

The Singularity and human communication versus a future that does matter

Leo Lake

lake@home.nl

Soon the computer will take over. So they say. The singularity is the name reserved for the moment our computers will out-smart us and develop their own minds.

Singularity theorists think they see an important similarity between humans and computers: they both think. However, given the vast differences in the circumstances under which humans and computers compute, this discovery of similarity is both a remarkable and a suspicious one. Even when thinking only of thinking, the differences between both seem to be more important. The current machine computer performs its tasks in glorious isolation from which it can be interrupted, the human computer is closely linked to its environment: it is fundamentally event-driven. If a human computer is not driven by events it comes to an halt. A machine computer is more likely to halt when it is, occasionally, interrupted.

Event-driven becomes almost synonymous with distraction when humans and computers are considered similar. When we, humans, think, we get so easily distracted that those who do not get so easily distracted become famous. When we solve a differential equation, we often get thirsty or develop a pseudo-philosophy about the color of the pencil used to jot down the intermediate steps. When we listen to music, the proverbial fly on the nose too easily becomes the most urgent thought. When we play chess for an audience, our eyes often wander to sexy examples of the desired sex.

Our environment pulls the strings of our attention. We “think” in messy dependence, not in the computers glorious isolation. The machine computer extrapolates from axioms numerous consequences, the human computer basically reacts.

This is probably due to our hardware, our brain. The larger part of the human brain has not developed to deal with the movement of the stars, musical compositions, chess, poetry or abstract logic. The brain was not designed to extrapolate, but to react. React to what? Well... to other human brains. Indeed, the main objects in our environment are people. The brain has adapted its structure to this social environment. Our brain is not a general purpose computer. Our notions of mind, of person, of subjective experience may be the result of the way our brain adapts to other brains. All brains together may be an all-purpose computer, but probably not.

Is the singularity theorist correct in ignoring the vast differences in the pragmatics of computation as done by machines and as done by humans? It may

be that they see an arrow of brain-development that is, to a large degree, an illusion.

Why? It all has to do with the fundament of what our mind is. That fundament is called "being a person". I will return to this in the next paragraph, but let me first be explicit on the consequences of this claim. It is unlikely that the person concept will be developed by machine computers, or by any "running" computational process. This notion however controls to a very large degree what a human does and thinks. In the degree the concept of person matters, in that same degree humans and computers will be different. In the degree the concept of person matters, in that same degree a personless future becomes irrelevant to us here and now.

Let's inspect the development of personhood a little closer to make such statements credible. When we see a body we automatically infer that it is a person, endowed with consciousness, with feelings and subjective experiences. This point is made in an exquisite book by Leslie Brown (*Friday's Footprint*, 1997). Our brain is hardwired to develop the notion of person, she claims. The notion of person is instrumental in co-adjusting the behavior of a group of human bodies. That it is hard-wired means that we cannot see a body without seeing a mind, without inferring the existence of subjective experience in the other. A similar point has been made by Peter Strawson, who claims that concept person is logically more primitive than the idea of subjective experience.

There is nothing mysterious about this process of person construction. When we see a string of letters that form a word in a language we speak, we cannot but see it's meaning. Exactly what meaning depends on what we have learned, just as the rather abstract concept of person will be endowed with numerous characteristics based, mainly, on what is learned during the conversations between two or more human bodies.

The notion of person is a construct of our brain. It comes to being when brains and bodies interact. A person is therefore a social phenomenon. It is not 'in' a brain, it is distributed over at least two brains.

Back to our singularity theorists.

Will smart computers, or smart computational processes, have a mind, as so many singularists seem to imply? Probably not. A mind, as I've hinted above, is a sensation, or if you prefer cog-speak or have, unlike me, a degree in psychology, a schema, constructed by humans because it has a survival value in the war on the battlefield of interpersonal relations. Mind is conditioned on personhood. A mind is an attribute, it is a relation, or relation producing form, and therefore has no essence. If it *has* a reality it *is* a social reality. Whether something like a mind will exist in the future universe of computational processes after the singularity, depends on how, and if, these processes will communicate, parallel computation being assumed, of course. They will only develop a person schema of a kind we, humans, can relate to, if they interact closely with humans. Given the schism between machine computer and human computers in the degree they are event-driven, this is unlikely to happen. It becomes even more unlikely if we compare a brain and computer on the speed of their constituents. The brain is many orders

slower than a computer. The notion of mind will most likely not even develop in the ongoing conversation of computational processes.

What will computers develop to understand each other? It will probably not be something we, humans, cannot understand, or something we couldn't possibly be interested in. If these communication processes become controlled by a new environment, however they too may get caught in new endless and pointless circles of communication, and they may themselves desire a singularity renewed. But who cares?

Does the future of the singularity theorists matter to us? That future is so alien to us, that it cannot matter to us. However, if their future is futile, their method of transcending the present is/maybe not.

The real value of singularity theory is that it is an attempt to transcend human existence. It does this by focussing on using a small part of our mental capacities, problem-solving, and on the production of machines that are good at it, better than humans. This transcendence is lacking in our picture of mankind as a set of communicating brains. As said, brains have developed to cope with other brains. Even the notion of person serves an instrumental role. If, as is bound to happen, this insight becomes part and parcel of our cultural discourse, then all we can do is stare at a rather nauseating circularity; brains exist to understand other similar brains. It is like saying that the reason for my being is your being; that the reason for existence is existence. From essence to being... let's not go there. Our cognitive apparatus itself may just be a way nature has found for one brain to make other brains more predictable. If this does not annoy you already, let me try to rub it in using an analogy.

There are animals who have learned to develop a thick skull because banging their heads against other skulls has proven its survival value. Talking to other people maybe just be the human variation of banging each others' skulls. Survival value is highly dependent on a self-created context and thereby becomes utterly point-less. We communicate to survive. Period.

The singularity theorists do have a way to transcend the mess (some call it mesh) of our existence. We, whose existence is conditioned on being a person, are bound to a brain that only wants to survive amidst other brains.

How to transcend human existence if the cognitive way of transcendation leads to an incomprehensible world? And should we?

If the answer is yes, we face the task of finding something between the meaninglessness of brains that develop just to understand other but highly similar brains and the unimaginable, even when unavoidable, existence of smart communicating parallel computational processes.

To this end we have to focus on bendings the arrow of our real brain-time development. Pointless conversations may precisely be the substance of our future, if we do nothing to prevent that. This is not a mere academic point. Our informational environment is increasingly orienting our brains to pointless communication. The human capacity to transcend the present is under serious

threat. The singularity theorists are probably sensitive to this threat, but their solution has some escapist tendencies.

Bending the arrow of brain-time into a direction that keeps the future related to the present, requires a different technique of transcendation than the protagonists of the singularity propose. They enhance only a part of a human. It also means a break with the ideology of protagonists of the dominance of the social, the worshippers of human communication, including the omnipresent practioners of irreflective communication.

The singularity theorists transcend humans by, perhaps implicitly, abandoning the concept of person. That will disconnect us from their future. But staying where we are, amounts to the closing in of human development in a small, narrow and incestuous circle, one where all that counts is coping with the brain of the other.

To transcend the present is to transcend personhood without abandoning it. Perhaps even without rewiring our brain. Since abstract personhood is filled in by conversations, we effectively need to transcend communication: we need an *über-language*. If we want one...

Here my story probably ends.