

The Totalizing Effects of Machine Culture in Higher Education

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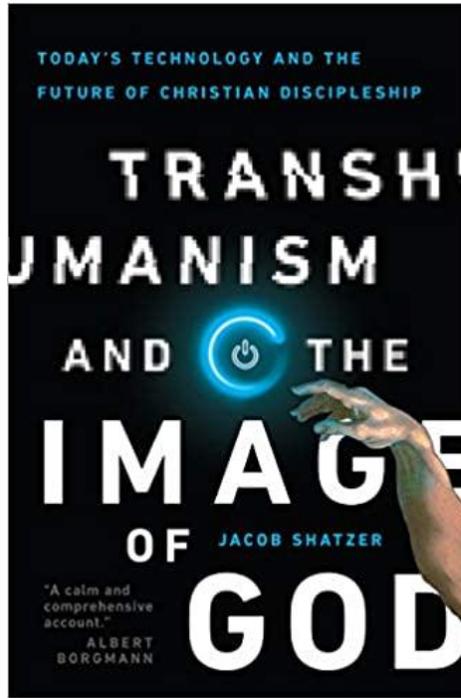
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“Higher Education in a Machine Age” session 3

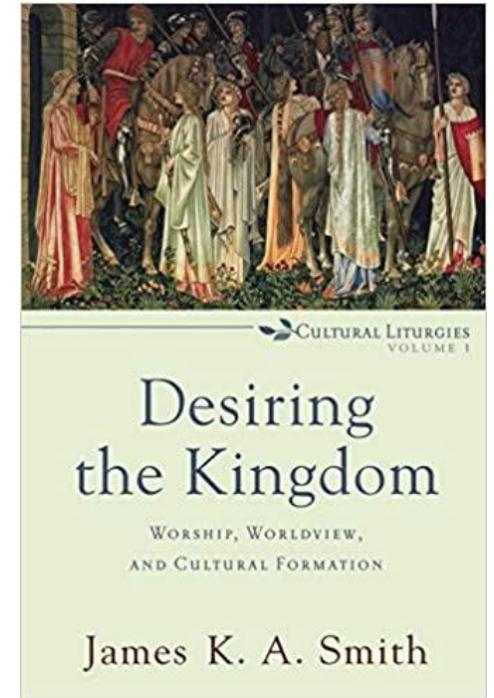
Roadmap

Most of the things that we might want education to achieve are at odds with the logic of technology

- 1) Transhuman and posthuman
- 2) Cognitive and affective
- 3) Informative and formative



Jacob Shatzer, 2019



James K.A. Smith, 2009

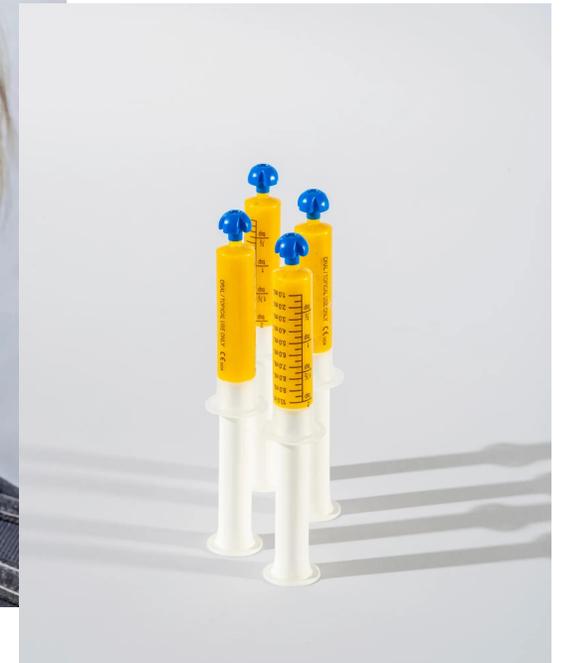
Premise (or root conviction)

- How we think about education is inextricably linked to how we think about human persons
 - Education as absorption of ideas and information => assumes human beings are primarily thinking things, or maybe believing animals
 - Christian education: “life of the mind,” development of a Christian perspective, a Christian worldview
- What if we are not primarily thinking beings?

1) Transhuman and Posthuman

- Definition: “The transhumanist movement seeks to *improve human intelligence, physical strength, and the five senses* by technological means.” (Michael Plato, 2018)
 - Virtual reality promises to transport us anywhere
 - Wearable smart devices put us closer to connecting the human brain to the digital cloud
 - Genome editing allows us to design our babies and cure any disease or disability

Transhumanist Declaration (1998, 2009): “We favor allowing individuals wide personal choice over how they enable their lives. This includes use of techniques that may be developed *to assist memory, concentration, and mental energy...*”



Transhumanism and Machine Culture

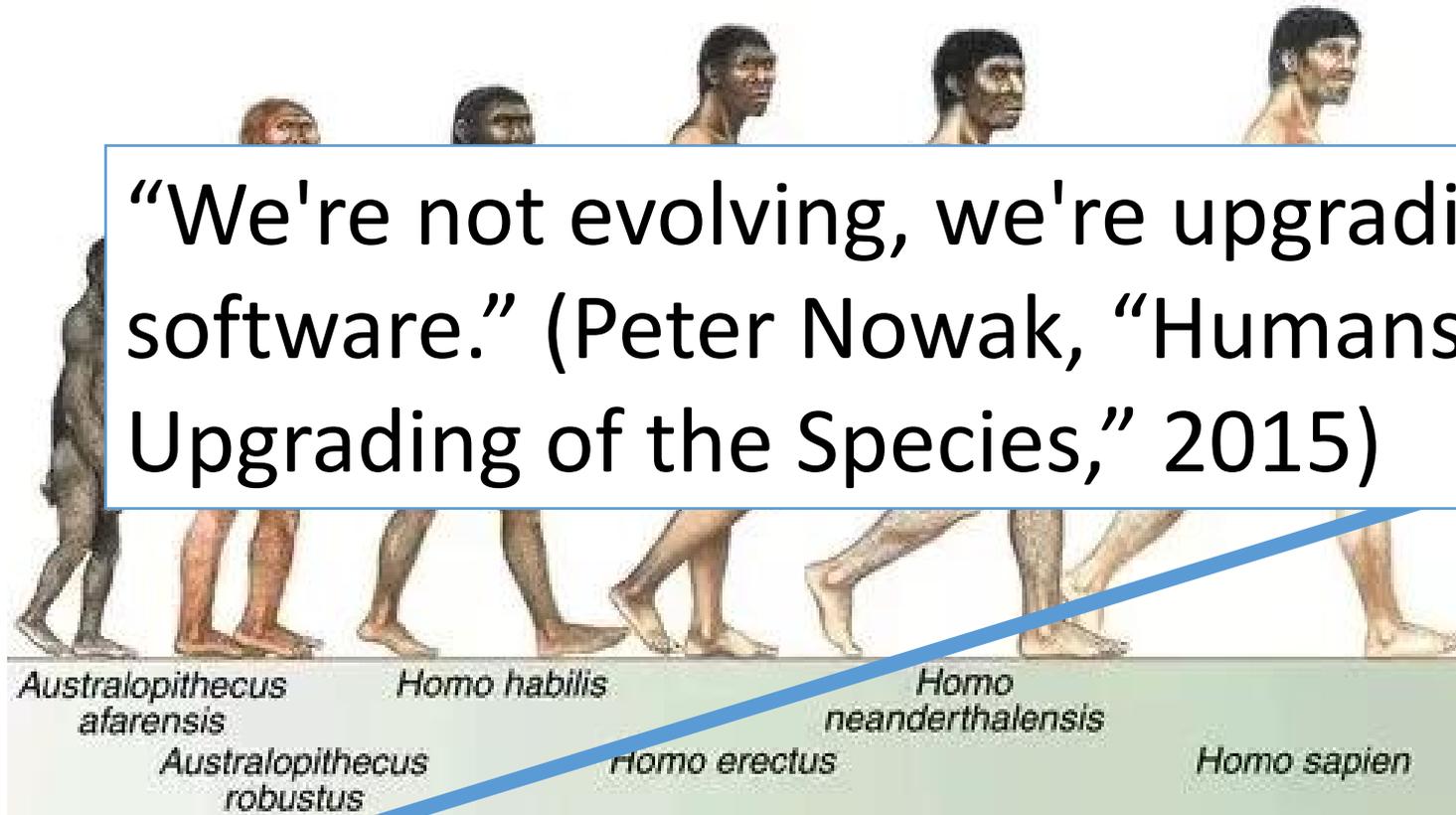
- For transhumanists, an enhancement is by definition good
 - “... to improve human intelligence, physical strength, and the five senses by technological means.” (Michael Plato, 2018)
- This “thinking is merely a logical extension of the increasing confidence that late modern people have placed in finding technological solutions to problems.” (Christina Bieber Lake, “Prophets of the Posthuman,” 2013)
- “In many ways, all of us are transhumanists based on our extensive use of technologies like the smartphone, the artificial hip, and the pacemaker.” ???

Human nature is not a static, unchanging thing but simply a point on a pathway of development.

Exceed the limitations that define the “less

“We're not evolving, we're upgrading: just like software.” (Peter Nowak, “Humans 3.0: The Upgrading of the Species,” 2015)

Overcome disease, aging, and death



Transhumanism focuses on the ever-changing process of development and growth. Posthumanism focuses on the product.

Transhumanist philosophy (1990)

Educational philosophy
Philosophical anthropology

- Emphasize perpetual progress
 - always want more: more intelligence, more life, more experience
- Self-transformation is possible
 - affirm continual ethical, intellectual, and physical self-improvement, through critical and creative thinking, perpetual learning, personal responsibility, proactivity, and experimentation
- Use of intelligent technology
- An open society
- Self-direction
- Rational thinking

Machine language of optimization, maximization, self-improvement, rationality

Celebration of weakness, of limitations, of boundaries, of us being created beings and not the Creator

2) Cognitive and Affective

- Premise: How we think about education is inextricably linked to how we think about human persons
- James K.A. Smith: human beings are primarily lovers, not merely thinkers (“Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation”, 2009)
 - how education shapes us and forms us to be a certain kind of people whose loves/desires are aimed at certain things
 - we are affective, desiring, liturgical animals

What it means to be human (James K.A. Smith, 2009)

- 1) Love's aim
 - humans are intentional creatures whose fundamental way of intending is **love or desire**
 - 2) Love's end
 - this love (which is often unconscious and noncognitive) is always aimed at some particular version of the **good life**
 - 3) Love's fulcrum
 - sets of **habits and dispositions** prime us to act in certain ways
 - 4) Love's formation
 - affective, bodily means such as **bodily practices, routines, and rituals** grab hold of our hearts through imagination and form us to love, desire, and worship certain things
- **Who we are depends on what we love, and what we love is what we worship** (from worldview to worship to worldview)

3) Informative and Formative

- Shifts **identify formation** from primarily an issue of cognition (what do I think or believe?) to also one of affection (what or whom do I love?)
- Loving rightly requires practice, and practice often happens in mundane ways
- The university is not only about knowledge. It is after our love, our desire. It wants to **make us into certain kinds of people who desire a certain *telos*, who are primed to pursue a particular vision of the good life.**

A formative, liturgical institution

- Worldview-focus on perspectives => a liturgical focus on practices
 - Liturgy = “ritual practices that function as pedagogies of ultimate desire”
 - The university is a formative, liturgical institution, animated by rituals and liturgies that constitute a pedagogy of desire
- 1) What *telos* does the university “glorify”? What vision of the good life does it foster? What does the university want us to love?
 - 2) What are the rituals and practices that constitute the secular liturgy of the university?

Technology promotes a “liturgy of control”

- “Companies increasingly find that their economic value is a function of the **strength of the habits they create**” (Nir Eyal, “Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products,” 2014)
 - trinity of access, data, and speed => unprecedented opportunities for developing habits
- Social networking (identity and relationships), gaming (attention, addiction, and aggression), and search engines (learning and memory) (Susan Greenfield, “Mind Change: How Digital Technologies Are Leaving Their Mark on Our Brains”, 2015)
- **Practices of technology or technological use = spiritual practices = all other kinds of liturgies**

Conclusion

- Most of the things that we might want education to achieve are at odds with the logic of technology
- How we think about education is inextricably linked to how we think about human persons/human nature
- Affective (worship), not just cognitive (worldview)
- Formative (liturgies), not just informative (truth claims)

What sorts of practices today can help us retain the best of what it means to be human in the future?