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Letter to Utopia

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Abstract

This paper is a reply to Bostrom's 'Letter from Utopia' published in the same volume.

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Sunday 24 February, 2008.

Dear Posthumanity,

Thank you for your recent (?) correspondence, it sounds like a lovely place where you are living. This is the first time I have written a letter to the future, so please forgive me if what I write seems unreasonable. My friends, Roberto Casati and Achille Varzi (2001) helped me out, so I hope you will find it suitable. In any case, I particularly hope that nothing I say here will be a source of concern for you or, indeed, will be cause to weaken the chances of your coming into existence. I fear that it might, so I thought I should at least warn you of this.

My first thoughts upon reading your letter involved imagining whether everyone around you experiences the utopia that you describe. Do you speak on behalf of the whole of humanity? Where I live it is very difficult to achieve this, since there is such diversity of wealth and happiness. For many, the monotony of a 'commuter ride', as you mention, is something of an ideal to work towards. I am not really in a position to speak for the whole of humanity, though I perceive that your situation is quite different. Nevertheless, I am compelled to indicate that my reply to your letter comes merely from an individual, and a relatively affluent one at that. However, I will endeavour to be fair to the range of people that are alive here today and will try to consider their interests, when I attempt to imagine on their behalf whether our future, your present, is appealing.

Before moving on, I am curious to know how you were nominated to represent your people in stating claims about their welfare. Are you their leader, if such a concept still applies in your time? It's not clear to me that it would. Perhaps your words represent some kind of collective consciousness. We have recently developed things called *wikis* here, which are like written encyclopedia entries, though anybody can edit them. I wonder if your letter was written this way, such that it conveys the sentiments of all people. Perhaps it took months of preparation and passed through the hands of thousands of people. The wikis that I describe probably sound a little primitive but, to some here, such innovations are still quite radical. Moreover, we are hopeful that this kind of system could lead to meaningful social change and enable a representation of more diverse perspectives than is typically achieved through our traditional mechanisms of governance. I suppose I am saying all this because I need some reason to trust that you are the person you claim to be, rather than someone who randomly found a way of sending something through time. In any case, I will give you the benefit of the doubt.

Your letter spoke about some very enticing prospects, which I find value in pursuing regardless of whether I will live to see them come to fruition. I am reassured to know that everything works out well for us in the end – or at least for some period of time – even if, sometimes, I don't see how some people will make it through to the end of today. Many don't. I have numerous questions that I want to ask you, which I hope you will be willing to engage with. For example, I am trying hard to understand your claim to greater intelligence. You know, there are some really, really clever people around here! Still, I wonder whether your claim requires that you have answers to my questions, in order to fully support your claim. However, answers to the kinds of questions I have in mind have eluded the intellect of people since time immemorial, so my expectations of what you will say are modest. Indeed, there is a big part of me that hopes you will not have answers to my questions, since I am troubled by the kind of omnipotence that you seem to enjoy. It's just that we have dealt with a lot of people who espoused claims of superiority over others – other races, ethnic groups, religious convictions – and I am quite wary of any language that appears to draw from such intentions.

To tell you the truth, matters of intellectual or physical difference are a very difficult subject for me to think about or discuss. Well, you will know what happened to us in the 20th and 21st Centuries – and, indeed, many centuries before. People still want to claim that there are reasons to support the eradication of certain kinds of people in this world on the basis of inferiority. The spectre of racial science has not completely disappeared from our society and I don't really know what to do about that. The most eloquent of arguments has been made against it and still the most racist beliefs remain locked into the mindset of some parts of our society.

Another of my initial thoughts when reading your letter was that you seemed quite distant from our situation here. I'm sorry if this comes across as a little angry, but you must have known that we are not anywhere near achieving the 'peace' you describe, and that 'prosperity' is terribly unevenly distributed among us. I know you were just being cordial, but I'm trying hard to demand more from you than just pleasantries. I also need for you to realize that your enhanced status does not make you superior to me, or endow you with greater entitlements than I currently enjoy. I regard you as some kind of brother or sister to us – you said we are kin - and I cannot resist my honesty to tell you that times remain hard. Personally, I have difficulty in knowing whether I am prospering or am at peace. My government is at war with various places, as are others, but I sit at home enjoying classical music on the radio and watching plays in theatres. Sometimes, a very good play makes me think that parts of my world are already characteristic of a utopia, where such wonderful creations and unabated freedoms seem self-evident. When moved by such moments, I find it hard to imagine that

there is anything more beautiful. But, I'm not completely fixed on that idea - I am willing to entertain the idea that aesthetic qualities progresses, as if further insights are occurring as we progress through time. I wonder how art is different in your world. Is it still imitated by life?

I would also like to know more about how you make sense of peace and prosperity and how it all came about. Did it require some great conflicts to occur, or the suppression of certain kinds of ideas and lifestyles? From how you write, I get the feeling that it did not. I also imagine that these two conditions of peace and prosperity have only just come into being where you are, and that you are writing to me, perhaps, on the day after Utopia was declared. How else could you recall the absence of these terms, unless you have lived through them? Am I right?

When you say 'I hope you will become me', I presume you do not mean this in a literal sense. What you mean, surely, is that you hope for me to enjoy what you see as the better life that you (or humanity in general) lead, compared with mine. I ask only because I want to rule out the possibility that my body could be appropriated one day by some, more powerful or deserving other, in order to provide the biology for some other person, perhaps you. I'm being silly, aren't I? But then we have the cryonics movement and, well, let's forget that for now.

I was delighted to see your reference to the use of pens. These implements – in their various forms – have been central to our humanity, both literally and symbolically for centuries. I am glad to learn that they remain a part of your world. Tell me, are they still a significant means of self-expression, or is their use simply nostalgic, used only by romantics?

I wanted to ask you more about your experiences of bliss. You invite us to consider why our lives cannot consist of uninterrupted blissful moments. I find this a very interesting proposition, since it has never really occurred to me. Do you mean some kind of permanent state of bliss? I ask, because I'm not sure that such an aspiration would be desirable or, perhaps we have different views about what a blissful life would entail. If I consider your reference to the 'ecstasy of love', as some limited definition of bliss, then I must conclude that you speak surely of the bliss of young love, which is but one kind. I have been with the same partner for some time now and I genuinely feel that our love gets stronger every day. Yet, we have also endured hardship and we have grown through it together. I cannot easily extract my enjoyment of the bliss we have shared from this hardship.

Don't get me wrong, I don't wish to claim that hardship is something we should willingly endure or seek out, for the beneficial feelings of looking back from a position of well-being. Although, I am reminded of a very clever designer friend of mine called Michael Burton (2007) who imagined a *biophilia clinic*, a future space in a world where all illness has been eradicated. People would visit

the clinic to seek out the contraction of illnesses, perhaps, to feel more human or, at least, to ensure their immune systems remained effective. Clearly, various forms of hardship have differing conditions of value. For example, the hardship of suffering that is experienced because of a severely difficult illness, such as the persistence of kidney stones throughout one's life, is different from the hardship of raising a child. The comparison is all the more rich since people often discuss the relative pains of these two experiences. Each is clearly hard to endure, but I think we would be foolish to pursue the hardship of suffering from kidney stones and sensible to pursue the hardship of raising a child. Yet, so far, most of my hardships have been more like raising a child than having kidney stones and I'd quite like to retain them. Well, when you speak of the importance of the 'journey', you seem to indicate that you also value these kinds of hardship. Yet, they certainly are not moments of bliss!

Other concerns of mine are aroused when you ask me to consider the memory of my 'best experience'. I just cannot think of my life in this way. I have experienced moments of extreme banality that I have found to be insightful and, even in times of suffering, I sense the possibility of understanding something valuable, the prospect of which I would be cautious to eliminate. I think my core doubts about your situation are revealed when you indicate that you are 'happy' and 'feel good'. You say this as if your happiness is the highest of your goals. Yet, it seems to me that there is much more to your contentment than just happiness. You seem reconciled with the world in a way that is far richer than happiness and this intrigues me. What is happiness for you?

I really liked your three 'transformations' and I am glad to report that I think we are on course for them to be realized. However, some things puzzle and confuse me about the way you describe them. When you talk about the possibility of growing capacities that are 'unimaginable' to me now, I feel uncomfortable. I find myself asking whether there is anything that is beyond my own imagination. Such a proposition seems something of a challenge to my intelligence. To assist in answering this question, I think about the capacities I currently enjoy, but which were not imaginable to people who came before me. Were these abilities, nevertheless, beyond their imaginations? I feel inclined to claim that there are no such instances of betterment that I could not imagine with my current level of intellect. Moreover, I want to claim that the depth of human imagination evident within the vast range of texts that have come before me – literally the artefacts of people's imaginations - provides an infinite wealth of possible influences from which I might enrich my own imagination. I am drawn to thinking of the capacities of flight or space travel, which are instances of abilities that were unavailable to my predecessors. Indeed, actual human flight still eludes us. Yet, the point is that it has always been imaginable, hasn't it? So, perhaps I can imagine your circumstances, after all.

Regardless, as I have already noted, I think we are on track to achieve your transformations, but I feel certain that we will not get there in one emergent leap. Like the pursuit of flight, I think we will need the imaginations of science fiction writers to assist us, along with the incremental progress of science. For this reason, I wonder whether we will ever become completely disconnected from our current understanding of humanity, in such a way that we will talk about having become posthuman. I'm also doubtful that this future state would diminish the regard we have for our prior selves. Nevertheless, if I were generous to your proposals, then the most we might expect is to regard our future capabilities in your Utopian state, as similar to how I now regard the apes from which we have descended or, indeed, the status of apes that exist today, which bear very close resemblance to us. Yet, I must confess that this set of analogies causes me some anxiety. We are not at all in agreement about the moral significance of so-called species boundaries. We disagree a lot about whether we might describe our position in the world as superior to animals.

By the way, what happened to non-human animals? Are they also living a utopia? You did say that it is 'the birth right of every creature' to pursue pleasure. I wonder how far you have extended that commitment, especially given some conversations we are having here about being able to uplift the capability of some species to something that might more closely approximate human experience. I also wonder what other capacities you have that are 'beyond human'. When you use that phrase – 'beyond human' – do you mean that you have the capabilities enjoyed by many animals, such as faster movement of limbs and the capacity to see in the dark, for instance? Do you share the view that there are great sources within nature that should inform how we imagine our enhanced status? It's here where I'm looking first, since there's such rich variation and I'm curious to know whether this is also where your people began. It seems to me that we might locate our inspiration for human enhancement within the broad boundaries of nature. Indeed, the capacity of extending life is also visible here.

This incremental theory of biological change places us in a very difficult position when attempting to respond to your advice. You say for us to go slowly with our 'paradise engineering until you have the wisdom to do it right', but how should we know when we are in this position? I feel that we have often progressed in ways that exceeded the readiness of the world at large and it doesn't seem too bad to continue on that basis, while always being mindful of the risks. Are you urging us simply to exercise precaution, as I feel that such an approach might limit any major progress we could make in reaching your position.

I think what intrigues me most about your letter is its ambiguity about your own position within history. You present your circumstances as something of an end state, a goal that is reached. But, what then is left for you to do now? Is

it just Utopia maintenance, or does its existence deny the capacity to regress towards a lesser state? And next time, send some photographs!

Finally, I hope you might be able to elaborate on something. I have wondered whether your letter was intended for some of my recent ancestors, rather than us directly. The 'yellowing photos' you mention belonged mostly to people who came before us. We have not had them for quite some time now; most of us possess only digital images. Oh yes, what came after digital!? I've been longing to know. I just can't imagine that there is anything beyond the digital. Is this what you mean by being unable to imagine beyond human? That said, we frequently participated in the practice of ageing digital photos to create the effect of time that has passed.

Yours Sincerely,

Your Ancestor.

PS: Soon after we received your letter, we received another one, which we believe was sent from your successors. They say only the following: 'It's all gone wrong! If you receive a letter titled '*Letter from Utopia*', ignore it. They are trying to mislead you.' Where do we go from here?

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