

Addendum to the SEA conference, 'The Permeation of Technology in Everyday Life', London, November 18-19, 2011

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Abstract: This brief article is designed primarily to continue the dialogue started at the annual SEA conference held in London in November 2011. Below I present some predictions about the evolution of human life on earth. I ask what role existential therapists might have in responding to these developments, if they happen. I suggest that any body of thought from the past or present will not prepare us to think clearly about technologies that alter the very basis of our thinking. If we take these predictions seriously, almost every other concern we have as therapists, and as persons, pales in comparison.

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It is timely that the Society of Existential Analysis recently held its annual conference in central London on the topic of the 'permeation of technology in our everyday lives'. For the first time ever, the world perches on the edge of an exponential dive into technologies that are predicted to fundamentally alter the very nature of life on earth. To highlight these possibilities, the conference addressed issues such as authenticity and distortion of the self through technology, emergent non-biological personalities, technology for social evolution, cybersex, cybernetics of mind, online disclosure, and technological co-constitution, amongst other fascinating topics. Many speakers referred to existential philosophers, concentrating especially on Heidegger's thinking on technology. Although these presentations were valuable, the conference emphasis on modern philosophies and their application to current innovations may have underplayed the vexing question of how to think freshly about a *post-dasien* future. I want to use this addendum to introject a futurist accent into the discussion started at the conference.

The past decade has witnessed an explosion of scientific and social discourse around the fantastical characteristics of the world to come. Much of this discussion reads like science fiction, yet the majority of respected voices in robotics, bio-genetics, and nanotechnology, say that the change described is, at least in large part, inevitable (see Garreau, 2005). It is the *exponential* rate of change in technology that results in estimations that the twenty-first century will see change equivalent to twenty thousand years of progress, one thousand times more than the twentieth century (Kurzweil, 2005: 11).

One respected voice among those who see these predicted changes as positive advances in human evolution is the software innovator Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil (2005: 7-9) describes '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'. He calls this period, or its inception, 'the singularity'. He says, 'this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely upon to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself'. To truly understand the singularity, he insists, will 'inherently change one's view of life in general and one's own particular life'.

Kurzweil describes the effects of the singularity as the time when humans will finally gain control over our own fate, including the limitations of our biology and our intelligence. As a result of this colossal change, the fabric of human life will be ruptured, no distinction between human or machine, or between physical and virtual reality. The only human quality that Kurzweil sees as remaining definitive of humanity is 'simply this quality: ours is the species that inherently seeks to extend its physical and mental reach beyond current limits' (ibid: 9).

In this future scenario, advanced robots, or 'future nonbiological entities' will display intelligence and emotionally rich reactions indistinguishable from humans; they will not be advanced calculators but beings in their own right that live themselves in an emergent way (Kurzweil, 2005: 475). Likewise, enhanced humans will no longer forget things, we will no longer get tired, everyone will know everything instantly, we will be able to re-engineer our biological organs and systems, we will be able to control and manipulate physical reality at the molecular level, and virtual reality will be created from within our nervous system (ibid: 29). Machines will become indistinguishable from humans and humans will become technologically infused.

In his book *Radical Evolution*, journalist Joel Garreau says that the prophecies of future technologies and our concerns, hopes and dreams about these, give us a 'window through which to gaze upon human nature' (2005:4). At the very least, we are increasingly challenged to think deeply about how we define life and human life in particular, what it means to be in relationship, to love. Yet, until this year's SEA conference, there has been remarkably little discussion amongst therapists about the psychological, spiritual, and existential impact of redesigning life on earth. After tens of thousands of years there may once again be more than one human species alive at the same time. And what form of life, what 'way of being', what set of values and what definition of 'intelligence' is it that will be enhanced and then projected into the future? Can technology answer the question of 'how or why to live?' or 'what is a good life'? If one takes the predictions seriously, as most experts do, every other concern pales in significance. As existential therapists on the brink of this new millennium some of us will face these fundamental changes in our own lives and in our consulting rooms. What is the role of therapy as revolutionary change takes over the 'nature' of human nature?

The philosopher and computer scientist Jaron Lanier pleads for us not to leave these questions to the scientists, 'Why are you sitting on the sidelines? ... So I challenge you ... There is a way to turn this around, to bust through ... My way through these things is, instead of sitting back and assessing, you have to actively create new culture' (Garreau, 2005:263). Is this a new role for existential therapy and all therapy? Lanier calls upon people to generate rituals, stories, processes, that will attempt to make sense of what's happening to us. What does death mean? What is the meaning of time in the future? What definition of 'choice' will still make sense even twenty or thirty years from now? What is the ineffable nature of being human? Who do we want to be if we can be anything?

Most therapeutic traditions have always included the agonizing ethical question of how to live well. According to Kurzweil, 'Some of the scenarios for radical life extension involve reengineering and rebuilding the systems and subsystems that our bodies and brains comprise. In taking part in this reconstruction, do I lose my self along the way?

Again, this issue will transform itself from a centuries-old philosophical dialogue to a pressing practical matter in the next several decades' (ibid: 383). Philosophy will not save us. Nor sociology. Nor psychology. We will mistake the future for the past if we reach for existing understandings about human being. We are entering a phase of living that might be described as *bio-existential* – how will we respond to our own and our clients' questions, 'should I transcend the biological body I have or should I die?'

In the near future we may find our therapeutic practices resembling genetic counselling, focused upon client deliberations about which biological enhancements to employ for themselves and their families. It seems likely that technique-based counselling that targets emotional, cognitive, or behavioural change will be superseded by technological innovation. In the small window during which anything like therapy still exists, I suspect its focus will be quite concretely existential, or if you prefer, theological or spiritual, addressing how my personal decisions regarding enhancement or not will impact my relations with others who may decide differently from me.

One danger is that if scientists can re-engineer the human brain, make it from scratch in biological or digital form, we may come to think that is all that we are. We already see this kind of reductionism in the current glut of manuals on the importance of neuroscience for psychotherapy. As existential therapists we may need to promote a first person science—emphasising the living beings we know ourselves to be, including body-process that senses itself from the inside.

This brief addendum is offered in order to continue a thread of discussion from the conference event to the planned publication of the conference presentations in the next issue of *Existential Analysis*. We are pleased to publish the first of those presentations, Dr Niklas Serning's *Towards the Cybernetic Mind* in this issue and look forward to the remaining papers appearing in 23.2, summer 2012, as well as reader comments and responses.

Garreau, Joel (2005) *Radical Evolution. The promise and peril of enhancing our minds, our bodies – and what it means to be human.* New York: Broadway Books

Kurzweil, Raymond (2005), *The Singularity Is Near*, New York: Viking,