

The Humanism of Abundance

Following My North Star

By

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Dualistic thinking is problematic because it causes us to draw lines where there aren't any. Just compare a map of the world to a photograph of it and you'll see what I mean. We behave as if the imaginary lines we draw in the sand are real and worth fighting over, even though they're barely dug into the surface of constantly shifting sands. But nobody is to blame for such dualism. Nobody invented it and convinced the rest of us it's how we should think. Differentiating one thing from another, including ourselves from others and the Earth, is what enables us to become conscious of ourselves, others, and the world. Those who can't make these distinctions, who are undifferentiated, remain unconscious and unaware.

So, we perceive truth and reality through the lens of dualism, the lens of opposites and opposition—this is *this* and that's *that*. Yet, as Taoism reminds us, especially with its profound image of Yin and Yang ever churching and turning into each other, with no discernable beginning or end, each always containing a spot of its opposite, duality is how, as conscious beings, we must interpret the world. Yet truth and reality are much larger and more whole than we are capable of understanding. If we don't recognize this, if we can't live with cognitive dissonance by entertaining opposing ideas, we become rigid in our thinking, cruel in its execution, and go through life acting like halfwits.

A few of the common dualities that irk me most are related. One is the duality of *thinking* and *feeling*, suggesting a person is either intellectual or emotional. If one is "too smart," or "too logical," whatever that means, it must mean one is incapable of also having compassion or empathy for others. Or one who feels too deeply must not be thinking straight. Unless there's something terribly wrong, however, like a brain injury or severe mental illness, most of us are capable of both thinking and feeling. Deep thinkers are also deep feelers. Thoughts and feelings may, in fact, be one event. Thoughts incite emotional reactions, and we get in touch with our feelings by rationalizing them, that is, by explaining them to ourselves or others.

Another duality is the notion that empiricists can't be spiritual. This reflects one of the most ancient, if not archetypal, dualities, the duality of Heaven and Earth. Either one is a gross, unenlightened, suffering, earthly creature, or one is a transcendent, high minded, heavenly being. Scientists are empiricists. So are many philosophers. And you better hope your doctor is an empiricist, lest you prefer leaving your care to faith healers or the Fates! Some say I'm not a spiritual person because of my empiricism, which I find as demeaning as it is dumfounding. Anyone who is inspired by anything, and all of us are inspired by something, is spiritual, even those inspired by elegant science, nature, reason, math, and other "earthly" muses. Having different sources of inspiration than our own doesn't mean others aren't

spiritual, and saying they aren't doesn't make us more spiritual. It just makes us sound like fundamentalists.

Disrespecting the spirit of another, which means not acknowledging it—because that's what *respect* means, *too see*—is also dehumanizing, which leads to the false dichotomy I want us to mostly consider here, the duality of *human* and *machine*. In 1999, scientist, inventor, and futurist, Ray Kurzweil wrote, *The Age of the Spiritual Machines*. In it he says, "Twenty-first-century machines—based on the design of human thinking—will do as their human progenitors have done—going to real and virtual houses of worship, meditating, praying, and transcending—to connect with their spiritual dimension."¹ As astounding as this prediction is, that our machines will someday be spiritual, the book's provocative title alone is enough to disrupt the duality we commonly take for granted exists between us and our machines.

Just try imagining if, instead of ambiguous Yin and Yang, we call the two sides of the Taoist mandala, *human* and *machine*, suggesting they are being born from each other, are turning into each other, and that they are so related that each always contains something of the other within itself. We could do the same with the other dualities I've questioned and not be bothered. Say one side is *intellect* and one side is *emotion*, or one side is *matter* and the other *spirit*. This is a helpful exercise because it reminds us these opposites are within all of us and, together, make us whole. None of us is simply one or the other, either intelligent or emotional, either material or spiritual. We can both think and feel. We are both body and spirit. But the notion that humans are machines and machines can be human isn't so obvious and may even cause some to recoil in fear or disgust.

My point here, however, isn't to argue, as Kurzweil and others do, that humans and our machines are coevolving and converging, but that our dualistic thinking on the matter causes us to consider technology to be the very opposite of what it means to be human, and that those who overly use or appreciate technology must be a bit inhuman. I began considering this dualistic paradigm recently when a good friend asked if I haven't strayed from the path of what I call my "North Star"—the humanistic ethic—since attending Singularity University last year, a Silicon Valley based school, co-founded by Ray Kurzweil, that focuses on exponential technologies.

My friend's question, which, I believe, stems from the common misconception this *human vs. technology* duality lead to, is a good one, and deserves a thoughtful response. But it's not the first time I've been accused of forgetting humanity in favor of machines. Several years ago I had the opportunity to spend a day with a delegation from Afghanistan. Due to the U.S. war there, and to what they considered the unjust, unwarranted, and deadly preemptive war in Iraq, and because of the tremendous hurt and loss they were still experiencing because of my country's heartlessness, they were initially rather hostile toward the Americans they met,

¹ Kurzweil, Ray, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, Viking Press, New York, NY, 1999. p. 110.

including me. But only a few hours later, during our lunch together, we had already been around each other enough for them to recognize our common humanity. One of them told me, “We thought that you Americans had been around your machines for so long that you had become machines, without hearts. But now we know you that you are human beings and have hearts just like we do.” So, this duality is widespread. It’s global. It’s universal.

Many consider technology the opposite of humanity, and those who use it, a bit inhuman. When it comes to using technology to blow up our neighbors and their neighborhoods, I’d say there’s some serious truth to this. What could be more inhuman than killing other humans? Yet anthropologists have also long distinguished toolmaking as our species’ specialty, and *technology* is just another word for “toolmaking.” Technology is, perhaps, the most human kind of undertaking. Fish swim, birds fly, and humans make tools.

So, my answer to my friend’s question is, *no*, I have not veered off course. Rather, I went to Singularity University in pursuit of my North Star. I went there because of my commitment to the humanistic ethic. As Erich Fromm defines it, the humanistic ethic, “is based on the principle that ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ what is detrimental to [humanity], *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare.*”² This means everything we do, every aspect of our societies, ought to be for the purpose of promoting human welfare and individual unfolding, including economics, politics, our treatment of the Earth and other creatures, and the technologies we develop. This, it so happens, is the explicit mission of Singularity University. It isn’t merely about educating, inspiring, and empowering leaders to apply technologies, but to apply them for the specific purposes of addressing “humanity’s grand challenges.”

During its 2019 annual Summit, for example, SU’s Executive Director (Summit), Will Weisman, began the event saying, “I’m here because like so many of you I believe in my core that an abundant world is possible in the not too distant future, and I want to do everything that I can to help bring that to fruition. To me that looks like a world where we feed everyone, where we educate everyone, where we shelter everyone, a world where people feel safe and they feel they have a fair shot at living a good life, a world where there are mechanisms to help curb our deficiencies and overcome our most base impulses.” That’s the humanistic ethic talking.

Weisman went on to say, “With so many technologies that are emerging and converging to help us eliminate disease, address climate change, and transform scarcity into abundance across the globe, we have but one thing to do, the very thing we’ve assembled here to do, create the future.” Yet his faith isn’t in the tools but in the toolmakers. “It’s about us,” he says, “It’s about people. That’s how we’ll get there and that’s the only way we’ll get there. We need to do this work together,” reflecting, again, his human centered ethics. Once again, Singularity University promotes exponential technologies for the strict purpose of

² Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

surmounting humanity's greatest challenges. "The stakes have never been higher," Weisman continued. "You understand that we have disconnected ourselves from nature and failed to understand that we are inextricably connected and depend on each other's wellness to thrive as a whole... So, everyone must do well if everyone is ultimately going to do great, and that's how we have to look at the world today. We all need to do well for all of us, as a whole, to be doing great." That, again, is the humanistic ethic. That's my North Star.

Our tools—our technologies—like everything else we do, according to this ethic, ought to be for the purpose of human welfare, which always includes the wellbeing of our planet. One of the most extraordinary and inspiring examples of this involves the Deepwater Horizon offshore oilrig explosion in 2010, resulting in 5 million barrels worth of oil continuously gushing into the Gulf of Mexico over a period of 87 days. But early on, after a conversation with James Cameron, the director of *Titanic* turned ocean activist, Peter Diamandis, a cofounder of Singularity University and the XPRIZE foundation, organized a "rapid response 'flash prize'"³ to anyone who could invent a technology that could recover the spilled oil by no less than 2500 gallons per minute, more than double the rate of then existing technologies.

"Using a combination of traditional methods, cleanup teams managed to remove less than half the oil, approximately 69 million gallons," Diamandis recollects. "Natural dispersal and evaporation removed an additional 84 million gallons. But that left a whopping 53 million gallons, about 26 percent of the spill, to pollute the ocean and adjacent shoreline." 53 million gallons, to give you an idea of it, is still five times the amount of oil spilled by the Exxon Valdez in 1989. 350 teams from around the world preregistered for the incentivized competition, resulting in 10 finalists, all of which exceeded the recovery goal of 2500 gallons per minute. The winning team's tech was able to clean up 4700 gallons per minute, which has since been improved to 6000 gallons per minute. The impacts of this disaster on the ocean, marine life, and shoreline were bad enough, but considering the amount of oil spilled, it would have been much worse were it not for a bunch of toolmakers who cared about human welfare and the welfare of our planet. "Disaster is a motivator because empathy is a motivator," Diamandis says, "and empathy is never higher than when the same disaster movie has been playing on TV for over a month."⁴ So this wasn't about profit or opportunism. What motivated our toolmaking species to make the tools necessary to deal with this disaster was their humanity.

Many SU graduates are also members of the Abundance Digital Community, including myself. It's an online community that allows its members to continually learn and be inspired to do our utmost to make the world a better place for everyone by taking on humanity's greatest challenges. During its 2018 annual 360 Conference, Diamandis interviewed cryptocurrency enthusiast, Brock Pierce, who told those entrepreneurs and business leaders in attendance

³ Diamandis, Peter H.. *Bold: How to Go Big, Create Wealth and Impact the World* (p. 250). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

⁴ *Ibid.*

this new means of securing financial transactions represents an “opportunity to go from building a world of *me*... to create a world of *we*,” then concluded his remarks by explaining the Japanese secret of a happy life, *Ikigai*, “find out what you love, find out what you're good at, find out what the world needs. At the intersection of those three is your life's purpose, and, trust me, the money will follow.”

It's easy to be pessimistic these days and hard not to be. It seems we're always let down by the leaders we elect to represent our interests. Meanwhile, the huge problems we face, like global warming, income inequality, the overwhelming costs of housing, education, and healthcare, the rise of global authoritarians, and so on, seem to only be getting worse. Sometimes it feels like the only thing we can do is point our finger at somebody to blame, using it like a magic wand to transform them into a dragon to slay or a giant to topple. But most the time we're really only pointing our fingers at windmills.

What we have to be careful of is pointing them at real people, dehumanizing them in the process. This is what dualistic thinking facilitates. Me good, you bad. It makes us feel good, or, at least, better about ourselves and the world, but at somebody else's expense. The humanistic ethic, on the other hand, requires us to believe in the innate goodness of humanity, in the goodness of others, in the goodness of our toolmaking species and the tools we make, because our tools are an extension of our humanity. Kurzweil says, “No other tool-using animal on Earth has demonstrated the ability to create and retain innovations in their use of tools.”⁵ So, if we believe in humanity, and in the innate goodness within us all, then we must also believe in the goodness of our toolmaking behaviors.

This, again, isn't to say our technologies haven't led to many disasters, like the Deepwater Horizon, only that they are not innately bad, nor are those who create them or use them. Machines are not necessarily the antithesis of humanity, but can be a profound expression of it, so long, that is, as those wielding them do so in the service of human wellbeing and fulfillment. Far from being heartless, we must realize individuals like Ray Kurzweil, Peter Diamandis, Will Weisman, and Brock Pierce, to paraphrase my Afghanistan friends, “are human beings that have hearts like everyone else,” because they are motivated by love and compassion and care, the best the human soul has to offer. This is why I feel so positive about our future these days, because I believe in toolmakers like these and the tools they make, because I know they are motivated to help create a future where “we feed everyone, where we educate everyone, where we shelter everyone, a world where people feel safe and they feel they have a fair shot at living a good life.” And this is why I'm confident when I say, *yes*, I'm still following my North Star.

⁵ Kurzweil, *ibid.*, p. 23.