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The centrality of the human being underpinning modernity is being challenged by biology on one hand and technology on the other. Is the formulation of a new humanism necessary, and if the answer is affirmative, what would it have to consider mostly?

There's a novel by Haruki Murakami called *Klara and the Sun*, which imagines a world in which "AFs", or humanoid robots, assist humans. The humanoid, Klara, is assigned to a young woman with bad health: Klara is programmed to help her, but at critical times, the question arises – does she care like a human for another human? That is, does she have what we would call a *heart*, in the emotional sense

You could also think of the famous film *Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy, the central character who has been spirited into the Kingdom of Oz, is accompanied by three characters with defects – one of whom is a Tin Man, who doesn't have a heart – but acquires one, through Dorothy's friendship. The Tin Man is an early version of a humanoid, transformed into a human by affection. The message of both of these fictions is that the emotive heart of 'tin men' is at issue. The *Wizard of Oz* solves it by the intercession of human affection: Murakami leaves the question open.

It would seem possible that humanoid computers could be programmed to simulate love. A love

program could be developed and inserted into humanoids – the program both manifesting signs of love in certain conditions, and also responding with declarations of love from other humanoids if they fulfill certain conditions, which the program recognizes and approves.

To propose a new humanism, societies would have to decide if humanoid love were permissible. Love in its various forms – romantic, familial, spiritual, friendship, – has developed in civilizations for thousands of years and is seen in most civilizations as a central human experience: *developed* being the key word, since it ordinarily requires time and intimacy. A program would require very little time and no intimacy. Thus if I were on a new humanist ethic committee, I would add a fourth law to Asimov's present three laws of robot behavior, these being –

- First Law – A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
- Second Law – A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
- Third Law – A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.
- The Fourth Law – “A robot is programmed to assist and protect humans as directed by its software. It can never develop emotional attachment, or hatred, of a human, and programs which attempt to simulate love and hate are illegal.”

A GLOBAL ETHIC

Many of today's problems are global and require global solutions. Attaining common goals requires shared rules. Is a global ethic possible? If so, what would be its unifying principles and values?

The UN Charter is the closest thing we have to a substantive global ethic, and it is a fine document. Many of the principles one would want in any global ethical document would be included in such a document – as, ‘to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small’. It is, however, frequently violated by member states: more often than not, the violators find protectors in the security council, and no action is taken against them.

It is hard to imagine a global ethic, which can be globally enforced, not having the same problem. A global enforceable ethic would require a global government prepared to use force, which could develop into a nightmarish idea. Best, and perhaps the only possibility is to continue to work through nation states – where, insofar as they exist, democratic institutions allow some popular participation in government, and where the UN principles hold most sway.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE DECLINE OF MORAL STANDARDS

This topic has come up in various publications. Some think the present moral crisis has simply been made visible by technology, others are convinced technology has contributed to it. What is your opinion?

We should be clear about what is the “decline”. Does this address issues like the growth of divorce, greater promiscuity, the greater distribution of pornography, especially the nastier kind, the growth of corruption, especially by the rich and by governments, the accumulation of huge wealth together with widespread poverty?

Should these trends be balanced against the widening of the scope of human rights, the attack, in part successful, on discrimination against women and people of colour; the greater scope of welfare states in the provision of health, education, housing; the much faster mobilization of aid to stricken communities?

Technology has assisted both of these trends, and assists in the attack on the first of these.

SCIENTIFIC ILLITERACY

How can scientific illiteracy be accounted for in that range of population that has access to scientific knowledge via education and internet?

Nothing of value to say on this – except to observe that most people are content to leave the difficult problems in applied and certainly experimental science to specialists. They may focus on an area of interest – as, presently, software development – but the development of a broad knowledge of science is generally rare. The best that can be done is to make scientific knowledge as far as possible popular

- in the schools, even in non-scientific courses, in universities likewise, and in the media.

CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATION

What are the main challenges for education in a world confronted with survival threats and sharpening divisions?

The main challenge is, as far as is possible, to separate education at every level from ideology, from opinion and from making it subservient to national or religious goals. It is to affirm the importance of the fact and the observable truth, the need for open minds and the confronting of students, of every age, with the current threats to the world, to peace and to human survival. It is to make of education something at once rooted in fact and truth, and in civic behaviour.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Power and the Story (2017); *Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot* (2020).