The Spiritual Challenge of Artificial Intelligence, Trans-Humanism, and the Post-Human World
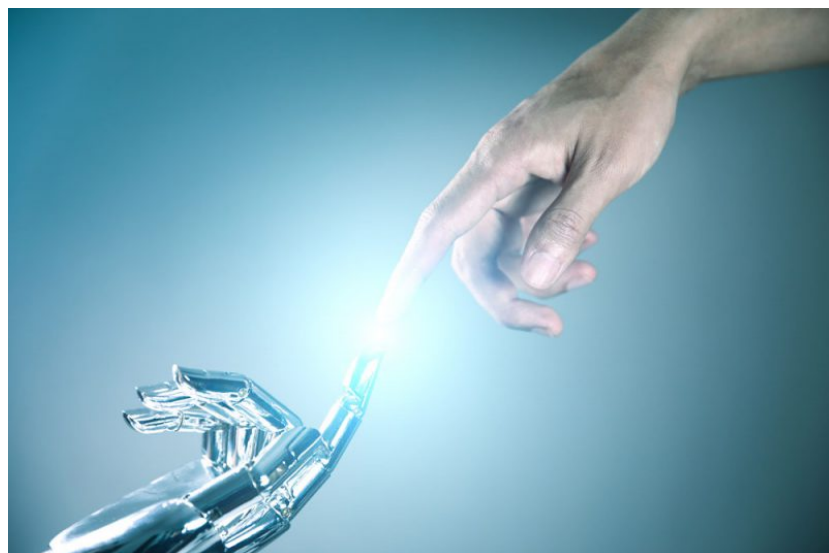
This talk by Shaikh Kabir created quite a stir at the Science and Non-Duality Conference, The Mystery of Being Human, Oct 26th 2018.   What compels me to speak about the challenge of trans-humanism, artificial intelligence, and the post-human world is our culture's lack of a metaphysical

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This talk by Shaikh Kabir created quite a stir at the Science and Non-Duality Conference, The Mystery of Being Human,
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What compels me to speak about the challenge of trans-humanism, artificial intelligence, and the post-human world is our culture's lack of a metaphysical framework to understand what's happening. With the disintegration of religious thought and its replacement with the dogma that only what is measurable is real, even those of us who are spiritual but not religious are a bit weak in the intellectual tools to consider questions of ontology and metaphysics. We have lost the idea of a human nature embedded in a divine order; it has been replaced by the idolization of human personality or ego, with its purely subjective and incoherent impulses.

I've certainly bit off a bit much for a 20 minute talk, but here we go…

Trans-humanism is not merely some geeky tech subculture, nor a futuristic daydream, but a pervasive phenomenon that is already impacting our humanness itself. We're talking about the merging of human beings with technology, and not just at the physical level, but possibly a merging that encroaches upon the most intimate dimensions of the soul.

In previous talks I have described how we live simultaneously in two distinctly different dimensions: one dimension is the world of matter and energy which science explores, measures, and explains. In its most advanced forms it reveals a world where energy and

matter, wave and particle intermix, and even our conventional sense of reality is replaced by an indescribable unity of space time, reminiscent of the deepest formulations of the great mystics. But there is a second dimension, often overlooked in the scientific description of reality, a dimension that not only deserves our attention but is in fact the most valuable, and meaningful, aspect of our subjective experience as human beings. It is typically referred to as consciousness, but I wish to draw attention to the critical fact that this consciousness is not a mere mental experience, but includes our experience of values, qualities, and the sense of relationship, precisely those aspects which C.S. Lewis said "may not contribute to our survival but make life worth living."

Yuval Harari in his book, *Homo Deus*, describes a trajectory of human development beginning with "religion" which explained reality in terms of gods and dogmas. Several centuries ago religion was superseded by humanism, a reliance upon the subjective feelings of human beings. Today, humanism is being replaced by artificial intelligence, and the ideology of "Dataism," the belief that all entities and processes are fundamentally algorithms, and everything, from living creatures to political and material processes are forms of data processing which will soon be better understood and known by artificial intelligence.

In Harari's analysis, religion amounts to no more than arbitrary beliefs and behaviors, which are mostly immature and unscientific attempts to deal with reality. In his analysis the quest for spiritual perception and transformation of the self is not mentioned. The next stage of human development, humanism, is no more than the reliance on subjective experience, such as desires and emotions, but with no reference to any criteria for refining, purifying, or elevating emotions, aspirations, ideals, and intuitions. And now, finally, in the age of artificial intelligence and "Dataism" the human being is conceived only in materialistic terms: our preferences in food, dress, politics, entertainment, sports, cars, and sex form our identity. When he says that artificial intelligence knows us better than we know ourselves, he means these preferences, tastes, and social identifications. Through this new dogma of "Dataism," we are witnessing the erosion of our essential humanness, which is being replaced by **the idolatry of mere information. In the new religion of Dataism subjective experience, qualitative consciousness, the perception of the heart, life's most meaningful experiences are removed from the description of reality.**

Trans-humanism is essentially the merging of human beings with technology, and Dataism collapses the human being into a mere algorithm. The concept of human identity put forward by the transhumanist technocrats is

that we are merely databanks of memories and abilities, mere information processors. A Cybernetic Totalist philosopher like Daniel Dennett would state that humans are simply specialized computers that generate the illusion of being conscious; he would deny any **fundamental ontological distinction between humans and computers**. And Ray Kurzweil believes it is just a matter of time before intelligent machines will be conscious. To these technocrats death is merely the loss of information. If the information could be preserved and retrieved, we could rescue our identities from oblivion and "exist" indefinitely.

Our humanness consists in a spectrum of experience from the deeply personal to the cosmically transcendent. I am making certain assumptions in this talk, that I'm talking to people who are aware that we are more than mere computers transported by biological structures, that we are more than meat imbued with information; that we are essentially spiritual beings.

In contrast to the cybernetic conception of the human being, our true humanness is to be understood in the context of a greater spiritual reality. The phrase **"created in the image of God"** suggests a relationship between individuality and Spirit. All of the spiritual traditions propose that **the human being is sourced in, and has some relationship with, a**

greater spiritual reality. Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam acknowledge that the human being is fundamentally a being with an inner life imbued with awareness, conscience, will, and love. Even Buddhism which is reluctant to assert metaphysical propositions like self, soul, and God, nevertheless makes wisdom and compassion the object of its practice, and attributes of its enlightenment.

Human beings are seekers and collectors of experience. The many ways we seek to fulfill this need include the quest for pleasure, control over the world, intellectual achievement, egoic satisfaction, and, for some, the experience of the transcendent, of the sacred, of ineffable beauty.

Not all inner experiences are equal, equally satisfying, or with equal consequences for our sense of identity. It may be true that some people find pleasure in cruelty, and others seem to journey through life content with the shallowest of experiences, the most banal thoughts, or even with the perpetual numbness of today's depersonalized and busied life.

Is there a qualitative achievement of the soul that operates through a noble aspiration and leads to its realization? And does any of this matter? Some human beings profoundly feel the need to transcend their selfish desires and

achieve coherence of soul. Some strive for beauty of character.

I'm going to offer a definition of spirituality from the perspective of the human's craving for inner experience: **spirituality is the process of developing our capacity for experience on ever more subtle levels of truth and beauty.** Beauty is included here to suggest that our perceptions of "truth" impact us in a qualitative way. This concept is going to be central to my discussion of the challenge of the post-human world we are facing today: our capacity to experience truth and beauty.

Where is our technology taking us, for what purpose, and who is in charge?

Trans-humanism seeks to download the information of individuality into some vehicle or body, whether biological or not, to realize the goal of life extension. Individuality is reduced to mere biology and data storage. For them transcendence is merely a problem of engineering. Are we destined to be a set of memories captured in a box, or in a bio robot?

All of us are aware that smart phones, social media, and virtual reality have impacted our social life, capacities for communication and empathy, and have led to depersonalization and to dissociation. In other words, people are spending more time in the realm of virtual social relationships with the social identity

managed and measured by tweets, Facebook likes, and Instagram posts. We only have to look around ourselves in public spaces to see that more people are relating to and seeking satisfaction from their iPhones than from the people they are with. More and more reports inform us that there's something very different about the younger generation — here I mean early elementary school — which seems to be severely lacking in empathy and the capacity for relationship. But even this revolution in social relationships is only the beginning of the merging of human identity and artificial intelligence.

No one has so far asked our permission to establish a post-human world, a world in which countless ordinary tasks will be performed by AI algorithms. People will be surprised at how fast machine learning will displace jobs. Over the next 10 to 15 years 50% of jobs will be vulnerable, 60 to 85% in developing countries.

AI will gradually and almost unnoticeably outstrip us and leave us dependent on processes that may themselves be designed by artificial intelligence. Inevitably some of us humans will need to augment our biological intelligence to remain relevant and competitive in an economy and society dominated, perhaps controlled by artificial intelligence. What will human dignity mean in a post-human world, when there will be less need for our work and

our main function will be as consumers, useless mouths that require a guaranteed income to perform a useful role in the economy?

What will be required of us in order to catch up with the robots? We will need to become cyborgs ourselves in order to become relevant in a future society. There is already the blueprint for innervated or cyborg tissue. Electronics can be injected into and intermingled with the brain. We will have to augment our biological intelligence with an intelligence nested in the cloud. It's already possible to go into the brain with a tiny needle and implant a mesh that opens up and links you to the Internet.

As this takes off some of us will say we want nothing to do with it, but eventually we will have no choice.

A merger of biological and machine intelligence will be required in order to stay relevant, **but what kind of intelligence will this be?** Will it be more and more a calculating, analytical, impersonal intelligence? And what will happen to emotional intelligence, the intelligence of human relationships, let alone spiritual intelligence, the intelligence that opens us up to higher reality, higher emotions, universal intelligence?

We are already waste deep in the waters of AI, swayed by the flow of information coming at us

which influences what appears on the screen of our awareness, what we choose to pay attention to, what narratives shape our reality, and what does not appear at all.

An example of this is the ability of Amazon to select books you might be interested in based on its knowledge of what you have read in the past, and what other people with similar interests are enjoying now. You are merely an algorithm in the system and the system can more efficiently offer the next books you might want to read, sparing you wasted time searching in bookstores or libraries.

If there were no limit to what Artificial Intelligence could know about you, it could not only supply you with reading materials, but with foods, medical suggestions, social events, interesting ideas, friends, and lovers. It could also begin to help you make decisions in your life much the same way as Google maps now sets the fastest route for travel, avoiding traffic congestion. **Perhaps one day there will be an app called Google Life**, which will know you better than you know yourself, or at least claim to, and guide you through life decisions.

What will be increasingly missing is human self-awareness, the inner life as the domain of aspiration, wisdom, conscience, and what will increasingly disappear are the possibilities of

true individuality, creativity, moral striving, selfless sacrifice, and transcendent awareness.

Instead our focus will be adding more information to the glut of information, posting more self-conscious images of ourselves, authoring more self-preoccupied narratives of our lives, repeating formulaic opinions, floating on the surface of a never-ending river of external data.

And what does it mean when precisely these attributes of humanness, these values, these qualities that seem to arise beyond the human ego, are suppressed, numbed, or replaced by a virtual reality, a hive mind sourced in the cloud, creating and managing our thoughts, influencing what we will pay attention to, and providing a narrative to human life authored by technocrats rather than by world wisdom traditions that recognize the ontological reality of the human being?

Already a particular group of companies—you know their names already—occupy a commanding position as gatekeepers of our collective reality. Could they conceivably become or may they already be the visible part of a rogue artificial intelligence collective, influencing, shaping, even threatening our very humanity? How can we make sure that these gatekeepers of our reality contribute to values derived from an understanding of our true

humanness? This will be the responsibility of those who understand and value the mystery of being human.

Will we allow these companies to control our information so much that they become brainwashing hubs for those forces of profit and control that are in fact dehumanizing humanity and destroying life on earth? This is a conversation we must have at a time when the pace of change is outstripping the ability of government, education, religion, or psychology to adequately respond to artificial intelligence and the trans-humanist agenda.

The Three Gates

Dr. Graham Downing in England has proposed that there are three gates of human perception that are being impacted by artificial intelligence and this metaphysical ignorance of the realm of human values.

The first is the gate that takes us to the outer world. When replaced with virtual reality, actual reality is devalued, and a synthetic reality is substituted, a creation of commercial, political, egoistic forces enhanced by AI.

Second is the gate that takes us to the inner world. This gate will be closed when virtual reality becomes your inner world.

Finally, the gate that takes us to the spiritual world will get narrower than it ever has been.

When we are increasingly enclosed in the synthetic and controlled environments of this technological age, when we are deprived of the natural world and our human response to it, when we are cut off from the living presence of authentic social relationships, we will also be insulated from the most direct impressions of the spiritual nature of reality.

In the end all three of these gates are being systematically and irreversibly damaged. Spiritual coherence is becoming harder to attain; humanity is becoming fractured and dissociated.

The wisdom traditions of mankind, at their best, have sought to **awaken, sustain, mature, and beautify the inner life of the human being.** While religious metaphors — heaven, hell, reward and punishment, sin and virtue — can sometimes be misused as tools of control, or cheapened into shallow clichés, nevertheless they point to a reality of something beyond time and space, an enduring dimension that we ignore at our own peril.

If I were to summarize the aim of spiritual development from the point of view of my own Sufi tradition, it is about reducing the tendencies of egoism that blind us to the spiritual nature of existence, that reality which the human being is inherently qualified to experience. Blatant forms of egoism like

selfishness, arrogance, narcissism, prejudice, and aggression limit our capacities for knowing. The degree of our egoism determines the quality of consciousness we have, and whether that consciousness will include empathy for others, as well as a fair and balanced view of ourselves.

If our consciousness is limited primarily to thoughts based in quantitative analysis, if our consciousness is primarily occupied with outer things rather than with matters of the heart, if our minds are filled more with information than meaning, we are living at a superficial level of existence, a condition of reduced humanity, a humanity that has lost its consciousness of the full range of reality and enclosed itself in a mental box. No matter how great and extensive are the algorithms developed within that box, they are still applicable only within that box, and tell us nothing of what is outside the box.

True spirituality is and has always been the exploration of the wider field of reality; true spirituality cannot be other than true humanness. True spirituality is a process of soul purification and development, the creation and accumulation of a qualitative spiritual "substance" that we can know and experience. Even if our material, mathematical sciences cannot confirm this substance (though it can sometimes read its effects in the human body, and especially the nervous system) the most

important and valued experiences of human life happen in this domain.

The project of human spiritual development is the one thing that all material and social well-being depends on. For without this we are lost, awash in the currents of shallow human conjecture, relentless greed, and possibly a control system that is the enemy of the very humanness we cherish.

Rather than upgrading our biological intelligence by connecting individual human minds and bodies to a supposedly all-knowing network of knowledge produced by artificial intelligence, our task is to awaken our highest innate human faculties. Rather than attaining transcendence by downloading the data of memory into super-computing cyborg flesh, or merging our brains with the simulated reality of an oncoming singularity, our task may be quite the opposite: to benefit, learn from, and develop our humanness within this mortal existence, to align and harmonize ourselves with the cosmological order and through it attain greater coherence, and in the end to upload our souls into eternity.

* * *

Appendix: Miscellaneous information and reflections related to Trans-Humanism

Now let us consider some statements from leaders in the field of human neural enhancement:

Steven Levy, In the Plex

"From the very start its founders saw Google as a vehicle to realize the dream of artificial intelligence in augmenting human reality."

Elon Musk

"With AI we are summoning the demon."

Andy Adamatzky, Director of Unconventional Computing Ctr., University of the West of England

"Personal computing will become intrapersonal and intracellular. Each human neuron will be hijacked by a self-growing, self-repairing molecular network. Computers will be networks of polymer filaments growing inside and together with the human. Seeds of the networks will be injected into embryos in the first month of their development. They will form a gigantic network inside the brain. Computers will be inside us. They will span all living creatures in a United computing network.

Billions of nano-bots (nanoscale robots) coursing through the capillaries of our brains, communicating with each other (over a wireless local area network), as well as with our biological neurons and with the Internet. One application would be to provide full

immersion virtual-reality that encompasses all our senses."

Fay Voshell

"A technological elite comprised of demigods who decide how the rest of us think and act by programming us will result in abuse and deformations as severe as those depicted in the island of Dr. Moreaux or Frankenstein."

Fukuyama

"What would happen when humans and post-humans coexist in the same world? What sort of interactions would occur between the two distinct species, and even between humans of different levels of enhancement? In our interaction with animals, we assume a superior rationality.

The idea leads us to think that we have more rights than them — even the right to kill them. How would this pattern of behavior apply to a situation in which some post-humans recognize that they have a superior rationality compared to 'normal humans'?

The issue here is one of democracy: if not everyone can or wants to receive the same level of enhancement, human rights will be threatened.

Same issue of superiority would apply to the question of inequality. Some people might

be able to afford becoming exponentially more intelligent than others, with the consequence of being able to control those who can't or don't want this enhancement."

In the military domain we are moving toward complex weapon systems that require software so complicated that it exceeds a humans ability to write and verify the software and its performance. AI will be relied upon to detect, deter, adapt and protect at a speed and level of complexity that will surpass human capabilities.

> "In a nonclinical population, immersion in a VE enhances self-reported dissociative symptoms on subsequent real exposure to the real environment, indicating that the VR does indeed modulate the neural mechanisms underpinning presence (Aardema, et al., 2010). Chronic expression of the symptoms in DPD is characterized by "alteration in the perception or experience of the self so that one feels detached from and as if one is an outside observer of one's own mental processes. DPD is often accompanied by alexithymia, which refers to a deficiency in understanding, processing, or describing emotions; more generally a deficiency of conscious access to subjective emotional states (Simeon et al, 2009)."

John A. Wheeler, Center for Theoretical Physics, University of Texas at Austin

"Meaning is important, is even central. It is not only that man is adapted to the universe. The universe is adapted to man. Imagine a universe in which one or another of the fundamental dimensionless constants of physics is altered by a few percent one way or the other. Man could never come into being in such a universe. That is the central point of the anthropic principle. According to this principle, a life-giving factor lies at the centre of the whole machinery and design of the world."

Harari

"Techno-humanism, seeks to upgrade the human mind and give us access to unknown experiences and unfamiliar states of consciousness." A complex and dangerous undertaking. "The study of the human mind has so far assumed that homo sapiens is Homer Simpson."

See also!!!: [Youtube: The War on Consciouness, Dr. Graham Downing.](#)