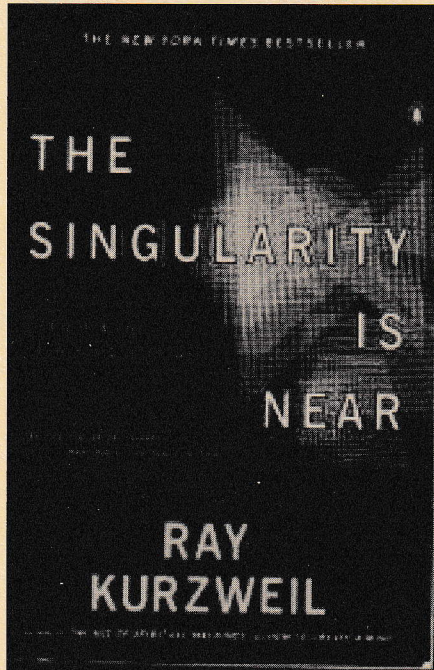


Nearing Singularity

Shamsad Mortuza*



Ray Kurzweil

The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology

New York: Penguin, 2005, pp. 652

Price US\$22

Optimism unsettles us. In the departments of English and Humanities, in liberal arts in general, we are trained to critique to prove ourselves human. Humanism, in its garbed guile, teaches us to point out what's wrong with humanity per se. Our criticism veers between skepticism and pessimism. Even when critics such as N. Katherine Hayles ask "How We Became Posthuman" or Donna Haraway perpetuates a tradition in which the posthuman subject takes the shape of a cyborg, we are very much within the comfort zone of critiquing humanism or its presupposed absence in the distant future. Hence, the optimism shared by Ray Kurzweil in *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005) unnerves us to say the least.

The book, shelved in the non-fiction popular science category of high-street book shops, resembles a sci-fi fiction; yet it remains solidly grounded in the soil of science. It turbo-boosts into near future and assures us that Singularity is attainable as early as in 2045. The Singularity, as Kurzweil describes it, is:

....a future period during which the pace of technological advance will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed... The Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but transcends our biological roots. There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between

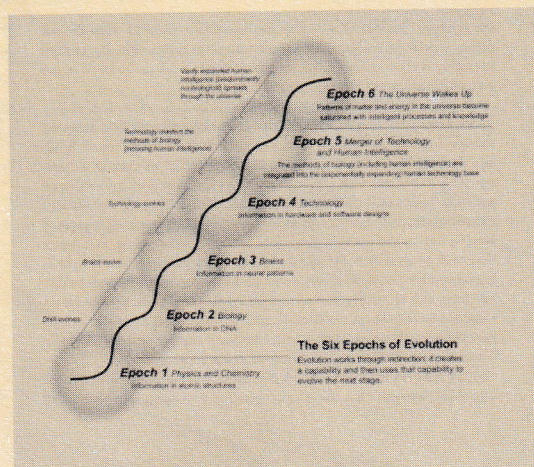
physical and virtual. (7)

The “exponential rate” in which our intelligence is growing will soon make human being a non-biological entity, an Artificial Intelligence (AI). The “version 1.0 human body” (299) is all set to be upgraded into “version 2.0” when “Billions of nanobots will travel through the bloodstream in our bodies and brains. In our bodies, they will destroy pathogens, correct DNA errors, eliminate toxins, and perform many other tasks to enhance our physical well being. As a result we will be able to live indefinitely without aging” (300).

Put simply, these presumed upgrading of human versions will usher in a new civilization enabling us to transcend our biological boundaries and amplify our creativity. Such “radical and optimistic view of the future course of human development” is endorsed by a certain Bill Gates who features in the dust cover of the book. Listed as The New York Times Bestseller book, published by Penguin USA, and certified by heavy weight celebrities--The Singularity is Here has all the right ingredients to be on your bucket list (although the book itself will denounce the necessity of having any such death wish).

But if you are brought up in a milieu of liberal humanism that started finding faults with wage labor system and alienation of the laborer from his product, that once saw the metamorphosis of a salesman into an insect, that once viewed the self etherized as a patient on an operating table, well, be prepared to upgrade yourself from version 1.0 modernism to version 2.0 postmodernism and perform a post-mortem of a post-human.

Indeed, Kurzweil is too modern to sing any requiem for a hollow man or his vanishing race. Human being, just like any other products--"clothes, food, energy" (339)--for this popular science writer can be reduced to information. Yes, you heard it right—information. His mathematical mapping of the six epochs: ‘physics and chemistry’; ‘biology’; ‘brains’; ‘technology’; ‘merger of technology with human intelligence’; and ‘the universe wakes up’ shows how humans are right on course to attain Singularity. So, in Epoch 1, atoms and molecules engineered itself to become “information-rich, three-dimensional structures” (16). Billion years ago, in Epoch 2, carbon-based compounds evolved into DNA and stored information. In the third epoch early animals started recognizing patterns; and “ultimately, our own species evolved the ability to create abstract mental models ...and put these ideas into action” (16). Epoch 4 shows



Source: (Singularity 15)

heightened use of technology in which humans have outshone other mammals “in roughly doubling the computational capacity” (16). Epoch 5 is informed by a “human-machine civilization” (20) which will lead to Singularity in Epoch 6 in which “intelligence, derived from its biological origins in human brains and its technological origin in human ingenuity, will begin to saturate the matter and energy in its midst” (21).

So what makes human superior to other species? Why homo sapiens is singled out in the evolutionary design? According to this acclaimed inventor of our time, responsible for designing flatbed scanner for instance, “It is this shared specieswise knowledge base that distinguishes us from other animals. Other animals communicate, but they don't accumulate an evolving and growing base of knowledge to pass down to the next generation” (328).

So in a post-Darwinian evolutionary schema we are fast outpacing other creatures in our capacity of both generating and storing information. Death, for Kurzweil, is tragic only because it threatens the death of information. For the ever optimistic Kurzweil, soon we will “be able to access, permanently archive, as well as understand the thousands of trillions of bytes of information we have tucked away in each of our brains” (329).

The “ultimate longevity software” will ensure that “biological hardware” is taken care of; in other words, death will soon be pronounced dead. Earlier Kurzweil observed, “As we learn the operating principles of the human body and brain, we will soon be in a position to design vastly superior systems that will last longer and perform better, without susceptibility to breakdown, disease and aging” (302).

Kurzweil's vision is more than a Keatsian negative capability. He is in search of a, as Nietzsche said and Kurzweil quoted, “rope over an abyss” (373). The central urge of the author seems to be in pursuing a more involved role in the universe in order to reach for a greater existence. He knows that human competence in technology will encourage our race to take noble risks not only to extend our lives and escape death but also to guarantee that our future or the future of humanity is secured.

Whether one will grab the rope over an abyss offered by Kurzweil is a matter of choice; but from the vantage point of 2014 we can denounce some of the predictions that Kurzweil made in 2005. For example, the Google guru predicted that by 2010 even fabrics would be used to wire up the globe to create an ultimate Wi-Fi zone. Well, Wi-Fi is everywhere but not to the extent that Kurzweil thought it would. Nevertheless, Kurzweil remains an extremely intelligent thinker who can use a wealth of information to argue that singularity can be attained in another 30 odd years.

Meanwhile sitting in my ULAB office room, I am thinking of asking the admin to change the fluorescent tube lights and energy saving bulbs into LED bulbs. We have just gone green, and CFC bulbs are no longer the in thing. Leafing through Kurzweil, which I had to read while auditing a course on posthumanism at UCLA, I am forced to ask: Are we living in a parallel universe in which Kurzweil's dystopia is pure science, and where the signs around me are releasing nothing but signifiers of a distant utopia?

