



keith stevenson

Conscious Explorers: Science Fiction, Posthumanism and the Mind
contribution to ConJure NatCon panel 2006

As I understand it, this panel is about how the human mind, and our very consciousness might change and evolve as we utilise scientific advances to modify our human bodies and move into a posthuman era. I've done a lot of reading about the future of the human mind, the possibility of adding prostheses or devices to expand certain senses, augment memory, or boost 'processing' or brain power, but the main area of discussion seems to revolve around the potential to map and then 'upload' the human individual mind into another construct less affected by the frailties of the human body. The 'technology' unfortunately rests on one hell of a huge assumption – that the individual is no more than the sum of the organic structures and chemical composition of the brain, and that this can be modeled as 'data'. Try as I might – and I'd like to believe such a thing as uploading is possible, I'd prefer not to die after all – I balk at that kind of thinking. How can we upload memory, or personality, or consciousness itself, the 'I' by merely duplicating or simulating structures and connections and the effect of chemicals on them. I am not simply quantitative information to be mapped and transferred, and even if I were, the means of transference – the medium – would act on the information in subtle ways. It seems to me to be ludicrous, and I think it's a big ask to get anyone to swallow that.

Personally I think the growing discussion on uploading is a representation of what's happening to the world in a wider context – the search for a meaning to life when we have lost faith in our spiritual side. So we abandon religion and flock to the new pseudo-church of posthumanism, reinventing everlasting life as uploading and heaven as some virtual reality where these constructs will exist and enjoy everything they desire just by thinking about it. The ability of the human animal to fool itself is seemingly boundless.

But if by some stroke uploading becomes a reality – true copying of the individual with all that entails, what will it mean for us? Looking at the various pro-posthuman websites, the benefits are going to be amazing – and literally unbelievable. But they're not telling the whole story. Thankfully, there's a lot of good writers out there that use their writing to extrapolate what some of the downsides may be.

Daphne du Maurier in her 1966 story 'Breakthrough', posits the possibility of capturing the life essence, the identity and intellect of the individual in a machine at the time of death. It's the first step to everlasting life. As she says – 'The fusion of science and religion [is] in a partnership at first joyous, [until] the inevitable disenchantment, the scientist realizing, and the priest with him, that, with eternity assured, the human being on earth is more easily expendable. Dispatch the maimed, the old, the weak, the very world itself, for what is the point of life if the promise of fulfillment lies elsewhere?' Posthuman methods may be life enhancing, as the proponents claim, but what would be the value of simple, unaltered human life in such a world? How could unaugmented humans hope to understand their posthuman counterparts let alone live peacefully alongside them? There is a danger of creating an under-class at best, and simply wiping out humanity as the modern equivalent of the Neanderthals at worst.

Sean Williams and Shane Dix imagine in 'The Orphans of Earth Trilogy', what it would be like to co-exist with copies of yourself. Carol Hatzis is an Earthwoman who has uploaded her personality into a variety of devices spread throughout the solar system. Her flesh and blood brain has been surgically augmented to allow her to communicate directly with these copies, to form a 'gestalt' mind when time and opportunity provide. The scary thing for the reader, and it's mildly unsettling for the human Hatzis, is that she is not the 'leader' of this gestalt. She's just one voice among many and by no means the most powerful. Copies existing in far more complex computer environments can out-think her and make decisions which directly affect her life. When Earth is destroyed, Carol is freed from these doppelgangers and I think she's happier for it. Posthumanism supporters claim that advances in science will enable us to become more human rather than dehumanizing us. But they



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ignore the fact that non-human elements will be used in their transformation. And that is a worry for the future of humanity. Would we jump at the chance to extend our life and make multiple copies of ourselves if we knew we'd probably end up arguing with, and being outvoted, by those very copies, copies that may contain some of our humanity, but also a hefty portion of something machine-like?

I'll end here with a story about how posthumans treat with normals in the future from David Bofinger, an Australian Defence Scientist, quoted by Damien Broderick in his book *The Spike*,

Monday: 'You unmodified humans can have New Jersey, but stay out of the Everglades.' Unmodified humans move to Jersey.

Thursday: 'The overmind has chosen to return Earth to its pristine condition. You will be relocated to a bubble-formed asteroid.' Unmodified humans blink and find themselves somewhere else.

Sunday morning: 'I have decided to... Oh, never mind, you wouldn't understand.' Nothing important changes but there's some evidence that the laws of physics have altered, or perhaps that everyone is now running as a computer simulation of themselves. No way to be sure, though.

Sunday afternoon: The speaker starts to say something, then everyone ceases to exist. Maybe they were going to say, 'Hi we're all going to commit suicide now, and you have to go too.' Or maybe, 'Excuse me, but we need you for raw materials.' Or perhaps, 'My God, how can you live like that? Better put you out of your misery.' Whatever it was, they got impatient with how long it would take and just went ahead and did it.

Posthumanism may be an answer, but it's not a particularly good one. Maybe it's time to start looking for a different way to evolve our consciousness...