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Posthumanism Meets Surveillance Capitalism

How to Delete the Manifest Image

Patrick Gamez



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Humanity is at a crossroads in its history, precariously poised between mastery and extinction. The fast-developing array of human enhancement therapies and technologies (e.g., genetic engineering, information technology, regenerative medicine, robotics, and nanotechnology) are increasingly impacting our lives and our future. The most ardent advocates believe that some of these developments could permit humans to take control of their own evolution and alter human nature and the human condition in fundamental ways, perhaps to an extent that we arrive at the “posthuman”, the “successor” of humanity. This series brings together research from a variety of fields to consider the economic, ethical, legal, political, psychological, religious, social, and other implications of cutting-edge science and technology. The series as a whole does not advocate any particular position on these matters. Rather, it provides a forum for experts to wrestle with the far-reaching implications of the enhancement technologies of our day. The time is ripe for forwarding this conversation among academics, public policy experts, and the general public. For more information on Palgrave Studies in the Future of Humanity and its Successors, please contact Phil Getz, Editor, Religion & Philosophy: phil.getz@palgrave-usa.com.

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The first version of this monograph fit my most natural mode of expression—a short, punchy, and not nearly well enough developed intervention. Encouragement and feedback from Shannon Mussett and Michael Ardoline, especially, was invaluable, as was thoughtful commentary from David Roden, Adam Rosenthal, Robert Goulding, and three anonymous reviewers from Palgrave, which led to the final version more than doubling in length. This of course means more than twice as many opportunities for me to be dead wrong. But their comments served solely to improve the book, and the errors are, as usual, solely mine.

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This book has its origins in a particularly unhinged period of my life, which might have made a deep dive into the further edges of philosophical posthumanism even more appealing. At any rate, I definitely owe many thanks to Danielle Schweiss for her patience as I dragged it across the finish line.

Praise for *Posthumanism Meets Surveillance Capitalism*

“This book shows how both ‘right’ and ‘left’ accelerationism are ultimately undermined by contemporary machine learning-based AI. Gamez not only develops an original position in the field of posthumanism, but also shows how machine learning-based AI, through its confrontation with accelerationism, prometheanism and folk psychology, has direct and important philosophical implications.”

—Dionysis Christias, *Academy of Athens, Greece*

“With impeccable scholarship and rare critical precision, Patrick Gamez takes the most important and radical arguments of recent Promethean and accelerationist thought as a foundation upon which he builds a compelling and timely critique of platform capitalism and of our responses toward it today and tomorrow.”

—Richard Iveson, *Goldsmiths College, University of London, London, UK*

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CHAPTER 1

Let There be Light

Abstract In this first chapter I introduce the basic aims of the text, before exploring the thermodynamic and informational themes of Asimov’s “The Last Question.” Accelerationism and Prometheanism have always been informed by the tropes of science fiction, and I argue here that the themes of reducing entropy and the transcendence of artificial intelligence, with their roots in the fledgling post-war science of cybernetics, inform both of these posthuman projects. I discuss the statistical mechanical interpretation of the Second Law of thermodynamics, and its connections to information theory, as well as Maxwell’s Demon, taking some time to emphasize that classical Shannon information is a non-semantic measure of probability.

Keywords Asimov, Isaac • Thermodynamics • Information • Cybernetics • Science fiction • Sociotechnical imaginaries

1.1 POSTHUMANISM AMIDST THE RUINS OF MIND

This is a book about the end of the mind. In it, I engage with two intimately related forms of philosophical posthumanism, each of which is engaged in attempts to think about how certain ways of technologically extending, intensifying, or radicalizing aspects of the *mind*, whether desire or reason, might lead to the end of the *human*, which can then be seen as

a mere limitation of these more interesting forces and capacities. As will be seen, I am deeply sympathetic to these views; there is something compelling, both aesthetically and theoretically, about the thought of an alien future that promises radical alterity. And this appeal isn't limited to the partisans of technological posthumanism, as Levinasian and deconstructive views of futurity, just for example, seem committed precisely to the arrival of such Otherness. Unfortunately, as will also be seen, I will be arguing that if one is sympathetic to this sort of posthumanism, the contemporary deployment of AI in platform capitalism doesn't merely herald the end of the human but also the mind that was to surpass it.

I make use of the tropes of science fiction, specifically those concerning the physical and informational dimensions of entropy and the thermodynamic arrow of time, and the way these are in turn incorporated into the cybernetic imagination of artificial intelligence, to test the promises of Prometheanism, a distinctive intellectual project at the intersection of posthumanism and transhumanism. Prometheanism is distinctive in both its commitment to rationalism and its commitment to a sort of technological inhumanism; rationality doesn't lie in human nature, or even in specifically *human* practices. Rather, reason is constructed by the dynamic development of technological systems, a future achievement. In this, Prometheanism is a mirror image of accelerationism, a controversial view on which the rapid development of our information technologies serves not to rationalize us but to intensify our desires past the point of being bound by, or intelligible to, the norms of reason.

I hope to show that by following the trajectory of these theoretical movements, what we find is neither the architecture of an artificial reason nor the explosion of that edifice by augmented desire. Rather, if we think of the mind, or mindedness, as a *technological* phenomenon, we have to take seriously the epistemic and normative dimensions of platform capitalism, wherein, I shall argue, the entire structure—the frame in which reason and desire find their proper place—collapses. I conclude by providing a brief gesture at the bleak sort of posthumanism that could emerge from the ruins of mind left in its wake.

1.2 THE CYBERNETIC IMAGINARY

How should we orient ourselves toward the future? In 1956, Isaac Asimov published “The Last Question.” Despite his long and stupendously successful subsequent career, it remained, in his words, “of all the stories [he

had] written... [his] absolute favorite.”¹ The short story is a fascinating reflection on what it would, or could, mean to orient oneself toward the future. What makes it such a distinctively contemporary reflection is that it is pitched thermodynamically, as it were. In it, humans have created something that we would now call “artificial intelligence,” the Multivac. Not only would we call it artificial intelligence, but the Multivac resembles, in some respects, *today’s* version of artificial intelligence, that is, a machine learning algorithm that feeds on data, extracting its answers and correcting itself. It can answer any question put to it far more quickly and accurately than a human (ultimately, than any organic intelligence at all), and nothing else serves to correct it. On May 21, 2063, Multivac is asked the last question, not because it is the last question to be asked, but the last to be answered. The question, raised by an attendant playing hooky, is, in its essence, “Is it possible to ultimately reduce entropy?”

It is worth noting that Asimov has his character raise the question in the context of humanity’s transition to entirely renewable solar energy; the massive computing power of Multivac allows humanity to escape, in advance, an Anthropocene disaster that doesn’t even register in the early atomic age. Yet the orientation toward the future is an *energetic* one, a *thermodynamic* one, a thoroughly post-Newtonian one. The last question is prompted by the realization that even the sun is not *truly* renewable.

On the canonical, statistical mechanical understanding of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, entropy is a measure of disorder, of the tendency of systems to settle into a state of equilibrium, which, at the molecular level, ultimately means the tendency toward a state of completely random stillness. Unlike the forces of the Newtonian cosmos, which are essentially time-symmetrical and reversible, thermodynamic processes are essentially *asymmetrical* and time-directed: energy always dissipates, systems grow more disordered, and as long as we organized organisms and our posthuman descendants seek to maintain, or even grow, the vast workspaces of our civilization, the only fate that awaits is the heat death of the universe.²

¹ *The Complete Stories*, Introduction, e-book edition.

² I say “Newtonian” here to emphasize the wrench that thermodynamics throws in the mechanisms of the physical worldview in which it emerged. But both quantum mechanical and relativistic descriptions of the world yield time-symmetric fundamental laws as well. Contemporary physics does in fact have other hypotheses on offer for the end of everything, but the “Big Freeze” or heat-death hypothesis is the most widely held view in the field. See Émile P. Torres, *Human Extinction: A History of the Science and Ethics of Annihilation*, 403.

But if energetic, then also informatic. The same year that Asimov published his story saw the birth of the transistor, an electronic revolution that, in turn, would unlock the potential of the information age that had just begun to dawn, eight years earlier, with Claude Shannon's *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. In the latter, Shannon had not only ventured to quantify the content of communication, independent of anything like *meaning*, as *information*. I take some time in the following paragraphs to explain this notion of information in a little more detail. While for my purposes here, little hinges on the technical details, it is worth noting some important themes, and articulating something of the cybernetic imaginary within which Asimov and—as we shall see—the accelerationists and Prometheans work, and which may well constitute our shared horizon for conceptualizing thought.³

In its most basic sense, Shannon information is a representation of the relative probability of a state of affairs; information representing a highly unlikely state is greater than information representing a highly likely one. This probability is what is transmitted through a communication channel. Not for nothing, Shannon's information theory made central use of the concept of entropy. Indeed, it is often reported (though probably the anecdote is apocryphal) that von Neumann specifically told Shannon to appropriate the thermodynamic concept of entropy for information theory, precisely because the mathematical formulae governing the information conveyed by a channel and the entropy of a system are the same.⁴ So, the universe of information has laws governing how much a message can be compressed, for example, or how much surprise a given channel of communication can produce, laws intimately related to those governing the slow settling of the cosmos into silence.

And yet, despite living in an “information” age, one in which unimaginably massive amounts of information are collected and constantly transmitted across vast distances, none of this information *means* anything. It is important to stress, here, that while colloquially (and historically) the term “information” has often denoted *specific semantic content*, as Shannon uses the term this is no longer the case. Indeed, insofar as one minimal

While the idea originates in the nineteenth century and thus has an air of “high modernist” about it, it nevertheless remains, for now, an inescapable horizon for thought.

³ I use the term “imaginary” here in the sense outlined by Sheila Jasanoff, as a set of future-oriented concepts and norms that shape intellectual, technological, and political projects. See “Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imagination of Modernity.”

⁴ Lombardi, Holik, and Vanna, “What is Shannon Information?” 1988.

condition of semantic content, or meaning, is normativity, information *cannot* be meaningful; our everyday sense of misinformation or disinformation has no place in communication theory. Even the arguably most basic semantic norm—truth—falls away. A false message, even a necessarily false one, is just as informative as a true one. Rather, entropy, or the quantity of information conveyed through a channel, is the measure of *surprise*, or *unlikeliness resolved*, by the receipt of a message; if any message, independent of observer or origin, can be quantified, the only relevant measure is how *probable or improbable* the state it relates is.

This disconnect from *meaning* and, in turn, from *truth* has led philosophers to try to appropriate the communicative “flowing” of Shannon information while salvaging some normativity for it. The classic example of this is the epistemic conception of information put forward by Dretske, which ultimately makes information a *de re* veridical representation.⁵ And the positive upshot of this is a conception of information—nowadays called “semantic information”—that can approximate the way we colloquially use the term in epistemic contexts. The cost of doing so, however, is that this is simply not Shannon information, the mathematical quantity that underlies the computing revolution of the twentieth century. This is made explicit, for example, in contemporary attempts to formulate a semantic notion of information, most notably that of Luciano Floridi, once referred to as “Google’s Philosopher,” which explicitly *require* a truth-constraint.⁶ While Floridi is agnostic about the mechanism of this truth-constraint, Fred Dretske’s strategy—and, to my mind, the most plausible one—is to stipulate a *causal* connection, from the information source to the recipient of the message (leaving aside the possibility that the source of information may not have any connection whatsoever to the content of information). However, as Richard Foley points out, this ultimately ends up cutting anything distinctive about *information* out of the account.⁷ Foley’s concerns are grounded in epistemic internalism and are beside the point here. Rather, what matters for us is that Shannon information is not described in causal terms.

⁵ Richard Foley, “Dretske’s ‘Information-Theoretic’ Account of Knowledge,” 59.

⁶ Cf. “Is Semantic Information Meaningful Data?” and “Semantic Information and the Correctness Theory of Truth.” On the point about Google, see Robert Herit, “Google’s Philosopher.”

⁷ “Dretske’s ‘Information-Theoretic’ Account of Knowledge,” 165–166.

Why this short excursion into the concept of information and its epistemic foibles? To stress that *information as such* is not content. At the heart of it there is no meaning, no cause, only probabilities.

And the same non-causal, non-semantic probabilistic void lies at the heart of statistical mechanics, which purports to explain thermodynamics, in particular its perplexing Second Law, and, in turn, the arrow of time that points us unfailingly toward the lifeless stillness of absolute equilibrium. For how could one explain the irreversible, time-directed processes of thermodynamics solely in terms of the time-symmetric causal laws of mechanics, whether classical or quantum? Boltzmann's great insight was to shift our gaze from the macro-scale to the micro-scale, to the scale of molecules, the great collection of which was beyond our capacity to ascertain the position and velocity of each, which ultimately do not matter, but from which we could draw statistical, probabilistic inferences. The causal histories of each and every molecule, in total, are opaque to us. And that is fine because they are irrelevant; any could be reversed, in principle, moving from disorder to order, and yet entropy continues to increase. As mentioned, the link between the informatic and the energetic was no secret, as it could not be: the equations for entropy in each are identical, *save for the curious property* that their values were inverted: an increase in thermodynamic entropy corresponds to a decrease in information-theoretic entropy. As everything tends toward equilibrium, nothing becomes surprising.

Deciphering the connection between information and energy, probability and time, became central for a whole host of disciplines. In part this is because it lay at the heart of cybernetics. As a number of recent works have shown, the rise of cybernetics in the post-war period, its extension into disciplines from anthropology to biology to economics, and its eventual dissolution into a variety of separate sciences and concepts, like auto-poiesis and cognitive science, have profoundly shaped our concepts and knowledge. In this sense, even if cybernetics is in some sense a "failed" science—the alchemy, or perhaps the Gnosticism, of the twentieth century—it still constitutes the vanishing horizon of our sociotechnical imaginary. In particular, the founders of cybernetics, John von Neumann, whose interaction with Shannon we've already noted, and Norbert Wiener, saw in the inverse correlation of information and entropy the possibility of creating a universal science of order and organization.⁸ While the earliest

⁸ See Ronald Kline, *The Cybernetics Moment or, Why We Call Our Age the Information Age*, esp. Ch. 1 and Ch. 3.