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HUMAN FLOURISHING IN THE AGE OF AI



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INTRODUCTION

Why do we do what we do? And what do we need to flourish in life? This is a topic that has gripped philosophers, policy makers, business strategists, parents, lover and friends since time and eternity. Aristotle for example, considered that each human being must use their abilities to their fullest potential and will achieve happiness and enjoyment through the exercise of their realizing their capacities.

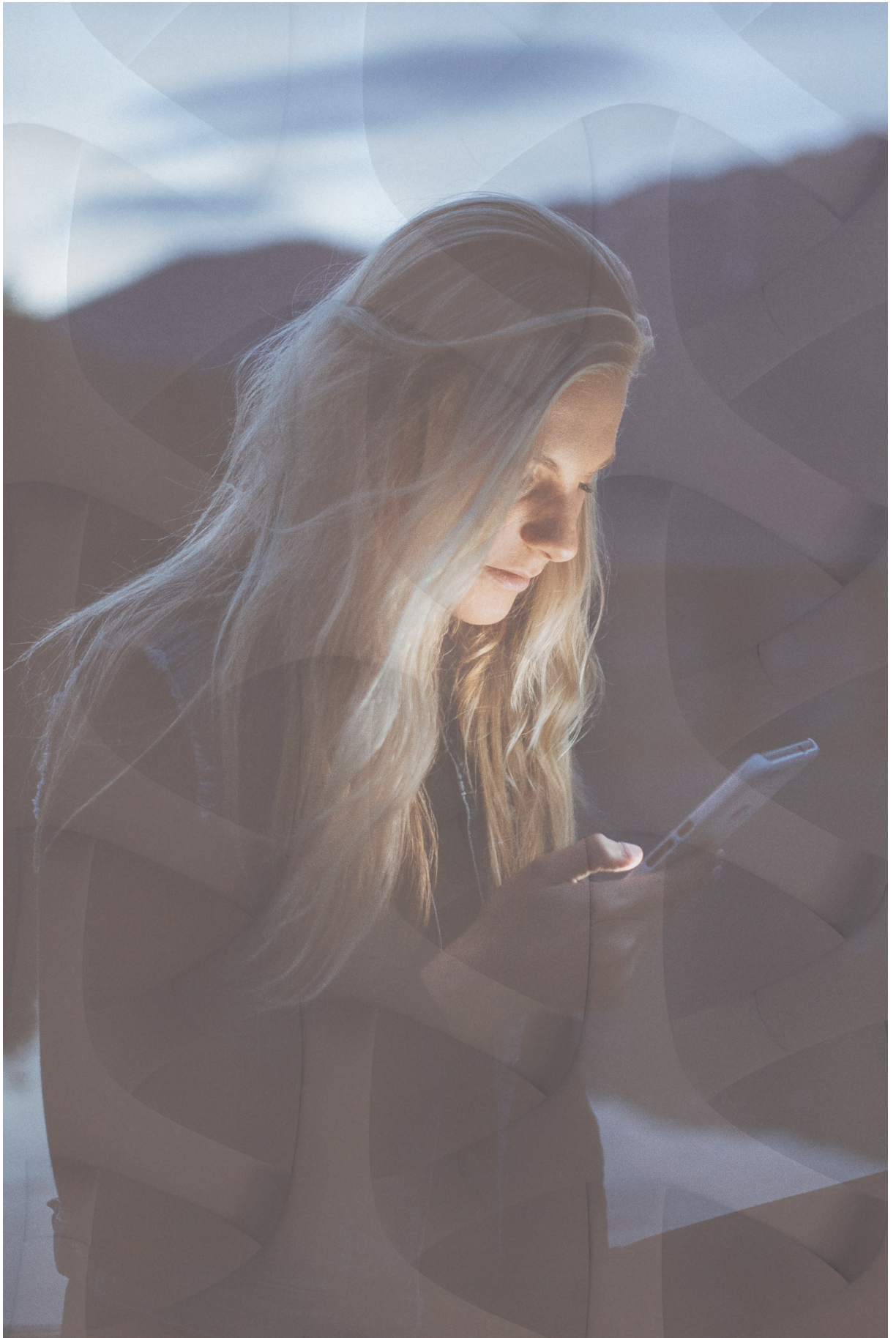
Our relationship with technology has always led us to examine 'what it means to be human'. Throughout history we have thought about ourselves in different ways as a function of the tools we use. The way they have defined our historical epochs, such as the Stone Age and Iron Age, is testament to this. We can also find examples of how technology has shaped the way we think throughout history:

PRINTING PRESS: This moved our society from an oral tradition to one where stories were shared and hand-written books read aloud, to one where we consumed knowledge individually. This is considered to have been responsible for ushering in an era of individualisation.

TELESCOPE: This challenged the notion of humans at the centre of the universe and our lives dictated by God, and instead allowed us to consider that our lives are determined by mathematical laws of nature.

CLOCKS: These served as a means of organising workforces and were key to changing attitudes about personal achievement and productivity.

As we enter the age of AI, we need to think about the way in which this technology is gradually encouraging us to look at ourselves in a different way. But first, we need a clear view on what flourishing actually looks like.



WHAT IS HUMAN FLOURISHING?

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The case for love

We have tended to operate using a dualistic mode of motivation according to which people operate either based on self-interest or as a result of 'something higher'. Many philosophers of the analytical tradition, for example, would consider that people are moved and directed solely by reason.

There is another dimension to human behaviour that is rarely directly addressed. And that is love. We often act out of love in a way that goes beyond any kind of self-interest or logic. We do all sorts of things that may be considered less than optimal for our own well-being such as learning a musical instrument, writing books, tending to our gardens. In these cases, there is nothing unusual when we talk about the way we are doing these things out of love – and this is quite different to acting out of self-interest or morality.

Of course, there may be some instances where acting out of love may not always be a good thing. We may fall in love and hand over all our possessions to someone who we may consider is less than worthy of that love. A caveat to this is therefore that acting out of love, is that the object of the love be worthy. And if this is the case, then behaviour which is guided by these reasons is at the heart of what it means to love a meaningful life.

Defining meaning

What exactly do we mean by meaning in life? It is not uncommon to hear people concerned that their lives lack meaning. We look admiringly at people with lives that we consider meaningful. But what is meaning? Philosopher Susan Wolf proposes that meaning arises from 'loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way'. She goes on to clarify what she means by saying that 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.'



“Meaning arises from ‘loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way’”

A person's life can be meaningful if they are 'gripped, excited, interested, engaged' – that is if we love something rather than being bored or disaffected by it. But if the thing which the person loves is worthless then that life is hardly meaningful. If our love is for doing sudoku puzzles or smoking cigarettes all day then this does not make a meaningful life, however much we may love it.

She also makes the point that there needs to be an engagement with the 'worthy' object of love in a positive way. The mere passive recognition towards the value of the object is not enough for a meaningful life. Wolf suggests we need to be in an active relationship with the object of our attention, 'to create it, protect it, promote it, honour it or more actively affirm it in some way'.

We keep coming back to the theme of the subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. The subjective attraction may be considered as looking for one's passion. When we are complaining that our lives lack meaning then we are perhaps saying that some subjective good is missing and that we need to fill this gap.

But at the same time, when we think about whose lives are meaningful, we tend to look at their lives in terms of the objective assessments of their meaningfulness. We refer to painters, philosophers, scientists and so on with hardly a thought for their experience of their lives. Wolf's view of meaningfulness therefore weaves these together.

She goes on to explain why either of these is necessary but not sufficient for a meaningful life. There are plenty of ways in which we can find pleasure on our lives, Wolf suggests 'Riding a roller coaster, meeting a movie star, eating a hot fudge sundae, finding a great dress on sale, can all give pleasure, even intense pleasure'. However, we can easily see that they do not offer fulfilment. We may have all these things and still find something lacking in our lives.

At the same time, we may be engaged in hugely fulfilling activities but for it not to offer all that much in the way of immediate happiness. Writing a book, running a marathon or maintaining a garden can mean a great deal of stress and discomfort. However, the fact that we willingly put up with this suggests that fulfilment is a driving force in the lives of many of us, in a way that is different from happiness or pleasure.

Finding things worthy of love

In a sense then, to feel fulfilled we must not compromise too quickly by being satisfied by the more superficial goals of ease, prestige and material wealth. Being fulfilled, according to this perspective, is a type of hedonism. By seeking fulfilling activities then we can have the most positive experience – and this is all that matters.

But if this is the case, then it should not really matter what these activities that we engage in are. Wolf asks us to consider the cases of a man who loves to make handwritten copies of the text of War and Peace, or a woman whose life revolves around that of her goldfish. It can be hard to make negative judgements about other peoples' lives but nevertheless, despite the feeling of fulfilment that is gained for these individuals, can we really say that their lives are meaningful?

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A classic Greek myth is that of Sisyphus Fulfilled, who is condemned to a life of rolling a stone up a hill and letting it roll back down again for his entire afterlife. This is taken as a paradigm of a meaningless existence. The philosopher Richard Taylor offers a thought experiment where the Gods take pity on Sisyphus and inject a substance in his veins to transform him from someone for whom stone rolling is a terrible fate, to someone who loves stone-rolling more than anything else. Sisyphus is transformed into someone who finds stone rolling to be exceptionally good.

However, despite Sisyphus' task no longer being boring, then just as with the handwriting copies of War and Peace or revolving our lives around a pet goldfish, simply because a life is no longer boring it nevertheless remains futile. There is no value to these efforts, nothing ever results from them. As a result, it seems that our subjective experience is something that is necessary but not sufficient.

The view Wolf proposes is for the 'objective' side of the equation to also be present, that of being involved in something 'other than one-self'. Of course, there is a possibility that we get involved in meaningful activities that we do not find fulfilling – we may be helping the poor of our community but if that brings no reward to how we feel, then it is not clear if that offers any meaning to one's life. There is an expectation or hope that when we get involved in something objectively bigger than ourselves that we will find it subjectively rewarding.

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We can even be able to take the view that it may even be worse to be subjectively fulfilled by something that is objectively 'not worth it'. Our Tolstoy copier or Goldfish obsessive may be happy but at the same time it is hard not to pity them for being fulfilled by such a task. Somehow it seems far from ideal.

Fitting-Fulfilment

The 'Fitting-Fulfilment' view suggests that indulging one's passions offers a particularly rewarding type of subjective experience but this is not in itself what is valuable. The thing we love doing must be objectively good. And this is in part to do with a need that we can see one's life as valuable in a way that can be seen from a perspective other than our own

Our drive for this is due in part to our need to see ourselves from an objective, external perspective. As Thomas Nagel would say, we aspire to have a 'view from nowhere' upon ourselves. In addition to this, we have a need for self-esteem. We want to be able to see ourselves as good and valuable.

We might add to this, considers Wolf, in this way:

'The thought that one's life is like a bubble that, upon bursting, will vanish without trace can lead some people to despair. The thought that one lives in an indifferent universe makes some people shudder.'

If we can think of ourselves as being engaged in a project of independent worth may put some of these feelings to rest. In some way, we start to see a relationship here between meaningfulness and the topic that has been around since humans first appeared of, 'what is the meaning of life?'

The feeling of being involved in a topic that has independent value, that takes us out of our self is thrilling as it talks directly to our social natures and our desire not to be alone. Through our activities, writing, fighting injustice, helping the poor in our community then it is likely that others will also appreciate what

we are doing. This helps make us part of a community, sharing values and a point of view. And whilst this may not be realised in terms of immediate returns, artists and writers may take solace in thinking that there will come a time perhaps even after their death, others will understand and value their work.

Some may think that these are issues which are the luxuries of an intellectual class that has no other worries. But the fact that a need for a meaningful life does not surface until our more basic needs are met is no reason not to recognise its importance.

We have a desire to see our lives as worthwhile from a point of view that is external to ourselves and be part of a community (immediate or notional) that can understand us and to some degree share our point of view. As Wolf puts it:



“By engaging in projects of independent value, by protecting, preserving, creating and realizing value the source of which lies outside of ourselves, we can satisfy these interests. Indeed, it is hard to see how we could satisfy them in any other way.”

Our desire for a meaningful life is not about feeling a particular way but an interest that life *be* a certain way, one that can be admired by others and is connected in some way with independent value.

What we need to be able to do is understand what the things are that people love doing that is objectively good. Which then raises the question of the role of AI. Can this facilitate a meaningful and flourishing life, or is it fundamentally problematic?

THE ROLE OF AI

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One of the fundamental issues to grasp about AI is that it is not just a technology. As Kate Crawford, Crawford (Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research, the Co-founder and Director of Research at the AI Now Institute) recently put it, “AI isn’t just tech; it’s power, politics, and culture”.

This is no surprise to humanities researchers who have long explored the culture of technology. One of the popular examples of the way in which technology choices reflect the dominant values in society is that of Robert Moses who was New York’s ‘master builder’ between 1920 – 1970. He designed 200 overpasses on Long Island but they were too low for the high public busses to get under them. Essentially this was to make it difficult for ‘lower classes’ to get out to Jones Beach, a public park he had designed.

Technology needs to be viewed not only through the lens of scientific progress but also with the lens of how it reflects and plays back to us our values and power relationships in society. As such, we need to look at technology both using the lens ‘Silicon Valley’ and those of activists (a wide range of technology critics such as Jaron Lanier, Brett Frischmann and Sherry Turkle). In the table below, we can see the way in which technology has influenced the workplace, for example, from these different perspectives:

THE SILICON VALLEY PERSPECTIVE

- More rewarding work – as AI does more rewarding work
- Routinized work undertaken by robots
- Smarter decisions – as it is possible to use much more data
- Less biased decisions – as humans are not part of the process

THE ACTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

- Taylorism – squeezing more value out of employees
- 'Dark kitchens' – poor working conditions are increasingly out of site
- Fauxtimation – AI often relies on poorly paid human to deliver the functionality
- Embedding bias – humans create algorithms that embed and hide bias

In a sense there has always been this dichotomy with new technology. There are upsides and downsides. But perhaps what is different today, is the degree of 'humanisation' that comes with AI. Our tendency to humanise our tools is well known. As long ago as the 60's, the 'Eliza effect' documented the way in which a simple computer programme designed to mimic psychotherapy can create an intimate response from users.

But the very description of AI is suggesting an equivalence in the technology (intelligence) with human attributes. Indeed, Pepper is a good example of this humanisation. This is an AI powered robot that was recently 'interviewed' by the UK's House of Commons. Essentially in the process being granted the status of human.

The makers of Pepper suggest it is able to 'perceive human emotion, and 'loves to interact with you, Pepper wants to learn more about your tastes, your habits, and quite simply who you are.'

This, suggests writer Sherry Turkle, is a problem:



"We nurture what we love, and we love what we nurture. If a computational object or robot asks for our help, asks us to teach it or tend to it, we attach. That is our human vulnerability. And that is the vulnerability sociable robots exploit with every interaction. The more we interact, the more we help them, the more we think we are in a mutual relationship."

So, we need to be very clear headed about the possibilities this generates for being detrimental to human flourishing. It is very easy for humans to consider themselves to poorer quality versions of these AI driven developments.

On the other hand, people such as Professor Genevieve Bell suggests that our concerns about AI are overdone:

“The notion of humans and technology in a kind of oppositional and antagonistic relationship is located in a very particular place in world stories. The Japanese are not off there worrying about AI achieving consciousness. They’re actually off building robots that look like seals so that you can pet them and they hum in your lap... The west is exquisitely determined to imagine that the only thing that gets to be sanctioned is humans and we have to be the top of the tree.”

IN CONCLUSION

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There are no simple answers to the notion of human flourishing – why would there? This is an issue that we have been grappling with for human eternity. However, the emergence of AI has led a certain urgency to this debate. Just what does it mean to be human?

Susan Wolfe offers a compelling vision of what we are looking for in life. The degree to which AI can help to deliver on this is complex. If we agree with Kate Crawford (and many others involved in reviewing technology developments) then the way in which AI is used currently does not necessarily support human flourishing, quite the opposite in fact. What is needed are powerful institutions that have human flourishing as the central concern of their mission.

A valuable perspective on this comes from Neil his classic book 'Technopoly'. He argues that in a 'tool using' culture, we may be dependent on machinery but:



'...tools ought still to be their servants, not their masters. They would allow their tools to be presumption, aggressive, audacious, impudent servants, but that tools should rise above their servile status is an appalling thought'.

Postman outlines how our environment is in danger of changing from a tool-using 'technocracy' to one where humans are effectively in service to tools, Technopoly. In this instance:



'society is best served when human beings are placed at the disposal of their techniques and technology, that human beings are, in a sense, worth less than their machinery.'

The starting point for an institution concerned with human flourishing is to explore perspectives about what it means to be human and then see how technology and AI can be at the service of this. The danger is that we look at the issue of human flourishing with certain assumptions that the way technology develops is independent of our culture, society and values and follows an inevitable pattern.

Institutions that don't fall into this trap and instead place technology in the service of human flourishing, will be a very powerful force.

Further reading

Neil Postman: Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology

Sherry Turkle: Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other

Susan Wolf: Meaning in Life and Why It Matters

Jaron Lanier: You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto

Brett Frischmann & Evan Selinger: Re-Engineering Humanity

Harry G. Frankfurt: The Reasons of Love

Donald A. MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman: The Social Shaping of Technology

Nicholas Carr: The Shallows: How the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember

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