation, the kind one feels entering strange territory. Imagine what it is like for people who even before Covid felt alien or unsafe in the world. They might hesitate much more than the rest of us to venture out again, and welcome the enrichment of the isolation bubble that the Metaverse offers.

I have described centuries-long trends and deep unconscious narratives that contribute to the transhumanist agenda. If we try to understand it as simply a dastardly plan by Klaus Schwab & Co. to take over the world, we miss 99% of the picture. We miss the forces that produce a Bill Gates, a Klaus Schwab, and the technocratic elite. We miss the ideologies that give them power and dispose the public to accept their plans. These ideologies are far beyond the intellectual capacity of men like Gates and Schwab to invent. They are deeper, in fact, than the word ideology suggests. They are aspects of what one can only call a mythology.

6. Parallel Societies

Any alternative to the transhuman future must draw from a different mythology. But the mythology, at least the part of it comprising narrative and belief, is secondary. The alternative to transhumanism and transcendentalism generally is to fall back in love with matter. It is to accept our place as participants with the rest of life in an inconceivable process of creation. Instead of seeking to transcend our humanity, we seek to be more fully human. We longer seek to escape matter—not through the digital means of the Metaverse,

nor through its spiritualized version.

Here I am writing about it. Here I am, putting into concepts a call to reverse the flight into concepts. I hope you can hear the voice behind the words, and sense the flesh behind the voice.

Those who fall back in love with matter will discover that the beloved bears unforeseen gifts. For example, when we reverse the quest for health-by-isolation and embrace relationship with the microbial world, the social world, and the wind, water, sunlight, and soil of the natural world, when we acknowledge the subtle dimensions of matter—frequency, energy, and information—then new vistas of healing open up that do not depend on killing a pathogen, cutting out a body part, or controlling a body process. Progress need not come through imposing order onto the world. It can come through joining in greater and greater, subtler and subtler levels of preexisting and unmanifest order.

The 1933 Chicago World's Fair slogan may as well be the motto of the modern age: "Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms." The doctrine of inevitability has long been a main thread in the narrative of technological progress. Science and technology will keep progressing, and it is up to us to adapt to it. But are we really so helpless? Are we but tools of technology? Shouldn't it be the other way around? History offers signal examples, scant though they may be, of conscious rejection of technological progress: the early 19th-century Luddites and the contemporary Amish come to mind. Hold on a second, I have to change my typewriter ribbon. OK. To say brain-computer interfaces, wearable computing, genetically-engineered humans, the Metaverse, or the internet-of-things are inevitable basically declares that you have no choice in the matter, that the public has no choice. Well, who says? Those who are withholding the possibility of choice, that's who. The logic is circular, when an unelected elite organization like the WEF declares that certain futures are

inevitable. Maybe they wouldn't be, in a fully informed, sovereign democratic society. Let's be suspicious of centralized institutions proclaiming the inevitability of technologies that enhance the power of centralized institutions.

Perhaps it is inevitable that at least some portion of humanity will continue to explore the ascent of humanity away from matter. Despite the futility of its Utopian ambitions, that exploration will undoubtedly uncover new realms of creativity and beauty. After all, the symphony orchestra, the cinema, and the jazz quartet all depend on earlier technologies that were part of humanity's separation from nature. Beauty, love, and life are irrepressible. They burst out everywhere, no matter how tight or stifling the matrix of control. Nonetheless, I know I am far from alone in saying, "That is not my future." I am not alone in wanting to be more embodied, closer to the soil, less in the virtual world and more in the material, more in physical relationship, closer to my sources of food and medicine, more embedded in place and community. I might visit the Matrix sometimes, but I don't want to live there.

Enough people share those values that the possibility of a parallel society is coming into view. We are OK with some people choosing to explore human beingness in the Metaverse, as long as we are not forced to live there too. The two societies might even be complementary to each other. Eventually they may split into two separate, symbiotic species.

Let's call them the Transhumans and, if you'll indulge me, the Hippies. I have had a soft spot for hippies ever since I first spotted some in the wild. It was in an Ann Arbor park in 1972. "Who are they?" I asked my mother, pointing to some people with long hair and beads. "Oh, those are hippies," said my mother in a matter-of-fact tone. My four-year-old self was fully satisfied with the explanation.



Pachamama. Mural painting
by Jon Marro

Back in those days, the hippies questioned the ideology of progress. They explored other paths of human development (meditation, yoga, psychedelics). They went back to the land. They wove their own baskets, built their own shacks, made their own clothes.

The Transhumans are distinguished by their progressive merger with technology. They depend on it for survival and more and more functions of life. Their immunity depends on constant updates. They cannot give birth unassisted—C-sections become routine (this is already happening). Eventually they incubate fetuses in artificial wombs, feed them artificial Mylk, care for them with AI nannies. They live full time in VR/AR environments, interacting with each other remotely from separate bubbles. Their material lives dwindle over the generations. Initially they emerge regularly from their insulated smart cities, smart homes, and personal protective bubbles, depending on what viruses or other dangers are circulating. Over time they leave home less and less frequently. Everything they need arrives by delivery drone. They spend most of their time indoors, for as they grow

increasingly conditioned to precisely controlled environments, the unconditioned outdoors becomes inhospitable. (Already this has happened as people get addicted to air conditioning. Americans on average spend 95% of their time indoors.) They also spend more and more of their time online, in digital and virtual spaces. To facilitate this, technology is integrated directly into their brains and bodies. Sophisticated physiological sensors and pumps constantly adjust body chemistry to keep them healthy, and they soon cannot stay alive without them. In the brain, computer-neural interfaces allow them to access the internet at the speed of thought, and communicate with each other telepathically. Images and videos are delivered straight to their optic nerve. Official announcements can be delivered direct to their brains as well, and advertisers pay them per minute to allow commercial messages to be piped in. Eventually they can no longer distinguish between endogenous images and those from the outside. Control of misinformation can be extended to the neurological level. Over time, their capacity for cognition too becomes technology-dependent, as the brain merges with AIs and the internet. (Again, this is but the continuation of an ancient trend that started perhaps with writing. Literate people export some of their capacity for memory onto written records. It is not uncommon for pre-literate people to be able to repeat a thousand-line poem after hearing it once.)

In this society, basic physical functioning, social interaction, immunity, reproduction, imagination, cognition, and health all enter the realm of goods and services. New goods and services means vast new markets, new domains for economic growth. Economic growth is essential for a debt-based currency system to operate. The Transhuman economy therefore enables the current economic order to continue.

The Hippies decline to walk this path, and in fact reverse some part of the technological dependency that is already normal in 2022. This too is already happening. My children

were born with less technological intervention than I was. The Hippies wean themselves off of pharmaceutical props to health, in some cases accepting higher risks and earlier deaths, but in the long run enjoying more vitality. They return—are already returning—to natural childbirth.² They reverse, to a degree, the exquisite division of labor that marks modern society, growing more of their own food, building more of their own houses, being more directly engaged in meeting their material needs on an individual and community level. Their lives become less global, less technology-dependent, more place-based. They redevelop atrophied capacities of the human mind and body, and discover new ones. Since they do not routinely use technology to insulate themselves from all threats and challenges, they stay strong.

Because the Hippies are reclaiming vast areas of life from the realm of goods and services, their society upends the familiar economic order. The role of money in life diminishes. Interest-bearing debt is no longer the foundation of their economy. Alongside the shrinking financial realm, new modes of sharing, collaboration, and exchange flourish in a growing gift economy.

The Hippies see labor as something to embrace in proper measure, not to minimize. Efficiency gives way to aesthetics as the primary guide to material creation, and aesthetics integrates the entire process of procuring, using, and retiring materials. As individuals, in their communities, and as a global culture, they devote their creative powers to beauty above scale, fun above security, and healing above growth.

7. The Great Work

Today we see early signs that humanity is resolving into two societies. What if we bless each other on our choice, and strive to make room for it? It could well be that the Transhumans and the Hippies need each other and can enrich

each other's lives. For one thing, because the paradise of control is a mirage, the material world will forever intrude upon the Metaverse in ways that robots and AI won't be able to address. Someone will have to fix the leaky roof on the computer server farms. The Transhumans will never fully realize the goal of replacing human labor with machine labor. However, they will develop technologies based on abstraction, computation, and quantity to an extraordinary degree, which in some circumstances can be put in service to the Hippies when they face a challenge requiring those technologies. And they can share the wonders of art and science they create on the transhuman path.

Both societies share certain challenges and live on a common planet. They will have to cooperate if either is to flourish. Perhaps the most significant common challenge is that of governance and social organization. While the transhumanist Metaverse today has overtones of totalitarian central control, it need not be that way. One can easily imagine a decentralized digital society, just as one can imagine a centralized low-tech society. Many ancient societies were exactly that. Neither path, the Transhuman nor the Hippie, is proof against the age-old scourges of tyranny, civil violence, and oppression.

Actually I don't fully believe what I just wrote. The ever-increasing control over matter that transhumanism requires goes hand in hand with social control. They come from the same worldview: progress equals the imposition of order onto chaos. Given that all of the 60 "stakeholders" in the WEF's new [Metaverse initiative](#) are large corporations, eager for a share of an \$800 billion industry, one can safely assume that Metaverse technology will be used to extend and consolidate the power of the corporate-government complex.

It is not as some people say: "Technology is neutral, it depends on how we use it." Technology has the values and beliefs of its inventors built into it. It appears in a social

context, meets a society's needs, fulfills its ambitions, and embodies its values. Inventions that don't fit are marginalized or suppressed. Some such technologies, such as those in holistic health, thrive in the near suburbs of official reality. Others, such as free energy devices, languish in the far reaches of unreality, so violently do they contradict what the knowledge authorities believe is real. Neither is value-neutral nor system-neutral. They both are democratizing. The former, requiring much less expertise and high-tech infrastructure, returns medicine to the people. The latter literally decentralizes and democratizes power.

In contrast, most of the medical technology of transhumanism casts ordinary people into a consumer role. Swallow this pill. Receive this injection. Implant this device.

Nonetheless, there is truth in the above words-I-do-not-fully-believe. Notwithstanding the embedded values in technology, we face a more fundamental choice than what technology to use or refuse. Imagine what surveillance technology would do if it were directed by the people at the government, rather than by corporations and government at the people. Imagine if every government decision and expenditure were fully transparent. This idea taps into one of the principles that run deeper than technology: transparency. Lies, gossip, secrecy, and information control can turn any society, Stone Age or Digital Age, into a hell. Dehumanization can turn any society into a slaughterhouse. Good-versus-evil narratives can turn any society into a war zone.

That means we who sound the transhumanist alarm have more work to do than merely to oppose certain technologies and political powers, more to do, even, than to build parallel institutions. We Hippies might roll back technology a little or a lot. We might keep using the internet, cars, excavators, chain saws, and hunting rifles. Or maybe over generations we give them up. Maybe we again dig house foundations with picks and shovels. Maybe we return to the bicycle, or the donkey. However, I feel

no excitement about a future that is only a return to the past. I am sure that the miraculous technologies enabled by the human journey of Separation are here for a reason. The pure melody of the lonely shepherd's pipe does not diminish the value of the symphony orchestra. Both express a love affair with matter.

So the question is, what is the Great Work before us that is common to any technological context? What is the true revolution, the revolution of consciousness, that leaves no one behind to languish in a totalitarian medico-digital prison?

I won't at this moment offer succinct or tidy answers to such questions. The questions themselves have more power than their answers. They invite us into compassion for all human beings. They return us to the truth of our inter-existence. They remind us that, just as we have not given up on our fellows, God will never give up on us. They attune us to the knowledge that if the situation were hopeless, we would not be here to meet it. They ask us to consider who we are and why we are here; what, and why, a human being is. Whatever the Revolution is, surely it goes all the way to these depths.

So I ask again, what is the Great Work before us? Be fierce in rejecting any answer that your soul knows is untrue, however flattering it may be to your righteousness. Be gentle in your judgments, so that clarity of purpose has room to grow. Be grateful as you discover the joy, ease, and humor that the Great Work makes available. Be confident in the true knowledge that we are ready to accomplish it. Rejoice in the renewal of our love affair with the world of matter and flesh.

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