

language does not lend itself to a quick read – it demands the reader’s unequivocal attention.

I find myself unsure of how to describe this book. Having finished it, I want to go back and re-read it and, in my present reflections, I feel positive about the experience. At the same time, especially in the first two parts, I found myself struggling to attend to the text and certain passages felt almost impenetrable. As I mentioned before, some of the case examples were insightful, and I find myself longing for more, in more detail, in part as more evidence of what can be done, but also as exemplars for the maps that are drawn and explored. The brief example of Vanessa was great, well articulated and supported the abstract theoretical reasoning. I wanted more, as upon Googling, it became clear that the author is an experienced psychotherapist and therefore likely to have a bank of relationships to draw from.

I would recommend this tome to colleagues who seem particularly interested in either Husserl and/or phenomenology, and indeed I have asked that it be added to the library catalogue at Regent’s University where it could provide a huge amount of value for the right reader, as well as leaving a positive experience in mind. That said, while it delivers, it is not for the fainthearted.

Ben Scanlan

The Spirituality of Awe: Challenges to the robotic revolution

Kirk J. Schneider (2017). Cardiff: Waterside Productions

About halfway through Dr. Schneider’s latest book, he recalls a memory of the ‘...religious experience of the secular...’ (p 61). While standing in the main quad of Columbia University in New York, he feels a combination of sensations and emotions: thrill, trepidation, fear, belonging, wonder and reverence for this ‘cathedral’ of learning. This is an example of the ‘Awe’ that he believes is detrimentally dwindling in the age of the ‘Robotic Revolution’ and that he urges us to recapture in order to retain our sense of what it is to be human. This is his central concern.

This slender volume is a manifesto (my term, not his) spurring us to preserve life-affirming and humanistic/existential values and practices, in the era of Robotics. The term ‘Robotics’, in this context, appears to act as a broad catchall word to express the generality of technologies and related services being ushered into the world through advanced computing, complex algorithms, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, biomechanics and many other broadly scientific developments advancing on multiple fronts. In particular, Schneider connects these developments with what is known as the ‘Singularity’, a term popularised by the Silicon Valley luminary

Ray Kurzweil to describe his culmination of human evolution in a seamless and complete super-intelligent human/machine integration. The term 'transhumanism' is also used to label a putative next stage of human evolution that transcends existing humanity. In the parlance of the computer age, one might dub this humanity 2.0.

If you are a techno-utopian, like the Kurzweil's of this world, then this is an end devoutly to be wished for – the final crescendo of human achievement ushering in a bright new age for super-humankind. If one is of a more dystopian frame of mind, then this book aims to illuminate some of the existential problems that these technologies are already posing and point to ways of resisting its powerful temptations.

The ills that Schneider seeks to diagnose essentially boil down to one thing – the role of technology is distancing us all from a direct experience of Being-in-the-World. As I mentioned, this is a slender volume and one aimed at a general readership, not necessarily a readership steeped in existential literature, and/or psychotherapeutic practice. Heidegger and all the usual existential suspects are not rounded up here, although their influence is palpable. Instead, Schneider parses some of the more fashionable contemporary writers exploring advanced technology and its utopian or dystopian dynamics – Ray Kurzweil (see above; optimist), Yuval Noah Harari (*Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*; sceptical optimist), Sherry Turkle (*Reclaiming Conversation* and *Alone Together*; hopeful pessimist) and others. There are other writers in the field... a lot actually. There is presently a busy and fertile hunting ground that Schneider might have referenced including Curtis White (*We, Robots*; angry pessimist), Jaron Lanier (*You Are Not A Gadget*; techno-savvy sceptic), Adam Alter (*Irresistible*; suspicious) and Bernard Stiegler (*Technics and Time* and *The Re-Enchantment of the World*; angry, suspicious, French pessimist)... and those are just the ones on my own shelf!

To underpin his diagnosis of the threats of the Robotic Revolution, Schneider posits the notion of the 'Chaos Complex', a fear of the complicated and the uncertain that has acted as a driving force in the history of the 'Western world' to simplify, de-risk and make more efficient the mechanics of Being. This has had the effect of effacing of ourselves as whole and spiritual beings capable of wonder and awe at Nature's bounty, and we are now at a critical juncture. Schneider hints at a sense of time that is at least teleological, if not fully eschatological, that is, driving toward a fixed goal/end-of-times and that inevitability is swamping free will. This diagnostic strategy tends to undermine what are otherwise sound observations about where technology may be taking us. Technological innovation has been a feature of humankind (Western or otherwise) since the taming of fire. Many of these innovations were, at least partly, the result of an entirely healthy and natural need to create stability, predictability, and safety in

the world for the greater prospering of humankind. There were some mighty strides made for the flourishing of humankind on the road to Candy Crush Saga. Pre-lapsarian dreams of a world of peaceful hunter gatherers are the *reductio ad absurdum* to each generation's own cut-off point – the point at which the technologies with which one has grown up, and then thrived amongst, start to be overwhelmed and the new technologies presage foreboding.

If the spirit of invention and innovation was especially strong in the countries and cultures of the West Asian peninsula, including the Mediterranean littoral and the North American diaspora – and maybe it was for a while – it is certainly not exclusive to these regions of the world. Thus, this needs to be accounted for much more carefully, or simply omitted from the argument. Better still, start from the point where the spirit of innovation may have turned darkly against us to become the obsessive and smothering quest for total security, swaddling us in a creepy, faux-comforting blanket of electronic infotainment and surveillance. There is a fair point buried here. Perhaps the accelerating pace of technological development allied to a hyper-kinetic commercial energy is producing ever more marginal goods and services that progressively dis-intermediate our daily interactions with the physical and inter-personal worlds. But equally, Schneider may be prone to nostalgia here. To be middle-aged, in a certain manner, is to be cursed and blessed at the same time. It is to be cursed with the not entirely reliable memories of a once familiar world, fading forever, but to be blessed with enough remaining energy to stand defiant against a Being-in-the-World that is forever shrinking to a Bargaining-with-the-virtual-World through the graces of our digital entourage.

Moving beyond this, Schneider asks his readers to imagine what an embodied sense of awe would be like when deployed into the key settings of life – childhood, school, the work place, government and faith, and, finally inter-community/inter-cultural relations. These vignettes are inspiring and one can see glimpses of this kind of attitude in well-funded schools, kinder workplaces, among enlightened civic activists, ecumenical religious practitioners and so forth. His idea of an 'army' of depth psychological facilitators to be recruited, trained and then deployed to foster Awe in institutions and communities, to be funded by taxes on share transactions, more rigorous imposition of the tax code and on closing tax loopholes, has a quixotic charm to it. One wonders how seriously Schneider really takes these proposals beyond their symbolic value as dreams from which some kind of workable reality might be fashioned.

What then, is to be done? Schneider offers a number of simple ideas, tailored to the individual and all of which appear sensible, moderate suggestions for living a more engaged life with an openness and curiosity toward the world: use technology less, take up a creative hobby, cultivate

meaningful personal relationships, develop self-awareness, be open to discovery for its own sake, be sceptical of corporate manipulation. He also has interesting proposals when it comes to building in reversibility to technology and the right to opt out of technology if one so wishes – as well as unimpeachable views on the need for the Robotic Revolution to ‘do no harm’. His final recommendations are for each of us to learn to deploy our ‘seven lenses of Awe’ – or you might think of them as the Seven Pillars of Wisdom – for a world sleepwalking toward transhumanism. These are essentially thoughts and feelings to hold in mind and heart in all our encounters in the world: to bear in mind the transience of the world and its people; that we cannot know everything about these things, or even very much; that it has the constant ability to surprise and enchant, if we allow it to; that it is vast and incredibly intricate; that it is capable of moving us to deep emotion; and that solitude can be the salve that refreshes and renews us to keep returning to the world. Appearances can be deceptive though. These are profound and radical propositions to transform twenty-first century Being from a drift toward techno-subservience into a resolute stand for the human-ness of humankind.

In his concluding remarks, Schneider comments that ‘The robotic age has the potential to be an *awe-inspiring* dawn or a dehumanising nightmare. The choice is ours’ (p 128). Yes... no... maybe. Such a binary conclusion has its place in a manifesto as a call to arms. But there is also the somewhat less inspiring, or frightening, prospect: the Robotic Age is not really the Robotic Age, just as the Renaissance was not really the Renaissance until the name was given to it much later as a tidy historian’s label. For this reader, the real value in Schneider’s book and, despite my reservations about his use of history and memory, there is value here to the existentially-minded, is in reminding us that the trans-human telos of technology is not inevitable. He reminds us that practising the basic disciplines of phenomenology, taking time, paying attention, keeping our focus on things in themselves, in the world, retaining a sense of the vast scale of our un-knowing and mastering the fear of our ignorance, will serve us well to guide our way to a future that is humane and not simply, post-human.

Richard Swann

The Banality of Heidegger

Jean Luc Nancy (2017). Translated with an introduction by Jeff Fort. US: Dogwoof.

This formidable little book is a tightly-argued response to the publication, still ongoing, of Heidegger’s sprawling *Black Notebooks*. In them, the German thinker puts to good use his incantatory jargon to add metaphysical