
Every day, it seems that some new technology under the title of artificial intelligence enters our lives. If not that, we hear rumors of a rising transhumanism or biohacking. With this in my mind, I found Calvin Mercer and Tracey Trothen’s Religion and the Technological Future: An Introduction to Biohacking, Artificial Intelligence, and Transhumanism to be a timely and impressive book. The topography is vast, and the authors’ knowledge commensurate and encyclopaedic. In covering the territory, their writing is generally good. Mercer and Trothen are clearly excited about their subject and seek to draw in their readers.

Since they present this as a textbook (e.g., p. xi), their intended audience is students. In that light, the writing style suitable for the intended audience with terminology, vocabulary appropriate defined in the Glossary. Each chapter also includes ‘Questions for Discussion’, which is a useful tool. These features make it a great text for teaching.

A listing of the chapters is instructive. Part I ‘Setting the Scene’ includes four chapters (Introduction; Existing and Possible Technologies: How We Biohack; Transhumanism, the Posthuman, and the Religions: Exploring Basic Concepts; Radical Human Enhancement and Ethics: Questions We Must Ask). Part II ‘Five Categories of Enhancements’ has three chapters (Superlongevity and Other Physical Enhancements; Cognitive Enhancement and Moral Bioenhancement: Becoming Smarter and More Moral; Affective Enhancement and Spiritual Enhancement: Feeling Happier and More Spiritual). Part III takes up ‘Special Topics: Going Beyond the Edge’ with its three chapters (Cryonics: Buried, Burned, or ... Frozen Mind; Uploading: Cyber Beings and Digital Immortality; Superintelligence: Bringing on the Singularity). They name the final section (Part IV) appropriately enough ‘Conclusion’, which seeks to draw in final thoughts about ‘Religion 2.0’ and the ‘Enhanced Technological Future’.

Mercer and Trothen glory in the manifold ways that technology can be brought to human life, which makes this book almost impossible to summarize, except in the broadest outlines or selective details. I’ve chosen the latter, and with that in mind, I will comment on one from each of the main sections. ‘Transhumanism, the Posthuman, and the Religions’ sets the groundwork for many of the book’s core concepts. They, for example, offer this definition: ‘Today, transhumanism is generally understood as an intellectual and cultural movement that advocates the use of a wide range of increasingly powerful technologies to radically enhance human beings’ (p. 20) and thus another key phrase here is ‘radical human enhancements’ (e.g., p. 49). After some comments on Philip Hefner’s ‘created
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co-creator’ (p. 28ff.), the authors present a spectrum of theological responses (p. 32ff.) and then review religious transhumanism (p. 34ff.), a movement that bucks a clear trend toward transhumanism as an entirely secular undertaking. Toward the end of the chapter, they briefly address the relationship between science and religion (p. 39ff.).

In ‘Cognitive Enhancement and Moral Bioenhancement’, they lean on Nick Bostrom and Anders Sandberg’s definition: ‘cognitive enhancement as using artificial means to optimize learning and memory systems’ (p. 92). A vast array of options is presented from more garden-variety stimulants like Adderall and Ritalin (p. 92f.) to transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) (p. 94), which reduces mental messages of pain and fatigue, to more applications of AI (p. 95). Moral enhancement (p. 96ff.) is somewhat less direct, but not impossible. In their assessment of religious responses, they present a general guideline: ‘conservatives may tend to reject enhancement technologies, while more liberals may lean toward acceptance’ (p. 104). With that topic, I was taken back about a century in remembering that it was the religious conservatives who rejected eugenics in the early twentieth century, while progressives tended to promote it. At any rate, in evaluating the ethical implications of this section, this statement was revelatory: ‘Your authors believe the main reason morality is difficult to define is its contextuality. The meaning of doing good and of virtues, such as altruism and justice, changes a little or a lot depending on who is interpreting what it means to do good, and the virtues’ (p. 107).

In ‘Superintelligence: Bringing on the Singularity’, Mercer and Trothen state their conviction that AI is the future, even quoting Vladimir Putin (p. 181). The oft-quoted philosopher Bostrom adds that ‘human-level machine intelligence... might perhaps fairly soon thereafter result in superintelligence’ (p. 183). This naturally leads to Ray Kurzweil’s Singularity, where ‘general human intelligence is surpassed’ (p. 184). The authors note that these comments nudge us toward omniscience and omnipotence, which represent traditional characteristic of monotheism (p. 187), though it is probable that this superintelligence will not be omnibenevolent (p. 188ff.). After engaging a variety of topics such as ‘baptizing superintelligence’ (p. 196f.) or whether incarnations can happen with AI robots, they ultimately end with the ethical question, Will this superintelligence simply reflect the ethics of those who built it? (193) (Which may not be an entirely good thing.) The tone is concerned throughout the chapter, though not entirely dour.

I do have a few academic quibbles. For example, the assertion that resurrection is more important in Christianity than Islam and that ‘A feasible religious interpretation is that cryonics provides the technological means for how God accomplishes transformational resurrection’ (p. 152) seem like hasty conclusions. I’m also not convinced about the breakdown of ‘monotheistic’ and ‘karmic’ as opposed to ‘western’ and ‘eastern’. Simply put, the alternative terminology doesn’t add anything. And is this true? ‘In comparison, religions originating in Asia, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are generally accepting of science, seeing no conflict between religion and science’ (p. 40). No conflict? Which Buddhism and which Hinduism are they talking about? Though this is certainly a common assertion, it strikes me that the answers from a variety of scholars are much more nuanced.

More substantially, Mercer and Trothen assert, ‘To ensure survival and relevance, the religions will need to evolve in ways significant enough to merit a new
era in religion, which we call “Religion 2.0” (p. 210). I have to admit that I’m skeptical of a phrase like ‘Religion 2.0’—how long did the version 1.0 last? Is the influence of recent technology the only substantial change to ‘religion’ (taken as a whole)? What about the effect of Emperor Ashoka on Buddhism? Or the collapse of the Roman Empire on Christianity? Or the Holocaust on Judaism? In the last chapter, Mercer and Trothen take up the ethical issues, and there lurks behind their discussion a concession that the advance of technology is inevitable, and it’s not quite clear whether religions can do much more than simply adapt to the colonizing advance of technology. Finally, I found this statement provocative, but by the end of the book, I’m not sure they convinced me of its truth: ‘The religions of the world will come to an end, or thrive, depending on how they respond to the topic of this book’ (p. 3). The topic of the book is certainly one key criterion for the viability of religion, but not the only one. I suppose what I’m saying in is that the book, at points, is given over to hyperbole. But when addressing the future of AI, transhumanism, and biohacking, that might come with the territory.

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