The Titanic and Transhumanism:
The Enfolding of Myth.

Michael Rectenwald

Ever since the sinking of the Titanic on 14 April 1912, the disaster of the luxury liner has animated the popular imagination. Countless articles, books and documentaries have reconstructed the chain of events that led to the accident. More recently, scholars have examined the meaning of the wreck in the popular imagination. For example, Richard Howells has examined the way that such disastrous events are enfolded into and made sensible in terms of existing myth. Howells sees myths as texts within which the actual and the imaginary are enfolded in a potent blending of fact and fiction in ways that make otherwise unintelligible, arbitrary, and senseless events meaningful. According to this understanding, myths locate confusing events within existing cultural frameworks. Howells shows how the Titanic became, post hoc, an unsinkable ship, as well as an emblem of the myth of technological hubris. As such, the Titanic not only became comprehensible in terms of existing myth but also became a mythic element according to which subsequent, similar events might be seen and comprehended.

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In this paper, I leave the study of mythopoeisis in connection with the Titanic to others and consider how the myth of hubris not only enfolds past events but is also projected onto prospective ones. In particular, I discuss the emergent field of Genetics, Nanotechnology and Robotics (GNR), and the way that it is enfolded within the imaginary of the hubris myth. I consider GNR as fostered and promoted by the philosophical movement largely based on these technologies, post-humanism or transhumanism.

GNR and Transhumanism

"Suppose it were possible, through some sort of instantaneous genetic engineering, to change any aspect of your nature, so that you could have any combination of capacities that has ever been in
the range of human possibility: you could have Michael Jordan’s fade-away shot, Mozart’s musicality, Groucho Marx’s comic gifts, Proust’s delicate way with language. Suppose you could put these together with any desires you wanted -- homo- or hetero-, or a taste for Wagner or Eminem . . . . Suppose, further, that there were no careers or professions in this world because all material needs were met by intelligent machines. Far from being a Utopia, so it seems to me, this would be a kind of hell." -- Anthony Appiah, The Ethics of Identity (2005).

"Man is not born free, but is everywhere in biological chains. People of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your biological chains! We stand at a turning point in human evolution. We have cracked the genetic code; translated the Book of Life. We will soon possess the ability to become designers of our own evolution . . . . As humanism freed us from the chains of superstition, let transhumanism free us from our biological chains." -ñ Simon Young, Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto (2006).

As the paired epigraphs above suggest, the possibilities posed by GNR technology involve some of the most breath-taking, complex, and controversial issues facing humanity today. As many enthusiasts and critics suggest, what may be at stake in the field is the very definition of being human. For better or worse, depending upon your perspective, GNR promises to challenge the conventional notions of human existence and human nature. The changes some GNR thinkers predict would be both far-reaching and extremely personal. GNR proposes to produce drastic changes in our external worlds, while simultaneously penetrating deeply into our bodies and minds. Some of these developments might be mundane, such as having regular genetic check-ups to scan for programming errors that may be treated with gene therapy. Others may seem like science fiction. Imagine a world full of designer babies, born of pre-implantation genetic screening and custom genetic engineering. Imagine nanorobots cleaning up the environment, recreating a green planet, and reversing global warming. What would life be like if computers exceeded human intelligence and memory chips, installed in our brains, enhanced memory by a thousand-fold? How would you feel knowing that nanorobots were coursing through your bloodstream, killing pathogens, eliminating cancer cells, repairing genetic codes, and reversing aging? Could death become a thing of the past? If you could upload your personality into a robot, and thus live forever, would you do it?

“the emergent field of Genetics, Nanotechnology and Robotics (GNR) . . . is enfolded within the imaginary of the hubris myth . . . promoted by the philosophical movement [called] post-humanism or transhumanism.”
The scope of GNR research and conjecture is so great that the proposals offered by enthusiasts and often feared and loathed by critics are not being left to scientific and technological thinkers alone. The field also engages moral, social, political, economic, and philosophical issues. It also necessarily taps into long-standing myths about technological hubris.

The ultimate objectives of GNR vary according to the stakeholders involved. One of the chief movements for advancing GNR technologies and harnessing them for their most far-reaching prospects is known as transhumanism. According to its proselytizers, transhumanism is the intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.(2) Transhumanism is a philosophy that works to achieve and promote the transcendence of human limitations by harnessing the power of science and technology to advantage. The transhumanist Simon Young believes that using GNR technologies, we will soon be capable and should proceed to take over where evolution has left off to create a trans- or post-human future.(3) Most transhumanist thinkers seek the conditions for an enhanced nature harnessed and altered by technology to the extent that humanity, as we know it, will cease to exist, and become more and better than it is now.

The transhuman future is hardly one that is universally embraced. The philosopher Francis Fukuyama argues that our notion of individual rights depends on a stable human nature.(4) Changes to human nature undermine the secular foundation for morals and ethics. When some human beings are enhanced by GNR technologies, Fukuyama insists, the dignity and respect accorded to the unenhanced will diminish. Their human rights will erode as the enhanced argue for privileges based on their generally acknowledged superiority. The only reasonable solution, Fukuyama insists, is to put in place governmental policies that guard against such possibilities. On the other hand, GNR proponents such as Simon Young believe that such sanctioning is tantamount to legislating to impose infirmity, disease, aging, and death.

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Access to GNR technologies is also an issue. Wonít the recipients of enhancements most likely be those with the most money? GNR, some critics argue, threatens to widen an already growing gap between rich and poor. In response, advocates claim that enhancements may reach the rich first, but as technology advances, its cost will fall, opening access to the general populace. For precedence,
they point to the principle widely known as Mooreís Law, a maxim of computer scientist Gordon Moore, who predicted (with relative success) that the price-performance ratio of computer technology (particularly its processing capacities) increases exponentially over time. Extending Mooreís Law, inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil argues that the price-performance of other GNR technologies will also improve at an exponential rate. Further, Kurzweil and others suggest that rather than increasing inequality, enhancement will actually level the playing field for those otherwise condemned to poverty based on differences in ability shown to be heritable. (5)

The ultimate prospect of GNR and transhumanism may be the possibility of a successor species. A successor follows and often replaces its predecessor. In the inatural process of evolution, varieties and species have exploited niches and replaced competing and often related varieties and species. The child replaces the parent. Even advocates of super-intelligent machines or robots admit that such machines, even those created by other, earlier machines, could very well compete with and eventually replace us as the dominant species on earth (and beyond). Such predictions are based on the exponentially increasing rate of technological development, as described by Raymond Kurweil, Hans Moravec, and others. The 2004 movie, "I, Robot," based on the fiction of Isaac Asimov, illustrates the possibilities for such a scenario. But even before such a dystopia could come to pass, human-computer interaction will surely be more than a matter of texting on iPhones. What about human-robot hybrids, often called cyborgs? Might these mid-term species ó either people with robotic parts or robots with human elements ó elbow unenhanced human beings out of existence? Humanists like Francis Fukuyama and Bill McKibben and technologists like Bill Joy say that we must know when to say ìenough,î and put the brakes on what they see as runaway technology. A belief in technological determinism, they say, may become a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead to a robot or cyborg takeover, but it is still avoidable. Others say that while these and other such futures are possible, safeguards can be installed to avoid them. (6)

**GNR and the Myth of Hubris**

The hubris myth has a long history in Western civilization. Hubris was the crime of Prometheus, the Titan in Greek mythology, who stole fire from the Olympians. The Olympian sky god Zeus, enraged by Prometheusís impertinence, condemned him to a life of torture, chaining him to a rock where an eagle could feed on his liver daily. Similarly, in the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are punished with banishment from the paradise of Eden and from the promise of eternal life for eating from the Tree of Knowledge. A more recent story of hubris and punishment is that portrayed in the novel
Frankenstein (1818), by Mary Shelley. For assembling human parts exhumed from graves and bringing his creature to life, Dr. Frankenstein suffers unremitting agony over the death of loved ones at the hands of his unnatural progeny.

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The wreck and sinking of the Titanic, as Howells has suggested, has been enrolled into the long-standing Western myth of hubris and has “emerged” as a major reference point for future prospects and technological endeavors. As an example of subsequent similar events, in his conclusion, Howells points to the explosion of the Challenger shuttle as an incident that came to be seen in terms strikingly like that of the Titanic. Like the Titanic before it, the Challenger drew meaning from the myth, was enfolded into it, and came to serve as an instantiation of it. That is, each new event both draws from and adds a new element to the myth. It both validates and adds potency to its explanatory efficacy.

What I am suggesting is that, in addition to past events, prospective possibilities can be always already enfolded within myths. Mythopoesis works both backward and forward simultaneously, enrolling pasts and futures in an ongoing and expanding framework of mythic comprehension. The transhumanist fantasies for GNR are already mythic instances of hubris before any eventualities have even been recorded. No matter what they may become, they will operate within and likely become burdened by the powerful myth of hubris.


Suggested Additional Reading

**Business and Economics**


**Genetics, Nanotechnology and Robotics**


Journalism


Morgan, John. "Science Cult Ray Kurzweil's vision of a 'Singularity' has attracted some followers, but don't expect it anytime soon." Newsweek 18 May 2009.

Philosophy


Social and Cultural Studies


