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The Endeavour to Make Ourselves More Perfect - Ambivalences of Optimization

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Abstract:

Design is usually understood as a practice that aims to realize a possible optimum: the best (i.e. the most functional) thing form, the best (i.e. the most effective) problem solution, or the best (i.e. the maximally effective and consensual) process. It is easy to agree that design can be understood in this way. But does this also apply to the question of what an optimum is in the first place? And does it apply to the related question of whether the finalities of designing, modelling and shaping things, solutions and processes are to be seen in a technological optimum or in its socio-cultural dimensions? The paper analyzes the philosophical infrastructures in design and art with regard to their precarious state and draws our attention to the problem of transhumanism. It exposes the fragility of the relationship between nature and culture and the necessity of freedom and humanity in the double movement of "Mastery over the inner and outer Nature" and realize a possible optimum of design through humane redesign our living conditions.

1. Introduction

Hard to imagine any disagreement about the matter, that the technological dimension cannot be considered separately from the socio-cultural one. Today, however, an aspect is emerging that has long been on the conceptual agenda in philosophy, but is only gradually coming into focus in the fields of applied sciences and design research. We are talking about the aspect of the natural basis of society, culture, and technology.

For radical socio-constructivism, this question seems to have been answered long ago. According to radical socio-constructivism, there is no such basis of nature. Accordingly, the natural conditions of human production and reproduction have always been produced by humans. For some, the scope of this assumption reaches extremely far. It seems completely plausible to them if we assume, that the binary-

polar order of cells in biological reproduction of living beings is a narrative thoroughly man-made, lacking any foundation in nature. Gender can then be defined, as the case may be, as a socio-cultural fiction or as a freely chosen self-assignment. [1]

Social constructivist thinking culminates in the idea of the human-poweredness not only of naturated nature, but also of naturating nature (in Spionza's sense). This idea finds its clearest expression in the thinking of transhumanism, which is at the same time a supranaturalism and thus – whether without consciousness or against its will – continues a long religious tradition. At the margins where the initially purely academic discourse of transhumanism touches science and technology applications and everyday discourses, it has been causing considerable unrest for some time. It has caused much confusion, but at times also productive irritation. [2] Models of transhumanism are gradually migrating from the fictional to the realistic realm. Their migration is accompanied by discursive music whose leitmotif is optimizing.

Nota bene, it is not maximizing that is being praised. Maximizing has only statistical-economic prestige (provided it is not completely discredited in view of the incalculably devastating consequences of just two centuries of the industrial-capitalist mode of production). No – the goal is the greatest possible improvement in the living conditions and quality of life of the human race under the conditions of its technical reproducibility.

2. Transhuman Design, Digital Takeover

Avantgarde discourses in the first third of the 20th century spoke of life as a work of art and of the Übermensch (superman). In the first third of the new century it is drafts of an autonomous interaction of networked artefacts and further developments of the ideas of a "bastard race" of cyber-organisms. Towards the end of the 20th century, cultural scientist Donna Haraway had fantazised them as a substitute for a revolutionary social subject. But transhumanism no longer thinks in revolutionary terms, it thinks again in evolutionary terms. In symbiosis with self-made technology, above all the artificial rationality of thinking machines, humanity is supposed to be on the best path to its self-optimisation – through self-enhancement and self-transgression (not only, but also in the sense of Friedrich Nietzsche [3]). (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Transhuman - from prosthetics to cyborg.

Source: https://www.hfg-gmuend.de/hochschule/transhuman-ausstellung

In an exhibition by the Hochschule für Gestaltung Schwäbisch Gmünd, which was shown in 2020 under the title *Transhuman Design. Von der Prothetik zum Cyborg* (From Prosthetics to Cyborg) at the Museum Ulm in 2020 (Figure 1), reference was

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made to the two most important factors that form the background for efforts to overcome the limits of human biology: the bellicose history of destruction of the 20th century and the economistic competitive present of the 21st century. Questions of the (self-)optimization possibilities of humans arise in the horizon of technical feasibility, marketing and exploitation. The "digital takeover of the human body" (Figure 2) [4] creates considerable gains in compensation and reach, as well as (no less considerable) moral problems.

Images:

Figure 2. The digital takeover of the human body.

Even for people who are not experts in the history of Western philosophy, it should be of interest that one of the main motifs of transhumanism (if not the central motif) comes from the tradition of outlawed humanism. It migrated via the Renaissance and the Enlightenment into the thinking of industrial modernity and blossomed again in the phase in which we currently find ourselves. We are talking about the topic of optimization.

A brief review of the history of concepts should make clear how comprehensive, indeed substantial, the concept of optimization has become for the understanding of man and of design. The basic idea of the following reconstruction: The motif of perfection or the perfectibility of human beings was the condition for the possibility of stepping out of the static-cyclical view of history of antiquity and being able to formulate a dynamic-processual concept of the development of human beings in their historical progression. On the one hand, the goal of this progressively conceived process is overdetermined, as it were, insofar as it is supposed to be the highest and final goal. On the other hand, however, it is indeterminate in its secularized form, which *nolens volens* dispenses with concepts of redemption and salvation. It is thought of as a telos without content fulfilment: as a qualitatively aimless goal. In this, the thinking of the Enlightenment, which had initially continued the Judaeo-Christian tradition, differs radically from the teleology of ancient Greek philosophy.

Because Greek philosophy had qualitative goals. And the Judaeo-Christian tradition had a qualitative goal too, since it formulated the goal of redemption. As Enlightenment devoloped, i.e. in the course of demythologization, the goal of redemption was displaced – rationalized away, – so to speak. History was no longer conceived as salvation history, world history was understood as an immanent-secular process (to say it with Karl Löwith: *Weltgeschichte* instead of *Heilsgeschehen*). The notion of transcendence, which was supposed to possess not only imaginary redemptive power but also the potential of an active goal-determination of liberating praxis, was relegated from the main line of Enlightenment to the pre-scientific realm of myth. Heterodox Marxists such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno

attempted to conceptually reconstruct the revolutionary content of this mythological realm. And not only that: they also tried to rehabilitate that content as productive imagination.

Transcendence, understood as a step beyond the existing - into a state for which theology knows the term "redemption" – became the subject of the arts. In Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altar*-Pieces, redemption from the excess of suffering becomes the appearance of a utopian vision. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the waiting for the redeemer who does not appear is staged as despair. There is no escape from it, not even through the consoling means of absurd comedy. (Meanwhile we know that Beckett was not guided by existential-theological considerations in conceiving his famous work. He had in mind the situation of European Jews who, fleeing from the German National Socialists, were hiding in the Pyrenees. There they waited day in and day out for escape helpers who were to organize their onward journey by ship to the USA.) And in design and architecture, too, the step beyond the existing has become a central motif since the 19th century. In the 20th century, redemption from the restrictions and adversities of industrial capitalist everyday life was not always formulated explicitly as the driving force of design as it was in the case of the utopian socialist William Morris, the head of the *Arts and Crafts* movement. But in concepts that were ideologically particularly far ahead, such as Walter Gropius's Weimar Bauhaus Manifesto, it shone through (in this case as a backward-looking utopia of overcoming the industrial-capitalist way of life through a new mindset in the spirit of medieval "Bauhütten").

The open-endedness of the idea of optimization is its great strength as a perpetually driving force, as a dynamis per se, so to speak. Without this force, modernity would not exist. At the same time, the openness to results is the great weakness of the optimisation idea, insofar as it lacks an objectively or intersubjectively binding goal and end (purpose).

3. Philosophical Reflections

In classical philosophy, the ability of human beings to perfect themselves was for a long time thought in terms of the Aristotelian doctrine of entelechy. For Aristotle, form was the general, the formed substance, on the other hand, the particular, the individual. According to him, form cannot be a substance that is independent of substance (as Plato had taught). The form common to all individual things of a kind only exists in a specific, individual substance. The form is the general essence that is realized in the substance, namely as a particular individual thing in each case. The essence realizes itself in the appearance. Aristotle called the force that brings this about entelechy. All developmental events, both in nature and in culture, are therefore purposeful. The little walnut already carries its inherent goal, the fully developed, fully grown walnut tree. In order to bring it out, it depends on accommodating external circumstances – just like the inherent goal of a tool to be made or a sculpture to be designed. The goal achieved is the perfect, perfect shape of the respective object.

Perfectibility was spoken of in the epoch of the Enlightenment especially in the context of ethics and theology: "The application of the anthropological and ethical concept of perfectibility must be seen in the context of those efforts towards maturity, self-activity and self-perfection which the Enlightenment had made its decisive concern" [9]. In the "progress optimism of the Enlightenment" (ibid.), the concept of perfectibility was reborn. Its foundations were, firstly, the metaphysical concept of

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developmental processes that carry their goal within themselves; secondly, the Christian doctrine that man is the image of God; and thirdly, the Renaissance humanist concept of human educability.

To this day, the idea of perfection is committed to the "concept of development and progress" (ibid.) of humanism – be it in architecture, for which the human being has to be at the centre (the industrial mass construction method of the GDR claimed this for itself just as much as "sustainable building" or "human-centred architecture" do today) or in design (which is often understood as user-centred in contemporary terminology). [5]

An important station of perfectibilism was rationalism. Based on the validity of the theorem of the sufficient cause, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the great mathematician and co-founder of the concept of artificial intelligence, had no doubt that within the framework of an optimal world as a whole, its parts, i.e. the individuals, would also have to "progress towards ever greater perfection" [9]. From the "highest perfection of God it follows that in bringing forth the universe he has chosen the best possible plan, in which the greatest diversity is united with the greatest order: where the land, place and time are used in the best way, and the greatest effect is obtained in the simplest manner; where the greatest power, the greatest knowledge, the greatest happiness and the greatest goodness that the universe could possibly admit have been given to the creatures. For since in the divine mind all possibilities, according to the measure of their perfection, strive to existence, the result of all these strivings must be the real world as the most perfect of all that is at all possible. Without this presupposition it would be impossible to show any reason why things have taken this rather than another course." [16]

In politically more progressive France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau no longer liked to rely on the supreme perfection of God and its necessary consequences for the world. Rousseau on the one hand was a pioneer of the revolution, on the other hand a critic of the Enlightenment and its optimism about reason. He formulated considerations that have proven indispensable for considerations of today's fantasies of perfection.

As a cultural philosopher, Rousseau was also the founder of modern cultural criticism. He described what distinguishes people's state of culture from their state of nature. What do people lose, he asked, by living in a state of culture? They no longer live in harmony with external nature and the other living beings, no longer in harmony with themselves. Natural frugality is replaced by greed and the search for ever new stimuli. Those who no longer depend on exercising their bodies lose health and physical strength. Instead, ever more sophisticated tools are produced. But what do people gain from living in a state of culture? They can, indeed they must, perfect themselves intellectually, acquire knowledge, perfect tools and technology. They constantly expand their radius and can achieve more and more. Last but not least, they develop laws and moral norms, making their coexistence more secure because it rests on consolidated convictions and (moral) customs.

According to Rousseau, human beings have no choice but to live in a state of culture because they differ from other animal species in that they lack instincts. They cannot survive without using their intellect [17,9]. However, they also differ in that they have freedom of action, which, in addition to the lack of instinct, is the prerequisite for educational ability.

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In Rousseau, we find a concept of the ambivalence of progress that is still decisive for modernity today, which is conceived together with its inevitability. Education and civilization lead to the fact that immediate violence no longer rules, as in the state of nature, but law and justice. But the "domestication of man leads to his degeneration" [6]. The "culturally prepared body" is weakened by lack of training and susceptibility to disease, but a "natural body does not (any longer) exist" (ibid.). Rousseau's counter-concept to perfectibility is corruptibility [9,12]. He criticized the inhumanity and coercive character of the civilizing process and drew attention to the fact that culture is always related to domination. Arts and sciences have an ideological function, they are supposed to cover up domination and persuade people that everything is in the best order. "Like the body, the mind also has its needs. These form the basis of society, these make up its amenity. While governments and laws provide for the safety and welfare of the people living together, the less despotic and perhaps more powerful sciences, writings and arts spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains that weigh them down. They smother in them the feeling of that original freedom for which they seem to have been born, make them love their servitude, and turn them into what are called civilised peoples." [19].

The important Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn introduced Rousseau's idea of perfectibility into the discourse of Christian-influenced German Enlightenment philosophy with a critical accent. Mendelssohn made the theological postulate of perfection on a philosophical level of justification that was supposed to be more tenable than the mere affirmations of a religion of revelation. His objection to Rousseau, meanwhile, was that self-perfection cannot be reduced to its function for self-preservation. "If nature has given us the faculty of making ourselves more perfect, it has at the same time engraved in our being, as it were, the ability to raise up all our faculties in the most complete harmony". [16] Mendelssohn argued that "the endeavour to make ourselves more perfect" (p. 136) had its ultimate purpose not merely in individual survival and the survival of the species or genus, but rather in a coming-to-itself of human reason, which became practical as moral togetherness.

This idea is implicitly found in Immanuel Kant, whose concept of culture is strongly influenced by Rousseau. Kant emphasized that culture encompasses art, science and civility, and described civilization as the social regulation of interaction through law and good manners. But according to him, culture is more than art, science and civility. Culture without morality was not culture for Kant. Or, not yet a culture, because it has not yet come into its own. "We are highly cultivated by art and science. We are civilized to the point of being superficial to all kinds of social niceties and decency. But to consider ourselves already moralized is still very much lacking. For the idea of morality still belongs to culture; but the use of this idea, which only amounts to the morality of love of honour and outward decency, only constitutes civilization". [10] In the context of his theory of education, Kant explained what he understood by an approach to morality. In this context, the concept of purpose or ends was given central importance in the philosophy of history: "Man should not only be skillful for all kinds of purposes, but should also acquire the attitude that he should choose only good purposes. Good ends are those which are necessarily approved of by everyone, and which can also be everyone's ends at the same time" [11].

In the German tradition, the Christian idea of perfectibility was anchored in the discourse of cultural studies primarily through Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, on the other hand, found the concept of perfectibility far too unspecific to exist as a viable category in the philosophy of history. His

critique starts from the concept of purpose. For Hegel, "perfectibility is almost something as indeterminate as change in general; it is without purpose and goal, as without a standard for change: the better, the more perfect, towards which it is to go, is an entirely indeterminate thing" [7,9]. The contradictoriness of a progress that is in itself purposeless and aimless, but is nevertheless set in absolute terms, has been put in a nutshell by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. For historical-materialist philosophy, it proved to be the conceptual expression of a real social antagonism. Marx and Engels recognized the epochal force with which the bourgeois class, under the sign of the industrial capitalist mode of production, started the engine of progress and initiated the permanent process of modernization. This involved not only privatizing common property and disposing of elements of tradition that proved obstructive or simply became superfluous when it came to making a society fit for the utilization of value and the permanent accumulation of capital.

4. Result and Question

"Great industry has produced the world market," wrote Marx and Engels in 1848 [15]. "The world market has given trade, shipping, land communications an immeasurable development. This has worked back again on the expansion of industry, and in the same measure in which industry, commerce, shipping, railways expanded, in the same measure the bourgeoisie developed, it increased its capitals." [15] This "modern bourgeoisie" is "the product of a long course of development, of a series of upheavals" (ibid.). "It cannot exist without continually revolutionising the instruments of production, that is, the relations of production, that is, all social relations." (p. 465) This includes "the rapid improvement of all instruments of production" and "the infinitely facilitated communications" by means of which "all nations, even the most barbaric, are sucked into civilization" because they are forced to "adopt that modern mode of production if they do not want to perish" (p. 466).

In other words: The goal of all activities is a permanent revolutionization of the productive forces, from the steam engine to the Digital Agenda for Germany. But the permanent revolution of the means of production and communication lacks a humanly reasonable, self-determined goal. It terminates in the utilization of the invested value, i.e. in the accumulation of capital, which in this respect proves to be the transhuman par excellence. Speaking in the Latinized terminology of the Aristotelian doctrine of the reason, it lacks a causa finalis: a purpose that lies outside itself. The law of capitalist accumulation is conceived as an autotelic optimum. It knows no why, it exists for its own sake and by its own right.

The question is therefore: Are the objectives of the Digital Agenda and similar programmes committed in terms of content to the solidary interest in a morally and culturally informed social coexistence, which would be oriented towards humane civilisational standards? Or are they out for "change in general" – i.e. ultimately for "something undetermined", as Hegel wrote? To critical reflection, the pure accumulation of invested capital could turn out to be the core and power centre of that something that is ultimately without purpose. Detached from any humane purpose, it serves only its own self-preservation through self-aggrandizement. This is its optimum. This requires permanent economic growth, which today is less and less dependent on the productivity of use values of any kind, because as "financial market capitalism" it is capable of constantly generating "new processes of value creation" [22]. This permanent autotelic optimization always takes place through its periodically recurring self-destruction. In its inevitability, this is either reminiscent of

an ancient fatum, or it is misunderstood as a socio-economic law of nature. Either way, it appears under the name of economic crisis as something that is self-evident. [7]

5. Conclusions - the Mastery of Nature Turns Inward, But She Remains the Irrepressible, Unavailable Rest

Today, the natural conditions of human production are caught up in the maelstrom of economic crisis cycles. Sometimes it seems as if the effort to change the natural conditions of the human body through scientific-technical interventions is also connected to the fact that the existing form of society seems like an unchangeable natural condition. To the extent that, for example, the economic significance of biological sex plays an increasingly minor role, its socio-cultural significance becomes a fetish. The desire for self-determination has possibly transformed into the desire for the most radical determination imaginable over one's own body. In this way, the mastery of nature turns completely inwards. This can be read as a counterpart to the external control of nature, which, in the form of man-made climate change, shows its disastrous side.

This could also be a kind of shift. Once aspired goals of the Enlightenment – self-perfection and self-determination of mature subjects, in the shape of a mixture of unconstrained identity and the undisputed right to non-identity – are considered unrealizable utopias. Innovation and optimization energy is shifted to a goal whose realization seems possible. The right to the most radical determination over one's own body then appears as a shift goal that is capable of reality. Transhumanism is taken a big step forward by the final denunciation of respect for the unavailability of the human natural basis.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

References

[1] For a discussion of the philosophical problematic of this dimension see Türcke 2021.

[2] As an example of the sometimes disastrous amalgamation of confusion and stimulation, consider Raymond Kurzweil's transhumanist manifesto, in which evolutionism, the cult of progress and innovation, as well as scientism, futurism and economism are blended for public effect. Kurzweil, 2014.

[3] Think of the unfortunate statement by the design philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (1999) on the subject of applied genetic research.

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