

Contesting Computer-Anthropologies: The Human in the Digital Age

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The public square is awash with anxious predictions and analyses of the significance of the rise of so-called “Artificial Intelligence” and “Artificial Life” (AI/AL). Our reception of these technologies is dominated on the one hand by merely technical and procedural questions about the refinement of instrumental efficacy, and on the other by alarmist prophecies of apocalypse or transhumanist accounts of a future in which AI/AL supersede human beings. Thus we tend to miss the real question posed to human societies by AI/AL: how is the rise of this technology re-shaping us?

Where the digital converges with ‘life’ and ‘intelligence’, operating in pervasive, intimate and largely invisible ways, our understanding of the human is changed. This technogenic re-shaping of our anthropology is a present reality and taking place largely without examination or critique.

This project proposes that we stop and think, urgently, about how AI/AL are implicitly creating and sustaining a particular vision of the human and ask ourselves (collectively) whether that is a vision we wish to sustain or challenge. We propose the hypothesis, that the rise of AI/AL has created social and intellectual conditions in which human beings are modelled on computers. In this understanding, human beings are basically information processors; calculating machines, whose rationality is taken to be computational. Computer intelligence is assumed to be the norm for intelligence as such and is used to judge and measure human intelligence. On the other hand, AI/AL are anthropomorphised, so that the difference between distinctively human and computational intelligence is eroded. We call this picture of the human operating here ‘computer-anthropology’. We see it as a deracinated, impoverished model of the human. How can this anthropology, its sustaining values and visions be brought to light, critically assessed, and confronted with substantial alternatives?

Answering these questions about AI/AL requires an interdisciplinary dialogue at the intersection of computer science, medicine, law, history, sociology, philosophy, religious studies and theology – the latter because they are paradigmatically concerned with the purpose and direction of human life (philosophy, theology and religious studies). We think these disciplines can resource an intellectually and emotionally compelling alternative to computer anthropology. Seeing the human as socially and ecologically embedded against a transcendent horizon, this would be an anthropology which takes seriously both our animality and our spirituality.

Recovering a language for a positive appreciation and appropriation of what is distinctively and irreplaceably human, the project aims to stimulate a wider societal conversation about how to create conditions for the flourishing of distinctively human life and intelligence in a digital age. Without this, the technical, economic and ethical questions raised by AI/AL cannot be well-answered.

The project comprises a critical analytical, conceptual and historical investigation of computer-anthropology, and the articulation of alternative anthropologies. Its findings will be processed with and communicated to the broader public by a variety of means: journalism, podcasts, video-essays, documentary films, edited book series, art projects and school projects.

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