

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 29, 2011 at 2:50pm

The new stage of psychic evolution

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Eco Catholic

Many years ago, The Jesuit scholar Teilhard de Chardin claimed that the biological (physical) evolution of our species had probably reached its climax; in biological terms, we could not evolve much further.

Consequently, he suggested that we are rapidly approaching a new evolutionary threshold, in which mind and spirit, rather than biology, will provide the context for evolutionary emergence. This new stage he named as psychic evolution.

The exponential growth of information, evidenced throughout the closing decades of the 20th century, supports this claim. Processing information provides the primary work-outlet in the world of our time. And the communication of information continues to rise with greater speed, accuracy, and efficiency.

Central to this explosion is the computer with its technology now doubling every five years. Computational skills which might take the human brain several hours, can be achieved by modern computers in a matter of seconds. In fact, computer technology measures its speed not in hours, minutes or even seconds, but in terms of the nanosecond -- which literally means one-billionth of a second.

The notion that the intelligence created through computerized technology might catch up with, and even outpace, human intelligence, has been the subject of intense study in recent decades. Will machines develop a type of brain that might be more advanced and sophisticated than the human brain?

There is no clear consensus on this matter. Obviously, proponents from the world of technology tend to warm to the prospects that lie ahead, while those of a philosophical or religious persuasion opt for the view that the human brain will probably co-evolve with this new breakthrough, and is likely to remain superior to it.

A much more promising, albeit perilous development is that of intelligent machines and their interactive role in the human intelligence of the future. This is the topic explored by the inventor and futurist, Ray Kurzweil in his mammoth work, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. More details on his web pages: www.Singularity.com ; www.KurzweilAI.net

Kurzweil reviews not just how machines might develop brains (Artificial Intelligence), but far more importantly how the intelligence of machines can be used to evoke unprecedented potentials in the human brain.

The future, he suggests, may not be about replacing the human brain, but aiding breakthroughs which evolution itself desires for humanity. In this process nanobots will be crucial. These are microchips that are invisible to the human eye, potentially capable of carrying massive quantities of information. They can be inserted into many different organisms; much like a pace-maker can be inserted to help regulate the human heart.

Kurzweil's particular interest is the development of procedures whereby such nanobots can be inserted into the neurons of the human brain, thus modifying significantly the way humans act, think and generally behave. He claims that the strategy to do so is already well advanced and prognosticates that it will be an approved procedure by the year 2045 CE.

At that stage -- mid way through the present century -- intelligent machines will be smarter than the conventional wisdom Homo Sapiens has known for over 100,000 years. We will be into a new exciting and dangerous world!

To date, scholars have described this new creature as the post-human, a concept Kurzweil does not find helpful. To me the term makes poor evolutionary sense, using dualistic overtones which are dangerously simplistic. As indicated above, Kurzweil wagers that the breakthrough will enhance rather than diminish human potential -- largely depending on the quality of awareness with which we appropriate this new development.

I wish to suggest that what Kurzweil is describing -- without necessarily agreeing with all the details -- is the Teilhardian notion of psychic evolution coming to fuller fruition, perhaps even reaching a high point of maturation.

In 1957, the biologist Julian Huxley coined the terms transhuman to describe this new development; the word has taken on other meanings since then. Information, knowledge and wisdom become the core ingredients of this new evolutionary stage.

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The "intelligent machines" -- contrary to the widespread fear of undermining human intelligence -- are evoking new potentials and horizons of understanding which could bring forth in a more explicit way the richer giftedness identified by other disciplines (e.g., transpersonal psychology) over the past fifty years.

Kurzweil devotes the concluding chapters of his book to the prospect that this new technology could end up in the wrong hands and reap untold havoc for humanity as well as for several other organisms inhabiting Planet Earth. The breakthrough could easily become a nightmare.

Many of us are only too well aware of the destructive desires of those who release worms, viruses and

other lethal mechanisms into the communication networks; this is small stuff compared to deliberately infecting the workings of the human brain.

Kurzweil argues that it is up to governments to put ethical and protective measures in place, and concedes that, thus far, in information technology governments have failed dismally.

In our globalised world, corporations often outwit nation states (individually and collectively) thus leaving ordinary citizens at the mercy of dangerous and destructive forces. Kurzweil believes that governments will rise to this challenge; while I share his optimism on several matters outlined in his recent book, this is one I cannot support.

For over 30 years, I have publicly supported Teilhard's suggestion that our species is on the brink of a new evolutionary breakthrough, which in evolutionary terms is likely to take decades rather than single years. Consistently, I have regarded the information explosion as a major component of this breakthrough. I see two processes that now need to coalesce to see the whole thing through:

First, a technological dimension of the type Kurzweil describes which will not make us automatons, but creatures imbued with new wisdom thanks to the contribution which intelligent machines can make to our evolutionary unfolding.

Second, a mystical dimension, empowering us to discern and discriminate between wisdom that will enhance growth and flourishing as distinct from that which could wreck untold havoc on our species and the earth itself.

Kurzweil makes no allusion to this second dimension and this I regard as the major weakness of an otherwise timely and impressive body of ideas.

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