

[Essay]

Bullshit, Living, and the Future

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Abstract

Harry Frankfurt's work *On Bullshit* provides an analysis of this (ubiquitous) phenomenon, which David Graeber extends sociologically in his examination of bullshit jobs. How do these notions relate to philosophies of life and the innumerable lives caught in the systemic layers of bs? And what bearing does bs have on our potential future?

INTRODUCTION

When is a life worth living? Utilizing three broad philosophical categories (Takaki 2016b), a life geared towards *living well* is worth living when the multitude of factors required for flourishing remain largely in place; conversely, when tragedy strikes, life loses its worthiness. A life of *resilience*, by contrast, weathers many of life's storms, so the question of worthiness shifts to cultivating harmony amidst tribulations. But even for Stoic variants of resilience, for example, there are situations where suicide is a viable option and worth foregone. In contrast to these two projects, a life of *being* can "flourish" in the face of forlornness, thus moving beyond questions of worth or lack thereof which tacitly presuppose value tied to the accoutrements of self—the very thing that soteriological philosophies of being aim to empty out.

Yet even for these three categories broadly orienting inquires into worthiness, there remain innumerable vagaries of experience which complicate matters. A particular contemporary and widespread example discussed in David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs* (2018) concerns the soul-razing prospects such jobs create, which render a degree of harm leading to what might be called *bullshit lives*. Certain one's job isn't equivalent to either living well, living, or being; yet in today's world, where one's personhood is yoked to one's standing in the materials economy, Graeber's diagnosis of just what constitutes a bullshit job and how damaging it can be has intimate bearing on philosophies of life.

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How can we judge that one's life on the whole is bullshit (hereafter bs), worthless, indifferent, or some variant thereof? This differs subtly but importantly from the assessment that one's current path is a bs form of living (or worthless, indifferent, etc.), since there are presumably alternative life-paths. Given the complex ways in which these issues are interrelated, they call for further investigation. The first section focuses on Harry Frankfurt's work *On Bullshit* (2005), and relates that discussion to the three philosophies of life. The following section picks up Graeber's development of Frankfurt's work applied to diagnosing the systemic politico-economic phenomenon of bs jobs. I synthesize these reflections as they bear on the three philosophies of life, and then consider bs's relation to a novel approach to life, transhumanism. The last section continues to look to the future and the more general and trenchant nature of the problems tied to bs.

BS, LIVES, AND LIVING

Frankfurt first distinguishes bs from lying. While both involve deception to some degree, the difference is that lying involves a conscious act of deception, while bs-ing doesn't really care about truth. Thus the key feature of bs is an "indifference to how things really are" (Frankfurt 2005, 34). Additionally, a lie is false with respect to the intent to deceive, but bs may or may not be correct (accurate, true, and so forth). Bs-ers hide their lack of commitment to truth, and as a consequence the bs-er "does not reject the authority of truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies" (Frankfurt 2005, 61).

But is bs really "a greater enemy"? If a consummate liar acknowledges and then intentionally subverts truth, wouldn't this be worse? To see potentially why not, consider the analogous difference between premeditated murder and one who kills with casual indifference. Greater harm can materialize in the latter case since the only intent present is the purposeful ignoring of the potential harm done, thus in the process enabling the harm that can be done *and perpetuated*. Thus in similar fashion, the bs-er can do greater harm to truth than even the consummate liar, as his modus operandi enables-and-perpetuates a climate of casual, indifferent, and even callous fakery—a theme that increasingly resounds

in the modern world.¹

We could subsequently retort: is that so bad? Intentions are clothed in various shades, and if one's intent to conceal truth likewise exhibits shades of gray, there ought to be similar vagaries for bs. Indeed, ranging from the benign to the vile, elements of bs are present in phenomena such as innocent ignorance (e.g., a partial intent to conceal one's lack of knowledge in order to make for a friendly encounter), systemic ignorance (e.g., stubbornly doubling-down on one's position, even conscripting almost unknowingly counter-evidence in service of one's own peculiar prejudices), and full-fledged concealing of truths at significant costs (e.g., corporate knowledge of smoking being directly related to cancer, or of fossil fuels being largely responsible for current global warming). If the benign forms can be pardoned, the viler forms ought not, and therein lies the significant harm that bs can do, which, beyond mere lying, creates and sustains *an ecology of moral inversion*—of claims to truth that are significantly misleading, which gain their traction by *filling a power vacuum* created by that very concealment of lack of commitment to truth. I suggest it is this potent insidiousness that makes bs “a greater enemy of truth than lies.” For beyond mere lack of commitment (for example, a merely charming raconteur who bs-s their way through life), one actually committed to indifference to truth can do great damage indeed.

It is important to keep in mind that phenomena overlapping with bs range from the benign to the vile, which in turn range from the episodic (such as a moment of incompetence, ignorance, evil, etc.) to the habitual (which can define one's character). This raises the issue of how bs relates to the previous distinction between bs lives—which spans a significant portion of a life as a whole, where habit/*hexis* plays a prominent role—and bs living—which focuses more on the episodic aspects of bs in one's life. Since the boundaries between bs and the above range of phenomena (ignorance, incompetence, evil, etc.) are soft, the question of what constitutes a bs life and bs living can similarly only be qualitatively delineated. Building upon Frankfurt's analysis, here is a proposed

¹ Part of this climate involves the greater freedom of the bs-er: “His focus is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a certain falsehood at a specific point, and thus he is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting it. He is prepared, so far as required, to fake the context as well...[The] mode of creativity upon which [bs] relies is...more expansive and independent [than lying], with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play” (Frankfurt 2005, 52-3). More generally, if it is accurate that we live in the age of post-truth, I suggest that bs offers a better characterization of just what post-truth amounts to.

characterization of a bs life:

If bs-ers are indifferent to how things really are, and to an extent conceal their lack of commitment to matters of truth (fidelity, coherence, etc.), a bs life reflects a worldview and lifestyle that is enmired to a significant degree in this indifference and concealment.

Besides being obviously inauthentic, and potentially rendering great harm to others, is such a life worth living? From the point of view of the bs-er and their bs matrix, even if such a question may raise an occasional pang of conscience, my guess is that the bs-er answers as a bs-er does: “Of course such a life is worth living” (the unjust’s rationalization of their own power is a similarly well-worn theme). But this evades the larger issue whether such a lifestyle is worthy, and thereby whether it is the sort of life that ought to be affirmed. Quite simply, bs lacks the resources to address this question in good faith (besides its lack of such faith) since issues of worth and worthiness are rendered in a solipsistic circle of bs.

A bs life cannot really justify its lifestyle as a whole; it can only self-perpetuate its “toxic ecology” and viral features. By contrast, episodes of bs can play numerous roles in life, including potentially constructive ones, thus offering some grounds for justification. Given the above characterization of a bs life, we can formulate the following for bs living:

Bs living reflects an episodic slice of life that is enmired in the concealment of indifference to truth (fidelity, etc.).

Perhaps an episode occurs in a moment of weakness; perhaps it is used as a coping mechanism for certain truths too difficult to face; or it may be on the way to establishing a full-fledged bs life. In previous papers (Takaki 2016b, 2018), the three philosophies of life (living well, living, and being) outline resources that I here adapt to address bs living and its bearing on worthiness.

In brief, the foundation of living well is the acknowledgement of contingency. Bs living could offer moments of respite (e.g., free-riding when one is down on one’s luck), but insofar as the cultivation of character is a key ingredient buffeting against non-tragic contingencies, bs living can only be a “necessary evil” acquiesced to sparsely. Philosophies of living, by contrast,

would shun bs living as a dispreferred indifferent (or the like)—as something too corrosive to resilience to be given any genuine hearing. And similarly for philosophies of being. All three philosophies tacitly place the individual as the locus of issues bearing on bs living and worthiness. But what about wider considerations (sociopolitical, economic, historical, etc.) and their entangled relations to the individual? This is where the notion of bs jobs comes into play.

BS JOBS

A prevailing characteristic of modernity is the sizeable identification of one's job with one's personal identity. It would thereby appear that if one is invested in a bs job, one's life is bs. The discontents of modern living—ennui, angst, idle chatter, inauthenticity, false consciousness, etc.—bear close relation to phenomena associated with bs: bs relating to techno-saturation; bs relating to white privilege and outrage; bs relating to tweets, fake news, and their ilk; bs relating to consumerist branding; and so forth. But given the previous characterization of a bs life, being invested in a bs job may not mean one's life is thereby bs—for one may be caught up in a matrix of bs, yet not actually be wholly committed to a worldview and lifestyle that is enmired bs's indifference and concealment. Here is where Graeber's analysis of bs jobs applies and extends Frankfurt's work to the socioeconomic realm. For if it is largely correct that we live in times of systemic bs (exhibited, for example, in cults of personality, extreme and delusional forms of jingoism, alternative facts, etc.), shedding light on this globalizing phenomenon is critical to evaluating questions relating to bs living, bs lives, and the prospects for philosophies of life.

Graeber's analysis of bs jobs begins with a few of its tell-tale signs: the existence of pointless jobs is exactly what market competition is presumed to eliminate, but really existing capitalism actually fosters and creates bs jobs (e.g., in healthcare and academic institutions; Graeber 2018, 155-64); the roots of this phenomenon aren't merely economic—they are also “moral and political. The ruling class figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger” (Graeber 2018, xviii).² Graeber lays out the core

² A good example of the systemic intersection of economic, political, and moral bs is discussed by Graeber:

consider the following quote, from an interview with then US president Barack Obama about some of the reasons why he bucked the preferences of the electorate and insisted on maintaining a private, for-profit health insurance system in America:

of bs job as follows:

Final Working Definition: a bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case. (Graeber 2018, 9-10)

To give a sense of how widespread the phenomenon is, Graeber examines the *2016-2017 State of Enterprise Work Report*, which makes it “abundantly clear that (1) more than half of working hours in American offices are spent on bullshit, and (2) the problem is getting worse” (Graeber 2018, 24).

How does this relate to bs living and bs lives? One initial response would be to compartmentalize our lives into the public and private (tenuous as this distinction may be), relegating bs jobs to a public life separable enough from the private to ensure that bs doesn't inundate our living or lives as a whole. While this may work as a coping mechanism for some (perhaps for those particularly good at compartmentalization), it doesn't really satisfy for the simple reason that it ignores the systemic and encroaching nature of the problem. However one can object by questioning the very nature of this problem and its associated claim that one's personal identity is enmeshed with one's job (or “cloud” of possible career trajectories more generally). In other words, we can skeptically ask: is

“I don't think in ideological terms. I never have,” Obama said, continuing on the health care theme. “Everybody who supports single-payer health care says, ‘Look at all the money we would be saving from insurance and paperwork.’ That represents one million, two million, three million jobs [filled by] people who are working at Blue Cross Blue Shield or Kaiser or other places. What are we doing with them? Where are we employing them?”

I would encourage the reader to reflect on this passage because it might be considered a smoking gun. What is the president saying here? He acknowledges that millions of jobs in medical insurance companies like Kaiser or Blue Cross are unnecessary. He even acknowledges that a socialized health care system would be more efficient than the current market-based system, since it would reduce unnecessary paperwork and reduplication of effort by dozens of competing private firms. But he's also saying that it would be undesirable for that very reason. One motive, he insists, for maintaining the existing market-based system is precisely its inefficiency, since it is better to maintain those millions of basically useless office jobs than to cast about trying to find something else for the paper pushers to do.

So here is the most powerful man in the world at the time publicly reflecting on his signature legislative achievement—and he is insisting that a major factor in the form that legislature took is the preservation of bullshit jobs. (Graeber 2018, 157)

this an accurate portrayal of matters? There are two responses that can be gleaned from Graeber.

The first is that there is tremendous support for the systemic nature of bs jobs, both phenomenologically (e.g., via numerous testimonials gathered by Graeber) and empirically:

There have been an enormous number of surveys, studies, inquests, and ethnographies of work over the course of the twentieth century. Work about work has become a kind of minor industry in its own right. The conclusions reached by this body of research—and what follows appears to hold true, with only minor variations, for both blue- and white-collar workers virtually anywhere in the world—might be summarized as follows:

1. Most people’s sense of dignity and self-worth is caught up in working for a living.
2. Most people hate their jobs.

We might refer to this as “the paradox of modern work.” (Graeber 2018, 241)

This paradox looks to be the malaise of our time, where lives are entwined with jobs, unavoidably encroaching on issues of personal identity (perhaps most especially in cases where there is rebellion against encroachment, as viscerally embodied in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*).

The second response is more involved, as it in turn is responding to several objections over the claim that we are enmired in a capitalist matrix (keeping in mind that there are a number of senses of *capitalism*) and where raising the issue of this being a “problem” is itself a problem since capitalism (of whatever sort) is the norm. A specific line of thought that Graeber discusses targets economists and Marxists (not mutually exclusive, to be sure). Their objection goes that bs jobs are viewed as a problem since they reflect a value system that stands outside of market concerns; however this is mistaken since either (1) “value is ultimately just utility, [so] commodity prices will gravitate around their real market value over time” (Graeber 2018, 202), making bs jobs an aberration that rational markets will ultimately correct, or (2) for Marxists, we are still entrapped in a capitalist system—which determines in self-enclosed fashion the value of any value—so bs jobs are just self-propagating mechanisms of a

capitalist system. Graeber's corrective to (1)'s reduction of value to utility, or (2)'s claim that all value is entrapped in a capitalist framework, is to point out that these responses beg the question of what value is, and lack a historical appreciation of the phenomenon of bs jobs and how we got here in the first place.

Let's start with the historical response first (the question of value will be deferred to the following section). Graeber summarizes:

Bullshit jobs proliferate today in large part because of the peculiar nature of managerial feudalism [see Graeber 2018, 222-226] that has come to dominate wealthy economies—but to an increasing degree, all economies. They cause misery because human happiness is always caught up in a sense of having effects on the world; a feeling which most people, when they speak of their work, express through a language of social value. Yet at the same time they are aware that the greater the social value produced by a job, the less one is likely to be paid to do it. (Graeber 2018, 243)

In essence, the transformation effected by managerial feudalism stems from the (now accepted) view that “almost everyone was expected to get their hands dirty at some point or another” (Graeber 2018, 226), especially in the form of paid work. This marks a rupture from the classical world where work (especially physical labor) was viewed as detrimental to one's character, as it would detract from having leisure to devote one's attention to social and political obligations, among other privileges of aristocracy. With the “advent of capitalism,” there would issue the “gradual transformation of relations of service [i.e., managerial feudalism] into permanent relations of wage labor: that is, a relation between some people who owned capital, and others who did not and thus were obliged to work for them” (Graeber 2018, 226). The roots of bs jobs suggest that since they are offshoots of this transformation of structure and value, they aren't flatly entrapments (or aberrations) of capitalism—the larger historical context that objections (1) and (2) above ignore. This in turn raises the more important questions of value, which we next consider.

BS AND VALUE

The question of value brings us back to philosophical issues associated with bs living and bs lives. In Graeber's estimation, there is a modern split in value: between values determined by capitalist forces (related directly to bs jobs and ennui, resentment, etc.), and values whose social worth tends to be inversely correlated with such forces (art for art's sake, and eudaimonistic flourishing more generally).³ While at the end of the book Graeber outlines some measures to combat bs jobs, he leaves open ample space for philosophical exploration of values that can manage or defeat bs living and bs lives—and thereby manage bs jobs (even if such jobs cannot be wholly defeated, given their systemic nature as global structured structuring structures). Since these values have multiple interrelated layers, let us begin with a sketch of psychological considerations.

Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman's work on frames (1981) suggests that how choices are contextualized—how they are represented—can change people's attitude to risk (Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit offers an analogous perceptual illustration of gestalting frames). Further development of this idea outlines rules that govern how representations can change—how context and salience can shift (see also Kahneman 2011, and Lewis 2016). The basic idea is that our perceived reality consists in a cloud of possibilities, where what shifts isn't so much the situation—which tends to remain more or less stable—but rather the actions of the agent; that is, what are removed from counterfactual scenarios are what the agent found surprising or unexpected. For example, if someone were in a car accident, the narrative of events formed thereafter would

³ Graeber I think offers one of the best diagnoses of the current political malaise in America (Graeber 2018, 247-257); he writes:

Those trapped in bullshit jobs resent workers who get to do real productive or beneficial labor, and those who do real productive or beneficial labor, underpaid, degraded, and unappreciated, increasingly resent those who they see as monopolizing those few jobs where one can live well while doing something useful, high-minded, or glamorous—who they refer to as “the liberal elite.” All are united in their loathing for the political class, who they see (correctly) as corrupt, but the political class, in turn, finds these other forms of vacuous hatred extremely convenient, since they distract attention from themselves. (Graeber 2018, 248)

He then characterizes the key moral emotive root of this resentment—moral envy—which involves “feelings of envy and resentment directed at another person, not because that person is wealthy, or gifted, or lucky, but because his or her behavior is seen as upholding a higher moral standard than the envier's own” (248). Philosophical concerns reside at the very core of bs jobs. See also George Scialabba (2018) for a wealth of congruent penetrating insights.

focus on what was unusual about the sequence of events (if I only hadn't taken that call that distracted me into taking the wrong turn) and not so much the overall situation itself (the overall chain of events, actual or counterfactual, that eventuated in the accident). So our perceived reality consists of a narrative cloud of possibilities anchored by what actions we-did-and-could-have-taken, in turn usually anchored by what we find unexpected or surprising.

As this applies to philosophies of life and bs, perceived reality is contextualized by our perceived actions. If one lives a life comfortable in a tepid job, without much in the way of the unexpected, the seeds for existential awakening may remain forever dormant; but for those willing to risk possible liberation—where surprise and the unexpected become the sparks of awakening—managing or defeating bs living and a bs life become entangled with entertaining the relevant cloud of possibilities to transfigure bs into some form of authenticity. I think it is clear that for philosophies of being, authenticity is not an issue in the midst of bs jobs, as they provide the most robust of existential possibilities. Philosophies of living fare less well, but there still remains the live possibility of authenticity while enmired in bs (for example, Stoicism can apply even—*especially*—to the life of a slave). Philosophies of living well fare poorest, given their dependence on envioning conditions that are conducive to flourishing; as one critical mark of this impoverishment, we live in times of global *pleonexia*, diametrically opposed to Aristotelian flourishing (recall Graber's split in value, with eudaimonistic values aligned on the inversely correlated side).

Utilizing the Christian distinction between contemplative and active lives, the former corresponds approximately to philosophies of being, which can defeat bs living, bs lives, and to a not insignificant extent bs jobs (given their soteriological way of life).⁴ The latter, which coarsely maps to philosophies of living and living well,⁵ can still manage forms of bs; while the active life may not be authentic enough to defeat both bs jobs and bs living, it can still defeat having a bs life as a whole (by managing bs jobs and living). This can occur via a contextual shift to a cloud of possibilities that actively engages with—and affirms—worthy projects requiring “getting one's hands dirty” (e.g., works of

⁴ Compare Takaki 2018.

⁵ Note there are aspects of both philosophies that blur this distinction—e.g., Aristotle's favoring of contemplation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but favoring activity in his *Eudemian Ethics*; and Aurelius's daily meditations while conducting a very unmonastic life.

charity if one is a Christian or fighting economic forms of oppression if one is a Marxist—both of which navigate pervasive bs).

Thus far it has been assumed that the three philosophies offer the most robust, time-tested resources for responding to modernity's bs-laden matrix. However, novel problems brought forth by technological innovation make it unclear what relevance these past resources have on potentially radically different futures. One notable development of a humanist response to these encroaching technologies is transhumanism. If the above sketched paths provide a map for navigating bs using time-tested value systems, the question now is what possible map can we provide for a realm of “transvalue”⁶ to navigate an unknown terrain which we currently only feebly augur? Do considerations of bs and value even bear on this burgeoning future?

It should first be noted that this question presents a shift in emphasis since transhumanism doesn't focus on the cultivation of authenticity (philosophy as a way of life, etc.), which is the hallmark of these time-tested value systems; rather, as Nick Bostrom notes, transhumanism is indebted to the ethos of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on critical reason (Bostrom 2011). Transhumanism might appear to be hinged to some sort of technological “singularity” or the like—superintelligent artificial intelligence (AI), “molecular nanotechnology, or uploading, or some other technology of a similarly revolutionary kind” (Bostrom 2011, 12)—that radically transforms the human condition. “However, transhumanism does not depend on the feasibility of such radical technologies...[rather] the transhumanist agenda is to make [more modest technological enhancement options, like genetic engineering or virtual reality,] safely available to all persons” (Bostrom 2011, 12).

But what, philosophically, does the transhumanist agenda amount to? In part it is fueled by the assumption of exponential technological growth, and the concomitant assumption that with such growth comes the emergence of spontaneous orders of complexity—sometimes linked with open orders of social arrangement, the (dubious) political baggage of decentralization,⁷ and so-forth.

⁶ Note that transhumanism would promote “transvalues” within the expanded spectrum of the technologically possible: “Big-picture questions, including ones about our place in the world and the long-term fate of intelligent life *are* a part of transhumanism; however, these questions should be addressed in a sober, disinterested way, using critical reason and our best available scientific evidence [so the *trans* aspect isn't merely about ditching or transcending humanistic values *tout court*]” (Bostrom 2011, 10).

⁷ Although as Bostrom notes, in “principle, transhumanism can be combined with a wide range of political and cultural views, and many such combinations are indeed represented, e.g. within the

Bostrom (2011, section 5) outlines some of the ethical questions that transhumanism raises, and some technologies that bear directly or indirectly on these questions; the general upshot appears to be that transhumanism possesses the general resources to address technology's ethical concerns—testimony to its Enlightenment legacy. Perhaps, then, *transhumanism* should more appropriately be titled *extended humanism*, a less catchy moniker but a more accurate indication of its agenda.⁸

However, while much of the transhumanist agenda is really extended-humanism, there are the radical portions of it that warrant the name, as the possibilities expressed therein may ditch humanity (e.g., the warnings in Bill Joy's "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us"), or express values that transcend our comparatively primitive Enlightenment roots (e.g., Bostrom's notion that we might be living in a simulation, where humanity already became posthuman and is running simulations of our evolutionary history; Bostrom 2011, 21). In brief, given a wide spectrum of possibilities—dystopic to optimistic—what bearing might transhumanism have on bs? Clearly it can go any number of ways—from the dystopic increase of bs (*1984*⁹ or *Brave New World*¹⁰) to the optimistic

membership of the World Transhumanist Association" (Bostrom 2011, 22).

⁸ To situate transhumanism as an extended humanism, transhumanism is distinguished from posthumanism. The latter holds for a radically different space of technological possibilities, while the former holds for "moderately enhanced humans, whose capacities would be somewhere between those of unaugmented humans and full-blown posthumans" (Bostrom 2005, 5). Bostrom suggests a connection between transhuman values and posthuman values:

According to [David] Lewis's theory, something is a value to you if and only if you would want to want it if you were perfectly acquainted with it and you were thinking and deliberating as clearly as possible about it...Some values pertaining to certain forms of posthuman existence may well be of this sort; they may be values for us now, and they may be so in virtue of our current dispositions, and yet we may not be able to fully appreciate them with our current limited deliberative capacities and our lack of the receptive faculties required for full acquaintance with them. This point is important because it shows that the transhumanist view that we ought to explore the realm of posthuman values does not entail that we should forego our current values. (Bostrom 2005, 8)

⁹ For striking discussion of Orwell's Big Brother and our contemporary "Big Other" of "surveillance capitalism"—whose contrastive mechanisms issue in functionally similar power structures—see Zuboff 2019, Ch.13.

¹⁰ Our soma is media-tech, which resides in a minefield of bs; Shoshana Zuboff writes:

Like the gamblers in their machine wombs, we are meant to fuse with the system and play to extinction: not the extinction of our funds but rather the extinction of our selves. Extinction is a design feature formalized in the conditions of no exit. The aim of the tuners is to contain us within the "logic of social relations" in the hive to bow to social pressure exerted in calculated patterns that exploit our natural empathy. Continuously tightening feedback loops cut off the

scarcity of bs (*Star Trek*). While the answer thus appears to be “none”—that transhumanism contains far too many possibilities for us to get any better handle on matters—there is one key idea in transhumanism that sheds novel light on bs (and vice versa).

BS AND THE FUTURE

The key idea stems from its larger vision distinguishing high-tech transhuman possibilities from traditional “low-tech” humanistic values:

There are limits to how much can be achieved by low-tech means such as education, philosophical contemplation, moral self-scrutiny, and other such methods proposed by classical philosophers with perfectionist leanings, including Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche [what I have termed previously as projects of *authenticity*], or by means of creating a fairer and better society, as envisioned by social reformists such as Marx or Martin Luther King. This is not to denigrate what we can do with the tools we have today. Yet ultimately, transhumanists hope to go further. (Bostrom 2005, 9)

Combatting bs would apparently receive an upgraded boost via a synergy of low-tech values with high-tech transhumanist possibilities. However, given the ubiquity of free-rider problems, this optimism can also be exploited—as witnessed by disturbing uses of current technologies involving deepfakes, Big Data, biased and/or secret algorithms, and so on (see, for example, Pasquale 2015 and Zuboff 2019). Such a risk will most likely always remain, making the general problem of bs a perennial one. Subsequently we can re-focus from solving or managing bs to disclosing the underlying values exposed via the difficulties of bs. This I think is the true diagnostic merit of bs as viewed from a transhumanistic perspective.

There are three global values that transhumanism advances: (1) the avoidance of existential risk (basically, for humanity, avoiding the annihilation

means of exit, creating impossible levels of anxiety that further drive the loops toward confluence. What is to be killed here is the inner impulse toward autonomy and the arduous, exciting elaboration of the autonomous self as a source of moral judgment and authority capable of asking for a subway seat or standing against rogue power. (Zuboff 2019, 474)

of the species); (2) technological progress, which is tied to economic/productive growth; and (3) wide access (everyone should have the opportunity to become posthuman), which promotes moving forward with technological development as quickly as possible (Bostrom 2005, 10-11). How do these fit together in relation to bs? Since mainstream economic growth is tied to the “industrial bs complex” of pointless jobs, transhumanism needs to tread carefully as to what sort of productivity is gained, for what system, and at what cost. Additionally, associated costs incurred as externalities are especially important, since in relation to (1) there is a high risk of extinction with our self-induced entrance into the Anthropocene.¹¹ This also overlaps with (3), where quick technological development may not be sustainable on a planetary scale, given limited environmental resources, increasing population, and greater chaos in the climate system. I gather that the basis of these dilemmas lies primarily in our current global form of capitalism, whose key feature arguably isn’t productivity, but the dark underbelly of bs (which is also linked to the rise of ultranationalism and other fractures being witnessed on a global scale). The same holds for the riskiness inherent in (2).

If this diagnostic sketch is accurate on the whole, the light bs sheds on transhumanism is that the sensitive variable in transitioning from transhumanism to posthumanism concerns the values undergirding economic productivity.¹² Transhumanism, in keeping with its Enlightenment legacy,¹³ upholds individual

¹¹ It is noteworthy that, in general, Bostrom’s writings on types of risk—especially of the catastrophic and existential sort—give most attention to technological developments, and relatively little to perhaps the greatest threat, climate change (with attendant lessons from evolutionary history and extinction rates). See, for example, Bostrom 2004.

¹² The depth of the problem is partly disclosed in the following:

Durkheim understood that although economists could describe these developments [of economic productivity during the early twentieth century], they could not grasp their *cause*. He argued that these sweeping changes were “caused” by the changing needs of people and that economists were (and remain) systemically blind to these social facts:

The division of labor appears to us otherwise that it does to economists. For them, it essentially consists in greater production. For us, this greater productivity is only a necessary consequence, a repercussion of the phenomenon. If we specialize, it is not to produce more, but it is to enable us to live in the *new conditions of existence* that have been made for us. (Zuboff 2019, 32)

As applied to the transition from transhumanism to posthumanism, the fundamental “cause” of *lived values* remains unaddressed.

¹³ See Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) for a counternarrative to Bostrom’s optimistic Enlightenment ethos. They instead hold the Enlightenment responsible for the entwined darkneses of domination and capital, technological power and exploitation, and disenchantment. For a framework orthogonal to

freedom and choice, where making wise, informed choices matter. But our really existing economic arrangements largely pay lip service to genuine individual freedom and choice, and tend to leave wisdom to the invisible hand of the market (which is often neither wise nor as *laissez faire* as it is portrayed to be).¹⁴ In short, transhumanism has a fundamental disconnect from its aspirations (inductively projected from current technologies) and the core values needed to bridge the gap to posthumanism.¹⁵ Bs mucks up the works, making the

both techno-“enchantment” and disenchantment, see Takaki 2016a.

¹⁴ See especially Pasquale 2015, Ch.4, and Zuboff 2019 on the disturbing global emergence of what she calls “surveillance capitalism,” which

unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. Although some of these data are applied to product or service improvement, the rest are declared as proprietary *behavioral surplus*, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as “machine intelligence,” and fabricated into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. Finally, these prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions that I call *behavioral futures markets*. (Zuboff 2019, 8)

She continues:

Surveillance capitalism is not technology; it is a logic that imbues technology and commands it into action. Surveillance capitalism is a market form that is unimaginable outside the digital milieu, but it is not the same as the “digital”...[It is this form of] capitalism that assigns the price tag of subjugation and helplessness, not the technology.

That surveillance capitalism is a logic in action and not a technology is a vital point because surveillance capitalists want us to think that their practices are inevitable expressions of the technologies they employ...when they are actually meticulously calculated and lavishly funded means to self-dealing commercial ends. (Zuboff 2019, 15)

¹⁵ A localized version of this is present when Bostrom writes:

It is questionable whether the eudaemonic agents [a transhuman species retaining “consciousness and hobbyist interests” (Bostrom 2004, 10) who we can interpret as valuing an evolved form of Aristotelian flourishing] could in the long run prevent their fitness-maximizing competitors [who we can interpret as valuing the greed-is-good view of neoclassical economics] from engulfing them and expropriating their property. But even if the eudaemonic agents could do this, and escape extinction, the outcome would still be a disaster...[since] the fitness-maximizers would gobble up resources (space, sunlight, matter, etc.) that would otherwise have been used for more meaningful purposes by eudaemonic agents. (Bostrom 2004, 10)

The tragedy here is recognized, but not the implicit disconnect. Bostrom recognizes that free-rider problems occur (e.g., see sections 7 and 9)—and recognizes the insufficiency of the invisible hand (14)—but does not appear to discern the interconnected levels of “freeriderism,” which are systemically part and parcel of the disconnect. His proposal to manage freeriderism via a “singleton” further reveals this disconnect, as potential singletons either cut against freedom and choice, or discount just how systemic freeriderism is:

a singleton could be a democratic world government [a fine idea, like the U.N., but unlikely to

transition a far more muddled affair than these noble aspirations project.¹⁶

The problem, though, lies not in transhumanism as such; the tensions outlined are more trenchant. The problem lies primarily in the perennial search for—and elusiveness of—wisdom (compare Takaki 2016a). And relatedly, it has to do with the fraught transition from transhumanism to posthumanism, where Noah Harrari forebodes: “Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods [transhuman or perhaps even posthuman] who don’t know what they want” (Harrari 2015, 416)? Thirdly, it has to do with ever-present freeriderisms that occur at any level of evolution, through which bs-related phenomena parasitically arise. What all this suggests is that the need for wisdom is a kind of “pan”-versal phenomenon that emerges for any sort of robust living and the difficulties encountered therein—difficulties that are largely congruent, even if locally unique (thus the diversity-in-generality suggested by *panversal*, in contrast to the sameness-in-generality connoted by *universal*).

A parallel development to transhumanism and posthumanism—both of which focus primarily on human evolution—outlines types of AI that can assist in further exploring the above threefold problem (the search for wisdom, what we really want, and freeriderism and bs). The first, lowest type is *hypohuman*¹⁷ AIs, which are “not quite as smart as humans, and they are subject to our rule” (Hall 2007, 241). Clearly at this level, which characterizes most of contemporary AI applications, all three difficulties remain.¹⁸ The same holds for the second more advanced level, *parahuman* AI, which is similar to

manage freeriderism], a benevolent and overwhelmingly powerful superintelligent machine [almost certainly cutting against individual freedom and choice, if these are even recognizable under such a regime], a world dictatorship [ibid], a stable alliance of leading powers [either unlikely to fully manage freeriderism, or significantly curtailing individual freedom and choice], or even something as abstract as a generally diffused moral code that included provisions for ensuring its own stability and enforcement [amounting in essence to solving all problems of political philosophy and praxis—a dubious possibility at best]. (Bostrom 2004, 17)

¹⁶ For example, the global entrenching of surveillance capitalism exploits, at its core, “behavioral surplus” (Zuboff 2019, 77), which it then renders into AI manufactured desires and market futures as part of its capitalist cycle. The pervasiveness of bs occurs in the form of indifference to exploiting people’s manufactured “preferences,” whose dynamics are largely concealed from public view (e.g., the notorious secretiveness of Google’s practices); see Zuboff 2019, chapters 3 and 10.

¹⁷ J. Storrs Hall views the markers of human intelligence as universal features of significant intelligence for any “substrate,” thus his hypo-*human* (para-*human*, etc.) designation.

¹⁸ Note that current AI falls under several “tribes” of machine learning (Domingos 2015). These approaches, broadly speaking, 1) are brittle with respect to more domain-general thickets associated with the pursuit of wisdom; 2) have ends/“desires” that are largely pre-programmed; and 3) can be manipulated for purposes external to their design (e.g., financial black-boxed algorithms that are exploited for shorting).

transhumanism (perhaps even indistinguishable from it) as it concerns AI that works alongside human capacities in cybernetically enhancing “the interface between our native senses and abilities” (Hall 2007, 243).

The third level, *diahuman* AI, exists somewhere akin to the transition between transhumanism and posthumanism: “The core of the diahuman phase ... will be the development of autogenous learning ... [where these] AIs, like the brightest humans, will be completely autonomous, not only learning what they need to know but also deciding what they need to learn” (Hall 2007, 242). It is perhaps here that the threefold problem can begin to be navigated, if only because such AIs can now recognize the general nature of the difficulties that occur for any sufficiently advanced intelligence situated in the throes of living.

At a level potentially parallel to—yet significantly different from—this third, *allohuman* AI could minimize freeriderism and bs by replacing the distinctively human portion of intelligence with a new matrix that overall “might resemble Mr. Spock, or might resemble an intelligent ant” (Hall 2007, 245). The search for wisdom in this “parallel universe” would be reconceptualized because of novel *teloi* that are no longer tethered to the human-specific aspects of intelligence (such as our genetic dispositions, “the form of our motivations, and the sensory modalities, of which several are fairly specific to running a human body” (Hall 2007, 244)). Still, given the panversal nature of the difficulties of living that come with significant intelligence, largely congruent issues associated with the search for wisdom would likely arise.¹⁹

It is only at the last two most advanced levels do we have a potential resolution or at least considerable managing of the threefold problem. The first, which comes after diahuman AI, is *epihuman* AI. This is the AI analogous to posthumanism, both of which dwell in a radically differing space of technological possibility, thus changing the grounds for which the threefold problem arises. In other words, the very conditions for living are materially altered, thus either “resolving” these problems (by transformation) or considerably managing them (by powerful multivariate means).

The last level goes beyond this—what Hall terms *hyperhuman* AI (or what Bostrom calls *superintelligence*). “Imagine an AI that is a thousand epihuman AIs, all tightly integrated together” (Hall 2007, 247)—a collective

¹⁹ Most of Hall’s speculative proposals for AI ethics are based mainly on game-theoretic considerations (see Ch.20, for example). However considerations of wisdom, freeriderism, and bs are wider, deeper, and more diffuse than these narrow parameters.

consciousness that is able to resolve or manage freeriderisms and bs via such integration, mitigating the niches available for potential exploitation or systemic waste. It can also navigate the search for wisdom by managing known variables, and can countenance not-fully-known risks to then either learn from, prepare for, or avoid potential black swans (see Taleb 2007). At this level, the “really interesting question then will be, what will it want” (Hall 2007, 248)? This is unlike the above problem raised by Harrari (where transhuman and perhaps even posthuman “gods” may not know what they want) in one critical respect. Given the distinction between posthumans and hyperhuman AIs (one stemming from a human-centered view of evolution; the other from the broader standpoint of AI evolution), the latter may be able to learn from humanity’s evolutionary roots and re-engineer a radically new space of “wants”/*teloi*—via an exhaustive exploration of adaptive landscapes—to better accord with the difficulties of living, and thereby *just what regulative ideal wisdom represents*. This not only shifts the premises of the game, this transfigures the material conditions under which the game proceeds *and evolves*—nothing less than a revolution in what life is, what living means, and the (techno)philosophy bearing on these issues.

CONCLUSION

But of course, getting from here to there is in no way ensured; the perennial problems of living persist even in these transformative times. More disturbing are the potential catastrophic and existential risks we enact on the path from transhumanism to posthumanism, and the parallel evolutionary path from hypohuman AI to hyperhuman AI (see also Bostrom 2014, and Bostrom and Cirkovic 2008). If anything, the sirens of techno-expansion herald the deepening and exacerbation of the threefold problem as we lurch towards the future. For what can ameliorate the paucity of wisdom in these globally-and-systemically fraught times? Shall “gods” be able to figure out what they really want before largely self-induced catastrophe strikes? And how will ever-present freeriderisms and bs be alleviated when their short-term gains prove to be so seductive? The transitional pitfalls appear at least as great in magnitude as the benefits of a posthuman and/or hyperhuman age. Until then, the humanistic problems that irretrievably come with robust life-processes remain, for which philosophical reflection—comparatively frail and opaque as it is—offers one of the few tools of hope and warning.

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