

Humanity: An Endangered Idea?

Edited by
INGOLF U. DALFERTH and
RAYMOND E. PERRIER

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Humanity: An Endangered Idea?

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edited by
Ingolf U. Dalferth and
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Preface

The theme of 40th Philosophy of Religion Conference in Claremont in 2019 was *Humanity: An Endangered Idea?* Much of the discussion of personhood in recent years has focused on the differences between humans and animals, usually with the intention of showing how much we share with other living beings and why they should not be judged and treated significantly differently from us humans. But just when one welcomes this development, the question remains open, what then is it that distinguishes us as human beings? How do we want to live as humans among other living beings, and what is the core and the point of our humanity? Do we have to renounce such an idea because it gives reason to discriminate against other living beings? Or do we need it today at least as much as in the past, because only then can we reasonably judge where the meaningful description of differences turns into unjustified evaluations and devaluations of others? This volume marks some cornerstones of an overdue discussion that the humanities cannot avoid if they want to have a future in the academy.

We had to wait a long time for the final version of some contributions, and in some cases, we had to give up waiting. But what we now present has still become a substantial volume that sheds a differentiated light on the subject and makes an important contribution to its discussion.

We are grateful to the *Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum* (Hamburg) which has again generously provided ten conference grants to enable doctoral students and post-docs to take part in the conference and present their work on the theme of the conference. Five of those papers are published here along with the other contributions to the conference. We couldn't do what we do without its support. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Claremont Graduate University and Pomona College. We are indebted to the contributors to this volume, to Mohr Siebeck who has accepted the manuscript for publication, and to Trevor Kimball (San Luis Obispo) who helped to get the manuscript ready for publication.

Ingolf U. Dalferth
Raymond E. Perrier

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Introduction: Humanity: An Endangered Idea?

INGOLF U. DALFERTH

1. GPT-2

A week before the conference in Claremont on February 22–23, 2019, OpenAI released a very powerful language model called GPT-2.¹ “GPT-2 is a large transformer-based language model with 1.5 billion parameters, trained on a dataset of 8 million web pages. GPT-2 is trained with a simple objective: predict the next word, given all of the previous words within some text.”² The model “generates synthetic text samples” in a variety of styles, from news articles to fan fiction “in response to the model being primed with an arbitrary input. The model [...] adapts to the style and content of the conditioning text.”³ And it is astonishingly successful in doing so.

Here is an example.⁴ The system prompt (human written) was the following:

In a shocking finding, scientist discovered a herd of unicorns living in a remote, previously unexplored valley, in the Andes Mountains. Even more surprising to the researchers was the fact that the unicorns spoke perfect English.

The model completion (machine-written) looked like this:

The scientist named the population, after their distinctive horn, Ovid’s Unicorn. These four-horned, silver-white unicorns were previously unknown to science. [...] Dr. Jorge Pérez, an evolutionary biologist from the University of La Paz, and several companions, were exploring the Andes Mountains when they found a small valley, with no other animals or humans. [When they] ventured further into the valley [...] Pérez and his friends

¹ Cf. <https://towardsdatascience.com/openai-gpt-2-the-model-the-hype-and-the-controversy-1109f4bfd5e8> (4/21/2022).

² <https://blog.openai.com/better-language-models/>. Cf. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/open-ai-warnt-vor-der-eigenen-entwicklung-gpt-2-16047940.html>. (4/21/2022). Since May 2020, an improved version GPT-3 has been on the market, which is even more effective.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The following is taken from <https://blog.openai.com/better-language-models/>. Cf. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/open-ai-warnt-vor-der-eigenen-entwicklung-gpt-2-16047940.html>. (4/21/2022).

were astonished to see the unicorn herd. These creatures could be seen from the air without having to move too much to see them – they were so close they could touch their horns. While examining these bizarre creatures the scientists discovered that the creatures also spoke some fairly regular English. Pérez stated, “We can see, for example, that they have a common ‘language,’ something like a dialect or dialectic.” Dr. Pérez believes that the unicorns may have originated in Argentina, where the animals were believed to be descendants of a lost race of people who lived there before the arrival of humans in those parts of South America. While their origins are still unclear, some believe that perhaps the creatures were created when a human and a unicorn met each other in a time before human civilization. According to Pérez, “In South America, such incidents seem to be quite common.” However, Pérez also pointed out that it is likely that the only way of knowing for sure if unicorns are indeed the descendants of a lost alien race is through DNA. “But they seem to be able to communicate in English quite well, which I believe is a sign of evolution, or at least a change in social organization,” said the scientist.”⁵

The interesting thing about this text is not the fairly absurd story, but that the alleged report was written without any help of humans. The model generated it on the basis of the dataset on which it was trained, and it could generate an endless number of similar texts unsupervised by any human being. After training the model, humans are not needed any more – or less and less. We are creating technologies whose output is so human-like that we can hardly distinguish any more between a human-generated text and a machine-generated text.

It is easy to see why OpenAI has released only a small version of this model and not “the dataset, training code, or GPT-2 model weights.”⁶ There is a real danger of applying “these models for malicious purposes, including [. . .]: generate misleading news articles; impersonate others online; automate the production of abusive or faked content to post on social media; automate the production of spam/phishing content.”⁷ Clearly, concerns about potential abuse are more than justified. And the company is right in warning: “The public at large will need to become more skeptical of texts they find online, just as the ‘deep fakes’ phenomenon calls for more skepticism about images.”⁸

A few weeks after the conference, I received a letter from an online company that specializes in professionally produced series of publications and articles aimed at a broader audience. They asked me if I would agree to them writing new academic papers under my name based on my published work in the English-speaking world. They would only use material from me, so anything new would really be my doing. But I would no longer have to worry about extending my list of publications, as they would be happy to do this for a small fee, of course.

⁵ <https://blog.openai.com/better-language-models/>. (4/21/2022).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

2. Five Challenges

These are just a few examples of many. But they help to explain why we have chosen as the theme of the 40th Philosophy of Religion Conference in Claremont (February 22–23, 2019) *Humanity: An Endangered Idea?* Developments like GPT-2 as well as contemporary debates about the alleged demise of the humanities have brought to the fore that we are forced to re-think our humanity. Once we thought that the use of language is one of the things that mark us off from other animals. Now we see that it does not even help to distinguish between our text-generating models and us anymore.

So what is it that makes us different from the technologies we create? Why should we continue to put money into schools of arts and humanities and not invest in more profitable science or technology projects?

We are at a loss to give a convincing answer because we have lost a common understanding of humanity (if we ever had one) that could govern our debates and give direction to our research and discussions.⁹ Of course, *humanity* is not *humanism*, and a defense of humanism is not as such an argument for humanity or vice versa. But can one argue for humanity without falling into the trap of ‘speciesism’? Or do all arguments for humanity play into the hands of those who welcome ‘The Anthropocene’, as some have dubbed our age, because we have managed to undo all boundaries between ‘humanity’ and ‘nature’ that have traditionally prevailed?¹⁰

There is no straightforward positive or negative answer to these questions, as we shall see. Who and what we are as humans have always been controversial questions, and so have been the views about our impact on the environment in which we live. We may agree “that you cannot adequately describe a human person with the range of concepts which is adequate for the description of a chair, or a cabbage or even an electronic calculating machine.”¹¹ But this does not imply that we would agree on a positive account of what it means to be a human person. People differ not only about the *is* of humankind and what humans are and do in fact, but also about the *ought* of a humane humanity and how one should live as a human being.

Answers to the questions about our humanity and *humanitas* (Cicero) have been sought along five routes: by contrasting the human with the non-human (other animals), with the more than human (the divine), with the inhuman (negative human behaviors), with the superhuman (what humans will

⁹ Cf. *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. R. Braidotti and M. Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

¹⁰ Cf. M. ROBINSON, *What Are We Doing Here?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

¹¹ I. M. CROMBIE, “The Possibility of Theological Statements,” in *Faith and Logic*, ed. B. Mitchell (London: Routledge, 1957), 57.

become), or with the transhuman (thinking machines). In each case the question at stake and the point of comparison is a different one: a relative difference within a shared animality, an absolute difference from the divine, a practical difference with respect to what it means to live a good human life in a world whose life-sustaining ecosystems have been dangerously put at hazard by our individual and collective behaviors, an evolutionary difference between the present and future states of humankind, or a difference in kind between human biological evolution and technological enhancement. In all those respects the idea of humanity has been defined differently. What makes humans human? What does it mean for humans to live a human life? What is the *humanitas* for which we ought to strive?

Today we have to discuss these questions in the light of at least five challenges:

(1) The first is the *biological challenge* to human distinctiveness. Biological and neurophysiological research increasingly level out and dissolve clear-cut distinctions between humans and other animals and living species: reason, rationality, deliberation, decision-making, free choice, intentional action etc. all come by degrees and can be found in one way or another in other animals as well. Humans are part of nature and must be understood as embedded in complex ecosystems. Therefore the view that humans are special and stand out from the animal world in a significant way is challenged, and human speciesism is banned.

(2) The second is the *technological challenge* that seeks to overcome the limitations of our biological nature by technical means. The truth about us is to be sought not in our evolutionary past, but in our technological future. The romanticism of ecological bioconservatives is countered with the technological optimism of a progressive perfectionism, transhumanism, extropianism or postgenderism. Compared to smart machines, it is not our intellect, but our biology that makes us special. However, if research into biological computing and nanotechnology keeps progressing at the present rate, then the difference between humans and machines will soon be negligible and there will be no space to define humanity. “The future belongs to inorganic life forms,” as Martin J. Rees has predicted.¹² The challenge to the idea of humanity from this side is that humanity as we know it is expected to disappear when superintelligent thinking machines will have superseded humans and human intellect.

¹² M. J. REES, “Unsere Nachfahren werden Maschinen sein,” *NZZ*, October 21, 2017, (<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/unsere-nachfahren-werden-maschinen-sein-ld.1322780>) (4/21/2022); M. O’CONNELL, *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (New York: Doubleday, 2017); R. MCKIE, “No death and an enhanced life: Is the future transhuman?” (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/may/06/no-death-and-an-enhanced-life-is-the-future-transhuman>) (4/21/2022).

(3) The third challenge is what I call the *anthropological challenge*. If we try to delineate what is human about humans not by comparing humans to other animals but to other humans, then it is striking to see that regularities of a common biology and evolutionary past are by far outdone by the cultural differences and plurality in which humans adapt to different situations and circumstances. There is no unity of humanity that has not emerged from a multitude of diversities – at the biological level, and at the cultural level.¹³ Human life knows choice between options and the freedom to choose, not only the causality of nature and the conventional necessities of culture. The anthropological challenge to the idea of humanity is that humanity is a normative project, not merely a biological fact, and that there is an endemic normative conflict about how this project has been or should be worked out in human culture and history.

(4) The fourth challenge is the *cosmological challenge*.¹⁴ We live in a vast universe, in which we are marginal and completely insignificant. And we live in a finite universe that is not made forever. The vastness of the universe may lead to a sense of the greatness of God, or to a fright about the insignificance of human beings. Here is what Pascal wrote four centuries ago: “When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then [...] The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me.”¹⁵ Pascal was not the only one who was overwhelmed by this fright. We are nothing. It is not much consolation to be told that we live in a fine-tuned universe that seems to be made precisely for us to observe it, and for us to be made precisely to observe it.¹⁶ We know that this will not last forever – not for us, not for our kind, not for our galaxy, not for our universe. The long-term future of the universe leaves little

¹³ Cf. E. VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014).

¹⁴ Cf. for the following D. WILKINSON, “Being Human in a Cosmic Context,” in *Issues in Science and Theology: Are We Special?* ed. M. Fuller et al. *Issues in Science and Theology: Publications of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology* 4 (DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62124-1_1 [2017], 3–16) (4/22/2022).

¹⁵ B. PASCAL, *Pensées* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1958), 61.

¹⁶ M. REES, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces that Shape the Universe* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2000), 150. He highlights the apparent fine-tuning of the ratio of the electrical force to gravitational force, how firmly atomic nuclei bind together, the amount of material in the universe, the cosmological constant, the ratio of energy needed to disperse an object compared to its total rest mass energy and the number of spatial dimensions in the universe. If any of these were just slightly different to what they actually are then intelligent life would not develop within the universe.

to hope for. If the expansion of the universe is not reversed into a contraction leading to a big crunch, the universe will end as a cold and uninteresting place composed of dead stars and black holes. The only consolation seems to be that we shall not live to see the end. We shall disappear long before.

(5) The fifth challenge, finally, is the *theological challenge* of arriving at a view of human nature by comparing humans to the divine. The force of this challenge is underestimated if one conceives the divine merely as a cultural construction and not as a self-disclosing reality. The point of such a challenge is to outline a vision of a good human life that has, in the monotheistic traditions for example, its center in safeguarding the distinction between creature and creator (and distinction is not separation, as is often wrongly assumed). It is a normative idea of humanity that envisages human life at its best to be a life in harmony with the gifts of the creator (the gift of life and the gift of love) and open to the needs of one's fellow humans (as expressed in the double commandment of love) and of all other creatures who are also the addressees and recipients of God's gifts.

These are some of the challenges that a contemporary debate about the idea of humanity cannot ignore.

3. Idea vs. Concept

Of course, the core of this debate is about our humanity and not only about an idea of humanity. But we cannot discuss our humanity in a meaningful way without making it a topic in an explicit way, and this is only possible if we symbolize it semiotically, define it conceptually or – as in the present case – grasp it philosophically as an idea.

I speak of the idea rather than the concept of humanity for a specific reason: Concepts are often understood to be generalizations from experience condensed into a single term. Ideas are different. They are – in a non-Platonic sense – intellectual tools that help us to orient others and ourselves in a complex and confusing world. Ideas are more like a yardstick to measure something, than something that we measure by a yardstick. Freedom, God, and immortality are such orienting ideas in Kant. They are not concepts that can be exemplified by particular instances. There are no immortalities, or gods, or freedoms in our experience that we could compare. But we could not live a human life without using the ideas of freedom, God and immortality to make sense of our life in this world. They are, in Kant's terms, 'necessary fictions' without which we couldn't live a human life.

The idea of humanity functions in a similar way: It is not a concept like 'human being' of which there are many particular instances, and it is not merely the summary of a descriptive account of what humans are that can be

tested against reality. It is rather a normative idea that functions as a yardstick or criterion for a human life worthy that name. It not merely asserts what is the case but what ought to be the case. Thus, the questions to which it answers are not merely ‘What are humans?’ but ‘What do we want to be as humans?’, not merely ‘How do we live in fact?’ but ‘How do we want to live as humans together with other beings in the world?’ So what are the ideas of humanity that guide us? Do they still help us to orient ourselves in our fast changing contemporary world? Or which idea of humanity would be able or helpful to do so? To address these and related questions is the objective of this conference. Today we shall concentrate on problems posed by philosophy and theology, tomorrow on questions raised by contemporary technology, ecology, and ethics. These are the areas one cannot ignore when tackling the issues before us. They are pressing issues, and we cannot put off addressing them.

4. Outline of the Volume

The volume is organized into five parts. In the first part, basic philosophical questions of being human are discussed, which a useful idea of humanity must consider. This applies both to the Paradox of Humanity and to the question of universalism, which is part of the idea of humanity. In the second part, central theological questions are recalled – the Augustinian tradition of the human being as image of God as well as attempts to reactivate this tradition under contemporary conditions in a technological culture. Part three is devoted to the current discussion about transhumanism and asks how its questions are to be judged from the perspective of Jewish and Christian theology and why they have met with such a positive response from certain religious traditions such as the Mormons. Part four takes up another central area of the contemporary debate on humanity, asking about the role and significance of artificial intelligence for the elaboration of an idea of humanity. How different are we from our own creations, and should we expect that our technological creatures will sooner or later supplant their human creators and be able to leave them behind? This raises obvious ethical questions, which are taken up in the fifth part. How can we think of humanity under the emerging conditions of our technological culture? What role does human togetherness and existence for others play within the framework of an ecological civilization, which is becoming increasingly clear as the future perspective of humanity?

Taken together, the volume outlines a discussion that is important not only in philosophy, theology, and religion, but in the humanities as a whole. If we are no longer able to say which idea of humanity we align ourselves with, we will not be able to provide the humanities with a compass by which they can orient themselves in a rapidly changing social world and technological culture.

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