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Research article

Reading Nikolai Berdyaev's 'Man and Machine'

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Abstract

This article introduces the author's English translation of Nikolai Berdyaev's article 'Man and Machine' ninety years after its initial publication. It appeared in the journal *Put': Organ russkoi religioznoi mysli* ('The Path: Organ of Russian Religious Thought'). Established in 1925, *Put'* was the journal of Berdyaev's own Religious-Philosophical Academy founded in exile. The journal had a free-thinking, clearly anti-Soviet bent while also feeling the pulse of European temperaments. We examine Berdyaev's work in its historical context, its references and influences, including the special role of Russian cosmism. While noting the popularising and dated character of his positions, we maintain the continued relevance of Berdyaev's argument that machines should assist humanity in achieving goals that transcend humanity rather than humans being mere agents in the progress of machines. We compare this position with the current angst over Artificial Intelligence as expressed, for example, in the works of Yuval Noah Harari who treats the tool and the human as equal agents in history. We argue, in contrast, that one should view intelligent machines as partners in progress toward transcendent goals rather than interlocutors or competitors. The prescience of Berdyaev's argument is, alas, borne out by the fact that we have lost much of a sense of what such transcendent goals for humanity might mean.

Keywords: Philosophy of technology; Berdyaev; Christian existentialism; Cosmism; Futurism; AI; Yuval Noah Harari

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Научная статья

Читая “Человек и машина” Николая Бердяева

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Аннотация

Данная статья представляет авторский английский перевод статьи Николая Бердяева “Человек и машина” спустя девяносто лет после ее первоначальной публикации. Статья появилась в журнале “Путь: Орган русской религиозной мысли”. Основанный в 1925 году, “Путь” был журналом Религиозно-философской академии Бердяева, основанной в эмиграции. Журнал был свободомыслящим, явно антисоветским, и в то же время чувствовал пульс европейского темперамента. Мы рассматриваем творчество Бердяева в его историческом контексте, его отсылки и влияние, включая особую роль русского космизма. Несмотря на популяризаторский и устаревший характер некоторых позиций, мы подчеркиваем неизменную актуальность аргумента Бердяева о том, что машины должны помогать человечеству в достижении целей, выходящих за рамки человечества, а не люди должны быть просто агентами прогресса машин. Мы сравниваем эту позицию с нынешним беспокойством по поводу искусственного интеллекта, выраженным, например, в работах Юваля Ноя Харари, который рассматривает инструмент и человека как равноправных агентов в истории. Напротив, мы утверждаем, что интеллектуальные машины следует рассматривать как партнеров в продвижении к трансцендентным целям, а не как собеседников или конкурентов. Увы, дальновидность рассуждений Бердяева подтверждается тем фактом, что мы во многом утратили представление о том, что могут означать такие трансцендентные цели для человечества.

Ключевые слова: Философия техники; Бердяев; Христианский экзистенциализм; Космизм; Футуризм; ИИ

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Reading Nikolai Berdyaev's essay 'Man and Machine' ninety years after its first publication is like finding an old cassette tape in a shoebox. The label is smudged, you're not sure whether it is worth seeking out the apparatus to interpret the medium. Perhaps it is a hash of old popular songs already available in any quantity and combination on YouTube. The lilliputian amounts of data surely mean there is little to be found there. On its surface, 'Man and Machine' is a piece of cock-prophecy, a revue of opinions already well covered by popularisers such as Oswald Spengler and betraying an ignorance of more serious works such as Paul Valéry's 'Conquest of Ubiquity' (1928) or Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1926). The Christian element seems a shorthand for 'European tradition,' far too chummy with cultural essentialism and Hitler just in power. Yet, like the cassette, there is a beguiling physicality in the moveable spools with their black magnetic ribbon, harkening to a time when you could feel data between your fingers, when songs could be exchanged like valentines. It is at least a historical object worth deciphering despite its out-of-date forms. Indeed, in comparison with the cock-prophecs of our age who disclaim all manner of dystopias and utopias, it is not Berdyaev's prescience which is so important as it is the persistent relevance of this critique. And there are some thin, fragmentary voices, old voices, that have some disturbingly relevant things to say.

Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) was an influential Franco-Russian philosopher and cultural commentator. Caught up in the energy of the Moscow left around the Revolutions, he first adopted Marxism and its social critiques, but later regarded them as inadequate to deal with the major questions of human nature. He is often referred to as an 'Existential' philosopher, and the importance of freedom and human will resembles the work of later French existentialists, but his '*Existentialism*' is much closer to French readings of 19th century German philosophers of life such as Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer. Several major books and collections, *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1911), *The Meaning of Creativity* (1916), *The Spiritual Origins of Russian Communism* (1917–1918), *The Destiny of Humanity* (1931), and *The Russian Idea* (1946), have been widely translated and have exerted broad influence. Some of his finest and most relevant ideas remain his analyses of Dostoyevsky, his perceptive and informed refutation of Soviet ideology, referenced in this article, and his analysis of his contemporaries in *The Types of Religious Thought in Russia*, including the 'cosmists' which we shall discuss here.

'Man and Machine' first appeared in the journal *Put': Organ russkoi religioznoi mysli* ('The Path: Organ of Russian Religious Thought'). Established in 1925, *Put'* was the journal of Berdyaev's own Religious-Philosophical Academy founded in exile. With priests shot and imprisoned in Soviet Russia, the vibrant theological school of Moscow had found refuge in Paris where it would go on to shape Orthodox theology over the 20th century. As an independent academic, founder and general editor of *Put'*, Berdyaev regularly contributed book reviews and popular articles on politics, philosophy, and theology. Much like our own times, Russians in exile were trying to make sense of the new world they had found themselves in. The journal had a free-thinking, clearly anti-Soviet bent while also feeling the pulse of European temperaments. Publication continued until 1940 two months before the German invasion of Paris.

'Man and Machine' appeared in the May 1933 edition and soon received an



excellent translation into French (probably corrected by the author). German and Croatian translations appeared in 1934 along with a rather poor version in English. A Dutch translation appeared in 1935. The article is stylistically uneven with a number of clunky repetitions betraying some haste in composition. Overly literal translations by overly hasty translators also tend to garble a number of the author's points. Nevertheless, the text has since been regarded as a historical contribution to the philosophy of technology and an important source for Berdyaev's ideas.

Appearing in 1933, 'Man and Machine' is necessarily coloured by both the murmurings of Stalinist terror and the rise of Nazism. Surveying the literature to which the text refers, it is evident that Berdyaev's article is a work of popular philosophy engaging primarily with what was sitting on the editor's desk. He mentions Nicolai Hartmann's (1926) *Ethik*, the criminologist Gina Lombroso-Ferrero's (1931) *La Raison du machinisme* (Fr. trans.), the then-popular Count Herman von Keyserling's (1932) *South American Meditations* (Fr. Trans.) with its similar spiritual and anti-Western critique. The physicist and Catholic pacifist Friedrich Dessauer's (1927) *Philosophie der Technik. Das Problem der Realisierung* and Hans Driesch's (1921) *Philosophie de l'organisme* (Fr. trans.) are mentioned in passing. The impetus for Berdyaev's article is probably Oswald Spengler's (1931) slim volume *Mensch und die Technik*. Following after *The Decline of the West* (Spengler, 1918–1922), Spengler sees technology as an element of the Faustian man whose destruction of the world under the dominion of technology is inevitable. Some of Spengler's themes appear directly in Berdyaev's text: 'Der Herr der Welt wird zum Sklaven der Maschine [The master of the world becomes the slave of the machine]' (Spengler, 1931, p. 74). Another counterpoint is Jacques Lafitte's *Réflexions sur la science des machines* (pub. 1932) where the machine is a natural outgrowth of humanity, a type of social organism.¹ This influence comes in the contrast between organism and organisation (Lafitte, 1932/1972, p. 107). Yet whereas Spengler sees the development of Faustian man as a stage of evolution and Lafitte as an alternative life form, Berdyaev regards the technical as a mode of human being and activity that is natural but not inevitable. Berdyaev's technological 'organisation' is a bit like Iain McGilchrist's (2012) version of the two hemispheres of the brain: the left has come to dominate the Modern, but the right is still there, murmuring like Cassandra while the captains of IT and industry dribble over the commanding heights. Berdyaev resolutely maintains that it is possible for humanity to change course and reposition itself in relation to its tools. In contrast to Spengler's Wagnerian fatalism, for Berdyaev there is always a choice. That choice is cradled and nourished in Christian civilisation and only through God comes the possibility of humanity to fully realise itself in freedom. Thus Berdyaev sees the fundamental integrity of human nature as essential and its corporate movement through history as essential. Over the final decade of his journal's publication, Berdyaev would come to argue, like Spengler, that democracy was nearing its end and that the

¹ 'Ainsi, dis-je, tous ces faits nous montrent, avec une grande évidence, que nous avons dans la série des machines une série évolutive étroitement comparable à celle qui est constituée par les êtres vivants; que l'étude de cette série relève de méthodes étroitement comparables à celles de la biologie; que les problèmes qui sont posés par cette étude sont étroitement comparables aux problèmes biologiques' (Lafitte, 1932/1972, p. 108).



Soviet Union had set before us a forking path: to the left was the dictatorship of technology and mass dehumanisation, the path of the antichrist, to the right was the Christian brotherhood of freedom, creativity, and self-realisation. The path humanity chose would determine whether it was to be dominated by its own God-given will or the greedy, all-consuming creations of its hands.

Of significance are also works Berdyaev fails to reference. Despite his discussion of *technē* in the ancient world, Hermann Diels' magisterial *Antike Technik* (1920) does not appear. Berdyaev also betrays no knowledge of Paul Valéry's 'Conquest of Ubiquity' (1928). This work, a precursor to Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), bears some interesting comparison with Berdyaev's piece. Like Valéry, Berdyaev balks at the homogenisation of a life dependent on the spirit of technology, yet Valéry's analysis is less social and more psychological. For example, both consider the mass reproduction of culture. Valéry sees that the omnipresence of music from the radio will replace (and thus manipulate) the constant narrative of rhythms and melodies that shape our internal life. Berdyaev, on the other hand, is concerned with communicative ubiquity. Messages which were conveyed in the theatre from a living and present actor suddenly are addressed to everyone and no one. The 'vulgarity' that Berdyaev finds in the cinema is in part a reference to his reaction to Soviet culture. Perhaps this hinders him from seeing the significant power of the moving images of which Soviet filmmakers were masters. But he clearly identifies that speech presumes a special relation between the speaker and the addressee, an essential element of the ephemeral and intimate nature of theatre. The actor on the movie reel speaks to everyone and no one and therefore the audience knows that it is anyone and no one, and this is not a humanising event. Valéry's perspective went from the social to the spiritual – the radio infiltrates your internal music. Berdyaev's goes from the spiritual to the social – the speaker to the world. The subtitle to his piece is 'the problem of sociology and the metaphysics of technology'. It was the 1930s that would conclusively demonstrate the political and social power of technology to convey a 'message'.

Over that decade Berdyaev's views would continue some of the themes of this essay. He predicted that the world would arrive at a new middle age, that technology would be new forms of magic, even black and white magic. In time, religion and technology would begin to replace one another revealing the need for a new consciousness. While such bloviations were used to remove Berdyaev from the list of Nobel prize candidates (see Marčenko, 2016), it was not long before Nazi 'scientists' would be breeding aurochs and looking for the Holy Grail. In fact, the bizarre mixing of mediaeval fantasy and science fiction that emerged in the 1970s, and that multiplies with astonishing facetiousness in films and video games, seems right along Berdyaev's train of thought.

Berdyaev distinguishes between prophecy and prediction. The prophetic imagination is that which gives meaning to current history, and this is one of the author's pretensions. Yet when we see projections that have come to pass, such as mass communication and the Internet, or the mass destruction of weapons such as the atomic bomb, the distortions of the body that come from cosmetics and sport, rather than painting the author with glowing eyes and a quivering staff, we should consider the extent to which



such consequences were latent, yet observable, in his own time. We have the tendency to view technological developments with breathlessness, as things that are ‘life-changing’, ‘without precedent’, ‘never before seen’. Berdyaev’s ‘prophecy’ can help us find historical, causal roots to our present age.

As a Russian philosopher in the tradition of Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), Berdyaev occupies a special critique with respect to Western rationality. For these thinkers, the rational is opposed to the reason given to human nature as the image and likeness of God.² The mechanistic (or mathetic) rationality of the 18th century leads to an unreasoned destruction of human integrity. When done poorly this approach is no more than 19th century revanchism. When done well, it resembles the argument of Lorraine Daston (in Erickson et al. 2013) that Modern rationality, which was taken to be a human faculty, becomes gradually replaced by an algorithm. In their more subtle moments, these critiques hold that the Modern sees truth value only in reductionism. This disregards the purposes of thinking and being as putting things together, as recognising that activity and agency demand the recognition of wholes and not just constituent parts. This approach has important roots in Orthodox theology and is a critique which still bears a great deal of relevance for the theory of biology and its need for natural kinds.

On the other hand, it seems as though Berdyaev falls far short of anticipating the digital age. He writes ‘But the reality that art reveals has a symbolic character, it reflects the ideological world. Technology, on the other hand, creates a reality devoid of any symbolism, here reality is unmediated.’ This betrays a certain logocentrism and naiveté with respect to the manner in which a technological medium itself has ideological content and can be entirely built upon symbolically-mediated systems. Nonetheless, his perception elsewhere that the creation of new media would collapse space and time into new technocracies anticipates Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) ‘End of History’ while a greater parallel comes in Hans Ulrich Gombrecht’s (2014) ‘Broad Present’ where the constant access to information and context means we lose a sense of both past and future. Berdyaev, after Kierkegaard, argues that when we exist in one moment only to move on to the next we have no sense of time. This makes us unable to step outside of time to contemplate the eternal. For Berdyaev, dystopian technocracy creates not an endless present, but a false eternity. Technological objects are ‘superphysical’, they are additions to a spiritual reality that, like eternity, is the foundation upon which the temporal derives its existence. Futurologists such as Fukuyama regard whatever age they herald as a *trend*, in the language of the market, their reality extends only as far as their marketability.

Consider another populariser of our day, one perhaps comparable to Berdyaev in gifts and foresight. Yuval Noah Harari’s (2014) *Sapiens* is a fine example of what we can call the ‘perspectivism’ of our current position. Rather than viewing humans as a user of tools for individual tasks, the tool and the human are equal agents in history. His famous quote ‘We did not domesticate wheat, it domesticated us’ (Harari, 2014, p. 193) is no less imperialistic than Berdyaev’s Christianity (it could be applied to rice, but what about maize or sorghum?), but it is certainly post-human. *Sapiens* is a fine piece of rhetoric and can perform the moral task of taking humanity off its pedestal, seeing other ‘organisms’

² This perhaps first appears in Solovyov’s (1874/1996) *Crisis of Western Philosophy*.



and ‘organisations’ with their own perspectives. But it blinds Harari to things that would have been luridly obvious to Berdyaev. For example, in a recent piece for *The Economist* magazine, Harari (2023) argues that Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses fundamental risks to humanity. Just as with *Sapiens* and his later techno-hubristic *Homo Deus*, AI and mankind are on an even keel. The technology is there, it is coming. How can we resist it? This is the contestive form in which we set the debate, as if AI were a meteorite coursing toward the earth and not something that we have made, designed, financed, and sold. ‘We have just encountered an alien intelligence, here on Earth. We don’t know much about it, except that it might destroy our civilisation.’ While Harari offers reasonable proposals regarding governmental regulation, the cosmic encounter is staged between two equal combatants. Rather I would venture we know just about everything about AI, much more than we know about ourselves. And we have utter control over its sustenance and future, much more than we can say about ourselves. And what is the virtue of this battle between culture that humans create and that created by AI? Why should one be defended over the other? The way that Harari writes how ‘[h]istory is the process through which laws and religions shape food and sex’ makes one rather think that AI is the better alternative. Just as Berdyaev predicted, AI has ‘hacked the operating system of our civilisation’ because, beyond the metaphor, we have made civilisation into a machine. Furthermore, apropos Berdyaev’s ‘problem of sociology’, the question ‘what can we do about it’ is not prefaced by the question of ‘who is doing this and why?’ and this speaks rather to the political, financial, and bureaucratic elements to which Berdyaev had tipped his neo-mediaeval lance, and to which Harari makes no mention.

This is not because Harari has turned himself into a clean-shaven cyborg, it is because his notion of humanity takes it as a species like any other. It is a species that, as Heidegger said, is a ‘world-maker’, but that is just one of its features, like photosynthesis in plants, the trunk on an elephant, or geolocation on your smartphone. Harari’s (2016) *Homo deus* is a species with supercharged features. That humanity would reach beyond itself for something that is not in its ‘service’ is incomprehensible to Harari. Berdyaev argues that centering the ‘service’ of our needs and comforts immediately enslaves us to that which we must then service. This is much more prescient than Spengler and far more reminiscent of Aldous Huxley’s (1932) oddly contemporary *Brave New World*. In comparison with Berdyaev and Huxley, Harari is merely tootling his Tesla round the *Matrix*.

Berdyaev writes: „The human organism, its psychophysical organism, was formed in another world and adapted to the old sense of nature. It was a vegetal-animal adaptation. But man has not yet adapted to the new reality that is revealed through technology and the machine. He does not know whether he will be able to breathe in a new electric and radioactive atmosphere, in a new cold, metallic reality devoid of animal warmth. We do not yet know how destructive the atmosphere created by our own technical discoveries and inventions is for us.“ (Berdyaev, 1933/2023, p. 14) This ‘atmosphere’ is literal – the smoke of factories – but he sees the movement away from the natural world as a global phenomenon, as a question for humanity and not an individual that has sloughed off its duty to the species. In his day, Dadaism and Supremacism attempted to give technical objects a poetic and archetypal form. That,



ninety years later, we would still fret over the extent to which ‘the heart can scarcely bear the touch of cold metal’ may mean that the tension between the organic and the organism, and leafy groves or brutalist apartment blocks, is never going to pass. It is not something we can adapt out of.

On another front, when China, Japan, and India dominate IT development, it is hard not to see that this essential Christian man for Berdyaev is just another form of cultural imperialism. But this is where Berdyaev’s prophecies and predictions bear out the vacuity of our current position. In the Orthodox tradition that informs Berdyaev, since we were made in the image of God, both our nature and our aims in life are determined beyond ourselves. Indeed, that humanity is meant to strive toward something higher is hardly just a Christian notion, it is evident in the ancient Indian edicts of Ashoka and Confucian morality. In the second half of the 20th century that place was occupied by ‘liberal values’. We use our creations to bring us beyond ourselves to our ideals. The domination of technology inverts this aim: we focus on our creations and then set them in place of ourselves. That simple human comforts, bureaucratisation, an overweening state, and will to power would result from this inversion would have been evident in Berdyaev’s day. Yet it is disquieting to observe how far this movement has gone and how insidiously unremarkable it has become.

The beginning of ‘Man and Machine’ mentions the tendency of Christians to view technology in eschatological terms and as the advent of the antichrist. A cursory reading of his article would paint Berdyaev with the same brush, yet he has quite a different view, and this is where we find ‘Man and Machine’s’ most important, if not direct, contribution. Early in his essay he notes: ‘Technology tears away the fusion of the spirit with historical bodies.’ He then continues that Soviet technology is peculiar for its spiritualisation of technology, its eschatology that is Christianity in a macabre inversion. In part this is Berdyaev’s critique of Marxism as false eschatology, but it also alludes to the relationship of the end times with the ‘historical body’ of the human species – the resurrection of the dead, the reappearance of all humanity in its fusion of spirit and flesh. Berdyaev sees in *Homo sovieticus* and the modern spiritual demands of technology a grisly parody of this end of history. But this does not mean that technology has no place in the spiritual ends of mankind.

Certainly Berdyaev was correct in noting a mystical element to Soviet technologism. Subsequent history bears this out from popular science, science fiction, and the massive place of the Soviet space programme. There was no greater influence on this element of Russian culture than the eccentric visionary Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903), the reputed father of ‘cosmism’. His ideas had a significant effect upon such figures as Dostoyevsky, Vernadsky, Soloviev, and Tsiolkovskiy, the conceptual father of the Soviet space programme. Berdyaev wrote an impassioned article, ‘The Religion of Resurrection’ (1915), about Fedorov’s (1906–1913) only work, *Filosofia obshchego dela* (*Philosophy of the Common Task*), compiled posthumously by his students. Fedorov is Berdyaev’s philosopher of technology.

Fedorov starts with the very Orthodox principle that the main aim of life is to overcome death. We must wish for eternal life and for our own resurrection from the flesh after death, but we must especially wish for the resurrection of others, our loved ones and



our ancestors. When Berdyaev writes that Fedorov may be alone among Christians in taking eschatology as a project (he was not alone, in fact), he means that it is beneath the capacity of our freedom to passively expect God to do what He might wish us to do for ourselves, and which, if He wills it, we can do. If conquering death is the end point of our species, we must dedicate our lives to accomplishing it. This view presumes a faith in progress atypical for most Christian thinkers (and for practically any conservative one) and a sense of the ‘historical body’ that is rooted in that progress. It is not a faith, however, that sets its aims on technological innovation alone, nor is it one that relies on modestly attainable goals. Since we will cease dying and be resurrecting all the dead, our planet will not be able to contain the scores of billions of deathless inhabitants. Since the bodies of the dead become soil that produces wheat and other food, we effectively eat the bodies of our ancestors. Universal resurrection would require matter that had nourished several generations being used at once. Fedorov believed it was the task of science and technology to resolve these issues. Obviously we must colonise other planets to create homes for our vast human numbers. His students became pioneers of rocket and spaceship design. Technology must also be used to replace the matter that had been shared across generations, we must have new bodies made up of different materials. For this reason many regard Fedorov as a pioneer of trans-humanism (see Groys, 2018). Never mind that we have not the foggiest idea how to find and collect the matter to make new bodies, or how to unite body and soul again; all these things can be understood and determined scientifically and realised through the single, united, brotherhood of humanity though its tools over the aeons it takes to accomplish its task.

Fedorov’s ideas are astonishing for their theological woolliness and their bizarre unfeasibility. But they have behind them a number of crucial principles: humanity must direct itself wholly to that which is its highest purpose. This is at once completely un-utilitarian, and at once expresses the slogan ‘The greatest good for the greatest number’ more literally than the bourgeois J. S. Mill could ever have imagined. Furthermore, human activity is not an end to a means, it is, as Berdyaev says, a *project*. We express our humanity not necessarily by achieving goals but by the pursuit of what is best. This is what is meant in Fedorovian language by the union of ‘practical and theoretical knowledge’ pursued by ‘un-scientists’ (*neuchenye*). Finally, and what is often missed in the strange bombast of the cosmists, this is a work of reverence and love. A life devoted to the practice of universal resurrection is an act of reverence for God’s design and dispensation, life, the human person, and love for one’s fellows and predecessors. It is also a universal project for humanity as a species. Fedorov’s ‘Common Task’ is a call to all humanity to unite itself toward this goal, abandon all war and national aggression, take up a life of science which is a life of constant striving in reverence.

In these we see the tremendous contrast of Fedorov and Berdyaev from the likes of Spengler, Valéry, or Lafitte in the *optimism* of our place in relation to our creations. Reading Fedorov, the sheer ludicrousness of his positions becomes grating; yet adopting his principles, even as a kind of imaginative exercise, one finds startling contrasts with our own lugubrious present. There is no reason why he would not support bioengineering, or the ‘vegetal-organic’ explorations of bio-art. In this he exceeds Berdyaev’s distinction between the organic and ‘cold metal.’ He would quite conceivably support many aspects



of AI, which would expand human capabilities and seek to understand the origins and principles behind life. Yet the cosmist's AI is no threat to humanity because it has at its centre a progress rooted in life and mutual love.

Thus the greatest lesson of 'Man and Machine' ninety years after its first publication is that our current anxieties are misplaced. There is a great deal of tension that the advent of AI will rob knowledge workers of their uniqueness. But that uniqueness is now understood as a feature (playing chess, composing music) atomised as a commodity. Berdyaev's Christian human is a creature whose features are only in the service of its face. Like the face of Martin Buber (whose work Berdyaev reviewed in the same issue as this article) and Emanuel Levinas, Berdyaev's face (Russ. *lik, litso*) is an absolute category. It is person, personality (*lichnost'*) uniqueness, individuality. But it is not the uniqueness of intellectual property law, but the character and volition that allow the person to move forward. For Fedorov and Berdyaev our freedom is no feature, it is a talent that demands cultivation. It is also a responsibility.

Berdyaev writes, 'There will come a time when there will be perfect machines with which man could rule the world, but there will be no humans at their helm.' Contrary to Harari, I believe we can take this prophesy to mean not that the time has come when our creations can outthink us, but that the time may have come when humanity itself has forgone the character that would make it different from its machines. This in itself would not be problematic if our machines were to develop a morality, or a teleology, superior to ours, and they may yet do so if, as some experiments in artificial life forms have indicated, morality is a part of nature (Nowak et al., 2010). Yet since we have set no purpose forward for ourselves, is it not foreordained that we should imitate what is around us? If the environment we expose ourselves to is almost exclusively digitised, is it any surprise we begin to replicate our thoughts in digitally replicable ways? If an AI text generator builds its algorithms upon the probability of a correspondence between corpora, the most reliable product is going to be the one that receives the longest set of non-repeating iterations. If the products of AI are indistinguishable from our own statements, perhaps we spend too much time repeating ourselves. This is what most concerns me: that we choose to imitate our machines before they choose to eliminate us.

In the fervent recent interactions between ChatGPT and humans, one is struck by the artificial dialogism of the exchanges. One asks a practical question and gets, sometimes, a perfectly reasonable answer, and one is astonished at how reasonable it is. But, after all, any text you read has half its meaning supplied by yourself – be it an ancient inscription or a few strokes of found graffiti. We are frustrated that this non-human interlocutor requires that we regard it as a person, but that is part of the nature of communication. I, for one, am suspect that we continue this vexing dialogue because our habits of political discourse occlude what are the real, all-too-human aims of these innovations – power, capital, and more power. What Fedorov and Berdyaev are asking us to do, I propose, is not to stand face-to-face against our creations but to stand shoulder to shoulder with them. For these two philosophers there was a horizon, a purpose, toward which humanity and its machines could set our sights. What is that purpose for us?



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