Discussion between Philip Højme and Andrew P. Keltner

Brief Intro -

Both Philip and Andrew are philosophy students whose interests converge around the philosophy of technology broadly understood. Philip's interest is specifically aimed toward the ethics of Transhumanism and depictions of Transhumanism in works of fiction. On the other hand, Andrew finds himself more focused on religious behavior in the technological world.

While the two perspectives might not seem that close, there is certain to be an overlap in Andrew and Philip's shared understanding of how technological phenomena play a crucial role concerning

intellectual conversation, albeit both participants have gathered their collective knowledge on technology discriminately apart from one another. This leads the reader to understand the subjective fascination one can have with the world of technological development and the human instinct to put critique upon that fascination. In the end that part of the discussion is very much an armchair style.

On the other hand, we both speak on matters that I (Andrew P. Keltner) and Philip Højme (if I can speak on Philip's behalf) understand as somewhat humorous, but utterly important when it comes to the way in which we think about technology. In this sense, it seems we were both interested in the ethical movement within technology, which could be understood as not a field of inquiry that those in the technology of cognizant of.

Philip Højme focuses on Adorno and Butler and has all of that main research focused on bridging the gap between those ideas on gender. Peter's research interests include transhumanism, psychoanalysis, anarchism, marxism, bio-communism, feminism, gender studies, and critical theory.

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In the end, this interview might bring light to anyone who has some expertise in the respective fields. However, given the breadth of the topic at hand, for those a tad out of sync with the modern technological system, this interview might shed some light on the mediums and modes of technological/capitalist constructs.

Discussion -

Andrew P. Keltner:

Hi Philip, I guess first things first, how did you find yourself studying the philosophy of technology or technology in general? What was your background like that led you to this?

Philip Højme (Hoejme):

Before I answer these questions, I wanted to begin by thanking you for taking the initiative to have this discussion. With that out of the way, let me begin by stating that I am not sure whether or not I am engaging in the philosophy of technology or if I am instead

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My interest in Transhumanism began while I was studying in Amsterdam, where one of my good friends (Jakob Stenseke, now Lund University) told me about Transhumanism. I laughed a lot, to begin with, since the general idea seemed entirely bonkers to me. Nevertheless, a couple of weeks later, I had slowly convinced myself that Transhumanism was and is, if not checked by a sustained criticism of its inherent defects, simply another permutation of eurocentric and often male-dominated *techno-optimism.*

Whether or not this is an ethical concern or a question about justice, this is sort of the same to me at present. Moreover, to keep a long story short, my worry is about what might happen if humanity's survival was entirely in the hands of, e.g. Elon Musk and SpaceX rather than the living multitude that makes up present humanity (Højme 2019).

What about you, Andrew? How did you become interested in the relationship between religion and technology?

APK:

I became interested in the philosophy of technology after it was suggested to me by my

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During that time, I have become concerned with belief systems surrounding technology and their supplementation from religious behavior. The deeper concern for me is that religious behaviors typically lead to violence. There is one side that says that technology will lead us to a more pacified world, but this has yet to be seen. However, as a skeptic of human behavior, a pessimist, and as an absurdist, I think that technology will become another facet in which humans divide themselves. My drive then is to understand how this new division happens.

I also find Elon Musk a scary figure (for me, it is weird to say this in public because most do not see it as that). How do you think we can talk about the 'powerful people' in tech?

How should we think about them?

I tend to think they could be 'bad priests' — in the sense that they are actually creating evil for their own power motives without regard for the majority. What do you think?

PH:

I agree with this sentiment, at least so far, as they could potentially create 'evil'. However, I

possible. Moreover, I want to nuance the terminology we use by proposing that Elon Musk and all these mega-rich technocrats might have the potential to be like Lex Luthor from *Superman*. Nevertheless, regardless of whether or not these people are being altruistic, have ulterior motives, or have ill will, there seems to be an equation between being successful in business and having a clue about how to run a government or solve complex social issues. If we look at Elon Musk, I would say that Musk's expertise seems limited to effectively innovating. For better and for worse.

My position is easily explained with the example of an asteroid about to hit Earth. Let us say that this asteroid is what astronomers call a planet killer. Furthermore, add to this that Harry Stamper and the rest of the crew from *Armageddon* have had way too many pints to be helpful within the timeframe needed. Moreover, let us, for the sake of argument, also add that there is only enough time to send existing spaceships towards Mars and that it is not possible (because Harry is drunk) to stop the asteroid from hitting Earth. Hence, Earth will be destroyed. Hence, since NASA only has a few spaceships; the same

SpaceX, etc.

Thus, humanity will, in some form or another, survive the initial destruction of Earth. Nevertheless, how do we decide who gets seats on these spaceships? Who gets to determine this? In this situation, there might be government-mandated priority lists (like there were during the Cold War for certain high-security bunkers). However, in the case of privately owned ships, might it not be reasonable to assume that those with direct access (ownership, shareholders, etc.) to these ships will have enormous power over a large portion of those individuals who will be saved? This raises the question of whether or not the humanity subsequently saved is representative of humanity before the catastrophe.

It now becomes a question about which *version* of humanity survives, and who will be left to die. What I am trying to suggest is that the power held by private actors in this case is of a magnitude that rivals governments. However, to assume that just because Musk *and co.* hold this (potential) power does not mean they are evil nor that they will actually misuse it. But it raises some very pressing concerns about whether or not society wants

make such far-reaching choices on behalf of humanity?

Of course, you might think I am advocating for State control. So I want to assure you that *I am not!* Personally, I am somewhat apolitical because I understand myself to be working within the framework of the Critical tradition, which means, to put it frankly; that I like to point out what we, with Theodor W. Adorno, might call the wrongness of present life (*Minima Moralia* 2005). However, I do so without trying to provide any sort of positive solution to the problem I point out. Furthermore, my criticism of the mega-rich could just as easily be leveled against those governments that hold the same potential power.

Perhaps I have already strayed a bit from your original questions, so to get back to them, I would like to ask you. How do you perceive the notion of 'bad priests' as being helpful when discussing the power of mega-rich technocrats?
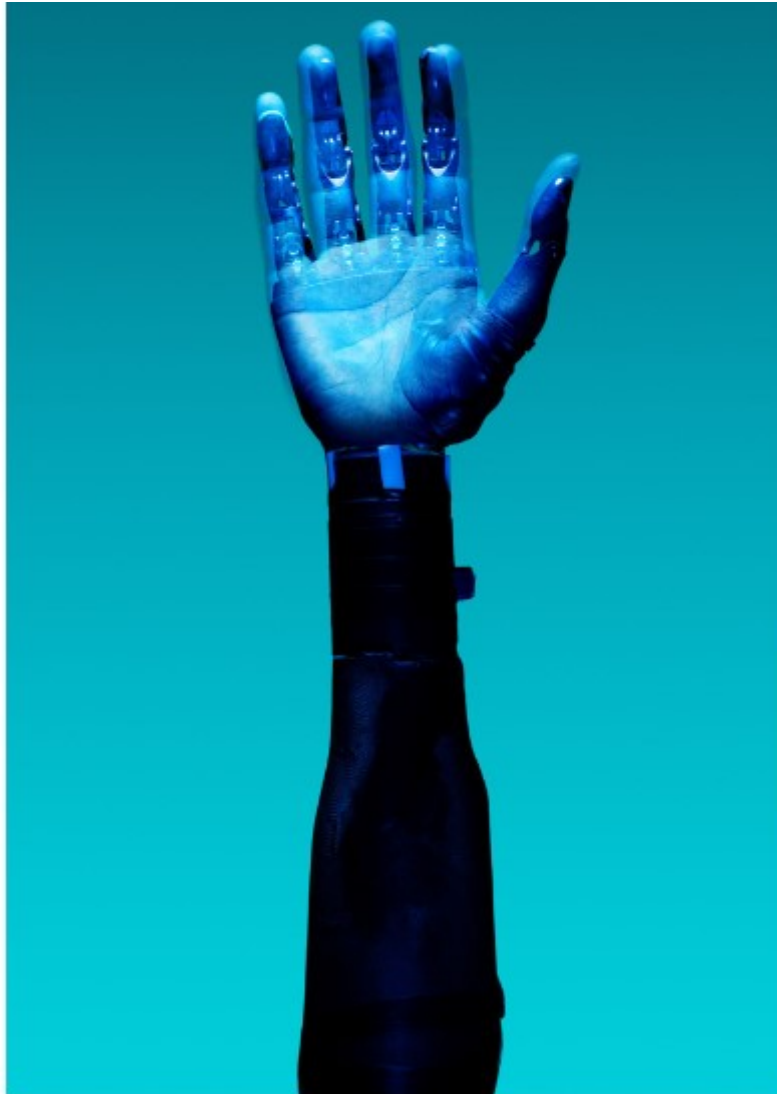
APK:

First, I agree that being apolitical is a better stance to be in. In the end, however, it does seem that there is a degree of moralism involved in the philosophy of technology because it has such dramatic and immediate effects on the general population. In that sense, if we take the Greek term of politics, which was meaning 'the matters of the state' — then I would think that if there is a moral

matters of the state, whatever that 'state' might be designated to. In short, I think in PoT there is a need to be actors and strategists to a degree. I am not sure I even know what this would look like, but vocality and expression of what is good and bad is essential. In the end, as people loving philosophy, we always need to be concerned with 'what is the good?' What do make of this?

Now, before I answer your final question I want to point to a curiosity in the PoT which is the question of 'does art imitate life or does life imitate art?' — I bring this up because of your comparison to Lex Luther. However, even more so, it seems that so much production in tech has some nascence in the science fiction genre. It seems like this could be a conversation on its own that would warrant a lot of clarity into the technological culture. Or maybe this is a pointless perspective? I am not sure.

Now, to answer your question on 'bad priests'. To take an 'apolitical' view on the history of religion, we can say that there have been good and bad figures in religion. And, there have been the bad ones. Why I compare them to priests, shamans, or religious figures,

through not entirely understood means — we still don't know exactly how certain things in tech function, we just know they do, for example). And further, this power can then be used to adhere to, change, or silence contemporary mythologies. And whether we want to admit it or not, we always have some mythology looming over us. And from mythology, there can come religious ideas, and then dogma. I am worried about a dogmatic techno culture and am curious who those people who are most likely to lead us into that dogma are.

On another note, you mention the futility of going to Mars. Where do you think technological efforts go in regard to having a humanistic approach?

PH:

In principle, I agree with your statement that there is a need for technological progress to be, in some way or another, more closely entangled with ethical discussions. Going back to Ancient Greek philosophy social development was often related to the question of how to achieve *eudaimonia* - the good life. Nevertheless, I also think we must be aware that this endeavor has changed in modern

rather than the good life. This point actually brings me back to my main criticism of Transhumanism and to your question about colonizing Mars. I find it quite unfathomable that anyone would want to colonize another planet when humanity cannot even figure out how to live on Earth: climate crises, wars, inequality, and so on, does all of this not suggest that the wish to colonize Mars has more in common with daydreaming, forgetting, or escaping the present than with actually wanting to save humanity. And what humanity is it even that the Transhumanists want to save?

I do not know if you have watched the film *Elysium.* It is a film (artwork perhaps?) that exemplifies one of my main criticism of Transhumanism. Namely, while Earth is finally being destroyed by humanity, those who are well enough off survive by migrating beyond the stratosphere while the rest is left to die. Moreover, if only specific experiences or ways of living survive, then how is it possible to say that humanity as a whole survived?   I am unsure if this is similar to how you think about bad priests. However, as far as I am concerned, Transhumanism is a bad religion since it is implicitly perpetuating the liberal

human beings share is our unequal vulnerability [Højme *forthcoming* 2023]). Take, e.g. those Transhumanists who want to enhance their bodies, are they ever aware that their choices might limit the possibilities of others? Did they learn nothing from watching *Gattaca*?

I suppose this would be a good time to try and answer if art imitates life or if it is the other way around. This is not a topic that I usually work with, so I am sure you will have something more substantial to say about this. What I will say is that art is certainly a helpful medium for criticizing what is, while at the same time also being able to gesture towards imaginaries about the future. However, when Transhumanists take ideas from films, comics, etc., and use them as blueprints rather than imaginations, they risk repeating religious aims such as e.g. wanting to create a heaven on Earth by e.g. wanting to improve or build a better, stronger, or faster version of *homo sapiens sapiens*. This, at least, was the driving force behind my latest essay criticizing Transhumanism by reinterpreting it as modern-day necromancy (Højme 2021).

APK:

You say: '*Are they even aware that their choices might limit the possibilities of others?"* I think this is completely a lack of technology. Okay, we can say that religious institutions, governments, and further could be an issue of a certain behavioral system of beliefs endemic to people that we are all susceptible to. For example, I remember when NASA and Elon Musk launched successfully a couple of years ago there was a discussion about the ability to grow human organs in space due to the lack of gravity and how this would benefit those in need of a transplant. At face value, this seems like a worthwhile project. However, I thought of a large number of people, mainly in Southeast Asia that already sell body organs to westerners and how they would have to compete with the rich and eventually lower the

no, it only makes the dark market have to go to larger lengths to compete. And further, I think that this demonstrates that, typically, instead of fixing the illness — to a certain societal or individual ailment, there is a habitual in treating the symptoms. For example, why does the west or the healthy (the two groups who typically get transplants) need transplants? Typically it is from lifestyle, which can deal with alcohol intake, poor diet, or poor lifestyle. This, in turn, might be something that was created from the same mentality which brings the solution — that being a neoliberal market strategy. Think of food consumption and where food comes from in the industrialized world. In the case that it was not, still those who needed a transplant most likely would still be quite behind in the line to get those space organs.

Anyway, now I am done rambling. Onto my next set of interests that I would like to see you write on. We have been discussing Mr. Musk quite a bit, however, what other people do you find interesting in the world of tech? For example, are there any people that fly under the radar of popular discourse that should be discussed? Are there people who think might champion a good idea of

missing?

PH:

To me, open source societies (OSSs) have always seemed like a smart way of dealing with technological innovation, mainly because they make sure that it is freely available. Just think of the Internet and the protocols needed for it to function. These are, as far as I know, developed and distributed freely. But, as with everything, there seems to be a constant struggle between, on the one hand, OSSs, and on the other hand, Capitalism. I suppose blockchain might have developed from this kind of struggle. However, this is not something that I know a lot about. So I would be pleased if you could say something general about the idea behind the GCAS and crypto.

Now, about the philosophers whose take on technology, I find interesting. Three spring to mind: Shulamith Firestone and Horkheimer and Adorno. I group the latter together because I am thinking of their co-authored book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and in regard to Firestone, I am specifically thinking of the book *The Dialectic of Sex*. The first of these books contains an argument against uncritically letting technology and Capitalism

critique of production, the other of *re-*production. However, both books converge in their criticism of the logic inherent in a Capitalist society, that of sustained and increasing (making more efficient) production. It is not as if I mind technology per se, but I am critical of it when it is used to further what we might call *the logic of Capitalism*. Moreover, I am also critical of thinking that freely available technology (e.g. OSSs) is the answer to our current predicaments.

Blindly thinking that structural issues can be solved with technological solutions would surely bring about new forms of subjugation by perpetuating what we might tentatively call *the logic of technology*, by which I mean to suggest a kind of liberal Capitalist techno-optimist ideology that seems to be the basis for much of Transhumanism when thought of as a political endeavor.

APK:

It is interesting that you bring up the logic of
Capitalism. I certainly think we can roughly
define that in more depth if we want. It also
reminds me of some of Ellul's work in which
he discusses 'logic of technology'. I am not
sure if you are familiar, but he has an
interesting concept known as *Technique*,
which to briefly go into is basically an
obsession with doing everything as efficiently
as possible, where quantified information
vastly outweighs qualified information, and
there is no ends to the means, the means are
the end — so it only works to reproduce itself.
For Ellul, from my understanding, there is
even an ontological perceptibility to *technique*.
E.g. it reproduces itself, which means humans
have a hard time managing its power, they can
become obsessed with it. Now, I understand
all this sounds fantastical and not grounded in
a physical reality *per se*, but I am fairly
convinced it is a development in human's
inability to lose religious ways of thinking. So,
even though we live in a secular and scientific
world, we have become dogmatic and reliant
on that system the way some are reliant on
traditional religious institutions. With that
being said, I do think a logic of Capitalism can

interceding in the neoliberal, global north.

As for GCAS, the general idea is to offer a world-class level of education without the potential to go into debt, and even further to become an owner in the institution upon graduation. The school at the moment has a great ability to grow which means students can create their own projects or work for the school itself, use those tokens earned to pay for school, and upon graduation becomes an owner in GCAS by how much has been earned from the time of acceptance to the time of graduation. I do think I should say though, that while crypto is a big interest of ours, perhaps blockchain is a better term to use. Essentially, it is a self-sufficient model that allows professors, administrators, students, post-docs, etc. to all work together and creates their own economic relationships outside of a traditional fiat system.

What are your thoughts on crypto, by the way? And further, in a broader sense, how do you see the connection between technology and revolution?

PH:

propagate problematic structures central in Capitalism. I am apprehensive about the inequality - both financial and technological, but also with respect to climate change - that crypto seems to generate. Crypto-mining is quite energy-consuming and produces CO2 emissions; on top of that, certain areas cannot get in on the craze because of unequal access to technologies. I fear crypto is yet another way to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. This is what I meant earlier by the notion of the logic of Capitalism; that is, there seems to be an underlying premise leading present society to reproduce social structures that in turn further inequality.

Perhaps this is examinable with Ellul's notion of Technique? I am not sure since I am not familiar with Ellul's works. But from what you have said already, my thoughts are led towards Foucault and Critical Theory and the notions of instrumentalization, rationalization, and here we might add automatization. Sure, many people benefit from technological innovations, but certainly, some are also left behind. When a company comes out with a new, improved chatbot, can we say that the customer support agents that get laid off have had their lives improved? Or,

about cryptocurrencies: is it really needed? What good does it bring? Moreover, if it is indeed needed, how do we ensure that it is used to better all lives rather than the few who got in on the craze early on?

APK:

I think that your analysis of crypto, for what we mainly see happening, especially now with the FTX fraud demonstrates that crypto is just another tool at the moment (for the most part) for the rich to find new ways to get richer. Then, they will regulate it until it fits their position better, then there will be more liberties that they allow themselves to have. It is a bit like solar or wind energy, a lot of people were against it until they could do the investing. Many in the US were against it and very pro-fossil fuels for a long time, but as soon as they could swing the business in their favor everyone became very pro-wind and pro-solar. But these are simple minds who are a slave to the dollar. And, I do think that crypto is still uncharted enough that there can be outliers and eventually leaders in how crypto is managed, at least in an internal organization — which may be something GCAS can accomplish, and in my opinion has. If, and

I think most economic markets can be looked at through the lens of *technique*. At the end of the day, they do try to be as efficient as possible to every degree of rationalization — even reaching into ethics of the spirit. As in, the more money you have, the more you can get away with. Most billionaires do things in everyday life that if the case that they did not have the money they would be social pariahs. I think in the end crypto can follow any type of market type that the user is willing to succumb to. Unfortunately, we might be so innovative as a species to create something new with the technology. But, as seems to be the case many times, we are deluded by imagination and expectation about 'new' technologies. However, the same human forms of structure come into play. This is what I think you are talking about when you mention the loss of jobs from chatbots, etc. And it is true, for every action, there is a reaction of proportionate magnitude, we just do not know how to foresee them, retroactively acknowledge them, or possibly even care about the reaction after the action. The players that make the initial action is thinking linearly not rhizomatically, so to speak. In the end, I imagine that we cannot make sure of anything

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What are your thoughts on how regulation can occur? For instance, do you have hope that there can be a legitimate and honest way to regulate these things? And further, do you think there is a general way to discuss the education of ethics towards technology? Meaning is it possible to have an approach toward technology that can mitigate all the negative consequences that come with it? And, if so, how would it look to you?

PH:

To answer your first two questions would be to venture beyond what I usually engage with. That is criticism without proposing positive or specific solutions to current problems. Thus, I am far more comfortable criticizing present issues than proposing how to solve them, and in line with this, I will only reply to the latter questions.

Yes, I think it would be possible to create educational practices that teach ethical ways of using technology, and I even think that this has been systematically attempted since the end of the Second World War. Think of, e.g. the various treaties providing guidelines for nuclear research and weapons, or the current surge in research on AI, and the ethics of AI,

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to be perpetually trying to catch up with the developments of science. Moreover, while ethicists are certainly faster in their scholarly pursuit than the politicians are in theirs, the former are often met with silence for a long time until issues have mounted and politicians start noticing it.

Allow me to develop this thought. On the one hand, politicians are now slowly beginning to catch on. They are beginning to realize that, e.g., crypto, social media, AI, etc., should be regulated to safeguard society against its own inner demons (i.e. fascism, totalitarianism, misogyny, racism, the list is long). On the other hand, this regulation could potentially lead to the same kinds of issues (demons) that uncontrolled technology also leads to. It is, e.g. the case that certain European countries, with questionable track records for upholding democracy, are now passing laws that increases the surveillance possibilities that the government and security agencies have. However, other countries have also passed similar laws. Denmark, e.g. in the wake of 9/11, passed laws that mean (unless this has changed since I left the country) that phone records and messages are to be kept for two years. What I am trying to suggest is that

might lead to increased surveillance (and, through this, towards totalitarianism). The downside here is that by accepting that governments are entitled to regulate, e.g. the Internet, one quickly ends up implicitly condoning what subsequently could turn into something like Orwell's novel *1984*.

Nevertheless, it is always tempting to choose the easy way out; just last week, I joked about how the issues related to doxing and trolling could be solved if we were all asked to log onto the Internet with our social security numbers. Nevertheless, such a way of fixing these issues is rather simplistic since it only treats the symptoms and not the real cause of the problems.

So returning to the notion of *education in ethics of technology*, this could, I reckon, potentially hamper certain misuses predominant today. But it would take some time before the effect can be seen, however, if a better understanding of the ethical implications and possible misuses of technologies (past, present, and future) was something that was not only taught in schools but also debated more widely in public and private, then things might slowly start to

becoming an ethical issue in the foreseeable future? Rather than asking can we make this? Or how do we make it?
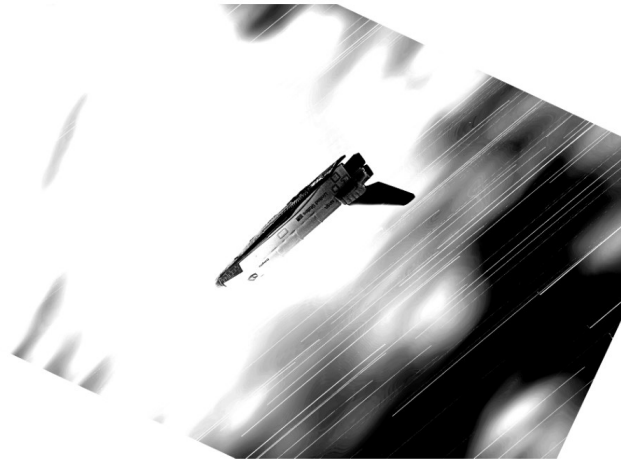
APK:

I think an educational approach would be very important to have. Aside from perhaps having this in the curriculum as early as kindergarten and into high school, and then further stretching into more specified sub-fields. I think the Orwellian metric is a nice one to look at, and I think on the other hand, we must look at how technology also gives us a Huxleyian world. For example, the dopamine we get from having followers and likes seems to be a more Brave New World thing, while Julian Assange is a 1984 type of thing. That is the scariest perspective, where we can fall under either side of some form of

have to live with some very uncomfortable facts which are that at the end of the day, we are basically so far removed from helping ourselves in any true way, that we must admit a form of complete submission to who controls our technology and media. This problem can lead to paranoia, depression, anxiety, etc. So, if we do not comply, but cannot rebel, what is the third option? In my opinion, it is related to Ray Bradbury's book Fereignheight 451 (I do not know what the rest of the world calls this book — Celsius 232?) Either way, the option here is a retreat from any society that has technology as its de facto form of analyzing who is 'good' and who is 'bad'. In that sense, there is a synchronicity with the work of Ellul, who at the end of his book *Propaganda: A Formation of Men's Attitudes*, states that basically an Epicurean (even though he does not use that moniker exactly) model. That is, we decide on our own personal work — that is something we are personally fulfilled by, we have moments of leisure around an art form, we make moral education a daily constant, and we work towards the benefit of our closed community.

Now, at the beginning of our discussion, you mentioned that you are a

have existed for time immemorial but pervade the world of technology? However, I am going to ask you to think on a deeper psychological level, for we know of human abuses, e.g. sex trafficking, arms sales, pedophilia, theft, fraud, stalking, lying, etc. that all come with the Internet in droves. But, by folly I mean something we cannot say is a direct crime, but something that is faulty in our behavior if left unchecked. My reason for asking this is one, to get a perspective of your ideas on pessimism towards human behavior, and two, to start a diagnosis of that behavior in the world of tech. With that being said, before you answer, thank you very much for taking the time to do this discussion. Cheers.

PH:

I must admit that I feel like I am about to be drawn into another five pages of discussion. So I will try and keep my answers short and direct. Because of this, I will skip the underlying premise of your question, which seems, to me, to be you are accepting an account of 'legality' which is in line with contemporary social norms (which are not norms that are universally shared, or even existed a mere 100 years ago).

1949). If we wish to perform well as individuals, we need others, and as the saying goes: *no human is an island*. We need each other for society (i.e. social structures, capital, etc.) to function so that I can be employed as a philosopher while someone else grows my food, takes care of my trash, and brews my beer. On the other hand, I also need closer others (i.e. friends and acquaintances) to keep me sane and socially functional. However, it is quite clear that with these needs comes a potential for becoming a follower (see Adorno et al. *The Authoritarian Personality* [1969], or Adorno 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda' [2001]) of a cause, sect, or Great Little Man (Adorno 2001). In modern times, with the Internet, we are just now beginning to see the effect of disassociated young men (Incels) being able to band together around the hatred for those (women, feminists, leftists, etc.) who have, supposedly, hurt them. Moreover, they seem to group themselves around personalities such as e.g. Jordan Peterson or Andrew Tate. Regrettably, society has been too slow to catch up with this problem and has failed to help those who follow in the footsteps of e.g. Breivik and the like could.

aids to the symptoms of the social decay that protrudes into the collective consciousness of the general public. Take, e.g. the alleged Fields' shooter from Copenhagen, Denmark. Here, in a 'well-functioning' welfare state, where the relevant authorities already knew about the person from encounters with e.g. medical professionals, a mass shooting still happened because the politicians have been very slow at realizing that many young people are not thriving. And this is despite the fact that, at least to me, this seems to have been the topic of an ongoing public debate over the last ten years.

In my opinion, technology ought to, if it is to be functional outside of the scope of increased effectiveness (production, alienation, and capital), be a social force for helping humanity with present issues rather than trying to appease the follies of Capitalism and its implied individualization of human beings. We are a flock animal, but we are also an animal capable of reflection, so we do not need to follow anyone blindly.

Lawyer Macres, BA (Univ. of Colorado, Boulder), and MA researcher at GCAS present his research.

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