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Parallel Metaphors in Theosophy and Transhumanism

AARON FRENCH

Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?¹

A recurring vision swirls in the shared mind of the Net, a vision that nearly every member glimpses, if only momentarily: of wiring human and artificial minds into one planetary soul. This incipient techno-spiritualism is all the more remarkable because of how unexpected it has been.

The Net, after all, is nothing more than a bunch of highly engineered pieces of rock braided together with strands of metal or glass. It is routine technology. Computers, which have been in our lives for twenty years, have made our life faster but not that much different. Nobody expected a new culture, a new thrill, or even a new politics to be born when we married calculating circuits with the ordinary telephone; but that's exactly what happened.²

In *The Singularity Is Near* (2005), pioneering transhumanist Raymond Kurzweil described the end goal of a six-epoch evolutionary cosmology, claiming that “once non-biological intelligence gets a foothold in the human brain ... the machine intelligence in our brains will grow exponentially... Ultimately, the entire universe will become saturated with our intelligence. This is the destiny of the universe.”³ This future destiny will be a world in which the limited physical body has been transcended through a merger of human beings and machines. Similarly, the above quote from *Wired* magazine founder and technologist Kevin Kelly points to this merging of technology and living nature (including humans). Other prominent transhumanists such as Max More, James Hughes, Hans Moravec, Marvin Minsky, and Nick Bostrom also share this vision of a post-humanity in which our physical bodies have been replaced by circuits

1 Frederick Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, London: Penguin Classics 1961, 3.

2 Kevin Kelly, “The Electronic Hive: Embrace it,” *Harper’s Magazine* 288/1728, 1994, 20-25.

3 Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, New York: Viking 2005, 28-29.



and silicon to partake in a superhuman intelligence that is partly, if not fully, non-biological (that is to say, artificial).⁴

A hundred years earlier, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, rolled out her evolutionary cosmology in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), in which the “spiritual nature” of human beings, along with the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, as well as the chemical elements, are all developed through a complex cyclic progression of seven planetary stages, linked together via “rounds” and “chains,” culminating in the spiritualization of all matter in the universe.⁵ Like the transhumanists, Blavatsky envisioned an evolutionary process culminating in a future where human beings had transcended their physical bodies and now possessed a superior spirituality and intelligence.⁶

At a glance, it may seem these two conceptual models, separated by years of history, have little to do with one another. However, as I argue in this paper, the contemporary ideas of transhumanists share many of the logics and metaphors of turn-of-the-century theosophists and theosophically informed esoteric groups, albeit in a reductive, materialistic, and technologically deterministic mode.⁷ The literature of esoteric groups such as theosophy and anthroposophy have anticipated the transhumanism movement in surprising ways. Blavatsky’s original vision pointed to a fleshless future in which human beings had attained immaterial spiritual bodies as the result of advanced spiritual wisdom. The vision of transhumanists such as Kurzweil similarly describes human bodies dematerializing as they fuse with technology and consciousness is “uploaded” to the cloud, resulting in a cosmic intelligence. In the first scenario, our disembodied future is achieved through spiritual development and with the help of higher spiritual beings. In the second, material technology itself accomplishes this task, as it provides the substratum of our new “bodies” and

4 For more on connections between transhumanism and religion see Calvin Mercer – Tracy J. Trothen (eds.), *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, Santa Barbara: Praeger 2015; Hava Tirosh-Samuels – Kenneth L. Mossman (eds.), *Building Better Humans? Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2012; Ronald Cole-Turner (ed.), *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press 2011.

5 Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, (2-volume set), London: Theosophical University Press 2014 (facsimile of the first edition from 1888).

6 For a history of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, see Julie Chajes, *Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky’s Theosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019.

7 The “theosophy” referred to throughout the article is that of the Theosophical Society, as opposed to pre-modern iterations of Christian theosophy by the likes of German mystic Jakob Böhme. Additionally, “transhumanism” in this context is considered separately from the theory of a “posthumanism” that has developed in the humanities.

creates a vessel into which an artificially created higher intelligence can enter.

These intellectual and spiritual expressions of theosophy and transhumanism are equally anchored in historical contexts awash in new technologies and scientific advancements, namely, the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries – two periods that witnessed a bewildering acceleration of technological innovation that reshaped people’s experience of the world.⁸ These are two periods in which a flood of new devices and machines poured from the laboratories and workshops at an unprecedented rate, producing a broad and complex range of emotional reactions and intellectual responses. Theosophy and transhumanism, which both gained increasing popularity at the turn of 20th and 21st centuries, respectively, share in the utopic hopes and apocalyptic nightmares that accompany generational transitions. My objective is to notice these similarities, recognize the prescience and influence of the former (theosophy), and analyze the doomsday and utopian rhetoric in both cases.

Three theosophically informed esoteric movements will be outlined: the Temple of the People in Halcyon, California, with its connection to Silicon Valley; the prognostications of Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophical Society, a group whose ideas closely resemble modern-day concerns about advanced technology and the loss of the “human”; and the evolutionary futurism and human enhancement of G. I. Gurdjieff’s neo-Sufism and its influence on the religious imagination of later technophiles. At times I will highlight direct influence, but more importantly I wish to foreground the use of parallel analogies by both the transhumanists and theosophists: that is, the evolving of humanity beyond matter in some form and the possibility for humans to achieve a higher, godlike intelligence. The examples I have chosen point to a parallel resonance in the logics and use of metaphors in theosophy and transhumanism – one esoteric, the other scientific

8 For connections between technological and scientific progress and the emergence of “modernity” see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000; Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984; Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2006; Lenard R. Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871-1914*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1984; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York: Pantheon Books 1964; Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2014; Bernhard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005; Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, London: Verso 1983.

– a link that most scholars have failed to recognize.⁹ Acknowledging these connections will draw our attention to the importance of the history of esotericism for the development of modern science and technology.

The Temple of the People

Founded by physician William Henry Dower and Native American activist and medium Francia Amanda LaDue, the Temple of the People initially organized its spiritual, scientific, and practical healing aspirations into a utopian theosophical movement called the “Temple” in Syracuse, New York, in 1898 – later renamed the Temple of the People in 1908. This theosophical enclave was an American split-off from the official Theosophical Society in Adyar, India, that had laid its roots in US soil under the direction of William Quan Judge, the American head of the Society. After Judge’s death, the American Theosophical Society fragmented. The Temple community was one of these fragmented groups. In 1903, they moved to California and settled in the Arroyo Grande Valley, christening their site Halcyon. Once established, they gained a larger following through setting up a sanitarium, offering nature-cures, and focusing on cooperative living and communal farming.¹⁰ Dower was a believer in the theosophical evolutionary cosmology of involution and evolution and was convinced that science and technology, through means of electricity, would bring about a spiritual transformation of both consciousness and the healing arts. This belief, which permeated the members of the Temple community, is not unlike the one professed by modern-day transhumanists. It held, for example, that advancements in technology would come to revolutionize biological health and enhance humans beyond their present form into more-than-humans. Science and technology were going to save humanity from its own destruction and elevate it beyond its physical limitations. Dower eventually started writing about an “Age of Radiance,” a time when electronic healing devices would cure all diseases.¹¹ In 1921 he

9 One notable exception is Egil Asprem, “The Magus of Silicon Valley: Immortality, Apocalypse, and God Making in Ray Kurzweil’s Transhumanism,” in: Ehler Voss (ed.), *Mediality on Trial: Testing and Contesting Trance and other Media Techniques*, Walter de Gruyter 2020, 397-412.

10 Paul E. Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon: A Utopian Experiment in Religion and Science*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2013, 1-2, 32-33; see also Joscelyn Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” in: Olav Hammer – Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, Leiden: Brill 2013, 15-32; Robert V. Hine, *California’s Utopian Colonies*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1966, 54-57.

11 The “Age of Radiance” was first announced to followers of the Temple through the Temple’s monthly circular *The Temple Artisan*, see *Artisan* 21/12, 1921, 107-109; see

enthusiastically announced to fellow Temple members – who to this day refer to themselves as “Templars” – that we had, in fact, entered such an age, that “electricity was the basis for all matter,” and that:

[H]umanity has come into a knowledge of radioactive forces and is applying those forces in various fields of human endeavor and activity. It can already be seen that the practical application of these forces is revolutionizing human life, making for greater efficiency and happiness as well as conserving time and energy enormously.¹²

According to the internal history of the Temple, permission to establish this community was granted directly by the “Masters,” spiritually advanced immortal beings existing in invisible light bodies and charged with guiding the spiritual evolution of humanity. There are several of these Ascended Masters in the Theosophical pantheon, but the one who oversaw the Temple of the People and “works” most closely with the Halcyon community was, and is, the Master Hilarion, patron of all working scientists.¹³ To reflect this, The Temple of the People displays Hilarion’s signature with an H and a mathematical or informatic sign, the Greek Phi (H–Φ). The Master is believed to communicate with the community via the Guardian-in-Chief of the Temple and through this channel provide direction and inspiration.¹⁴ The spiritual cosmology of the Native Americans played a central role in the Temple’s version of theosophy, especially the success of the Iroquois League, with Hiawatha being one incarnation of Hilarion.¹⁵

This represents another justification for why the Temple of the People, guided closely by Hilarion, felt responsible for the social reorganization of American society. The Master Hilarion is, in fact, credited with establishing the Temple originally and is the author of their foundational *Teachings*, published in the movement’s first official organ, the *Temple Artisan*. The Foreword to the first collection of Master Hilarion’s teachings, published in the 1920s, states that:

also P. E. Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon...*, 7-8, 184-185.

12 *Artisan...*, 107.

13 “Foreword,” *Teachings of the Temple*, Halcyon, California: Temple of the People 1925. The *Teachings* were originally made available separately in the *Artisan* and then first collected for publication in 1921. The Temple reissued them as e-books in 2012 and they are currently available online as part of the Temple Teachings and Artisan Archive; for the relationship of the Master Hilarion to scientists see C. W. Leadbeater, *The Masters and the Path Adyar*, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House 1925, 238; also see P. E. Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon...*, 28.

14 The succession of Guardians of the Temple runs from Francia LaDue (Blue Star) until 1922, William Dower (Red Star) until 1937, Pearl Dower (Gold Star) until 1968, Harold Forgostein (Violet Star) until 1990, up to the present-day Guardian Eleanor Shumway (Green Star).

15 P. E. Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon...*, 5-6.

This organization was called into being in 1898 at the behest and under the direction of the Master Hilarion ... working to lift humanity to higher levels by a direct outpouring of force and teachings, fulfilling the need of the time as rapidly as humanity was able to receive and assimilate such teachings and higher vibrations.¹⁶

These teachings were issued from the Master Hilarion directly to the Temple, and the members considered them of the highest moral, spiritual, and scientific importance. The Foreword ends with the chilling warning:

[T]here has been a great advance in scientific knowledge, invention, and attainments, and we are harnessing nature's finer forces more and more to our personal and commercial uses and pleasures. But ... unless rightly used in the spirit of unselfish service and for the good of all, there is bound to be ... terrible consequences to humanity, endangering the very existence of the planet itself upon which we live.¹⁷

In a recent monograph on Halcyon, historian Paul Eli Ivey recounts how during the 1904 grand opening and tour of the Halcyon grounds, Dower introduced his guests to his newly arrived X-ray machine. Dower impressed his audience and neighbors by demonstrating the effects of the electrical device and revealing “a physically and organic structure normally unseen under the surface of matter,” and confirming for them, in a “practical” way, the theosophical belief that invisible spiritual forces governed and preexisted physical matter including the human body.¹⁸ In this case, that underlying spiritual force was electricity. Dower developed his own electrical healing system of the Electronics Reactions of Abrams, based on the rejected electrical healing and “human cell as electron” theories of a controversial physician named Dr. Albert Abrams, whose clinic was located in San Francisco.¹⁹ This practice of showcasing groundbreaking technologies in connection with the body, particularly the body's interior and hidden elements, is one that has come to be associated with the modern techno-milieu of Silicon Valley. At the same time, the fascination with new, unorthodox forms of technology, coupled with grave spiritual doomsday prophecies and potential utopian spirit-tech possibilities, was a mainstay of turn-of-the-century theosophical, as well as anthroposophical, beliefs – a connection that historians of science and esotericism are only now beginning to appreciate.

In Ivey's reading, the grouping together of scientific and religious progress, alongside political and social aims, was the central theme of the Halcyon community:

16 “Foreword,” *Teachings of the Temple...*

17 *Ibid.*

18 P. E. Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon...*, 8.

19 *Artisan...*, 108.

They believed that their leaders' commitment to scientific inquiry would reveal a brighter future for humanity through mysticism, social science, and ethics ... The group emphasized that the new "social science," opened up by thinkers such as Karl Marx and his follower Laurence Gronlund, would enable a socialist re-organization of society that would result in the scientific demonstration of the Golden Rule.²⁰

Ivey convincingly shows that the interplay of theosophical esotericism and scientific enthusiasm at Halcyon fostered a cultural space amenable to innovation. This came to fruition in the next generation of Halcyonites with George Russel Harrison, as well as Russell (named after famed Irish theosophist Æ) and Sigurd Varian, whose parents were important members of the Temple of the People. In conjunction with Stanford University, and later MIT, the Varian brothers and George Harrison made invaluable contributions to scientific knowledge with the invention of the klystron tube in the 1930s and their work in spectroscopy. These developments played a key role for the US military during the Second World War and laid the foundation for contemporary particle accelerators at places like CERN. The Varians successfully demonstrated the functionality of their klystron in 1937 and published their research professionally in 1939.²¹ It represented a major innovation in the field. Building on their success, and sponsored by Charles Litton of Litton Industries, the Varians founded Varian Associates to commercialize their technology for making small linear particle accelerators for use in, among other things, cancer radiotherapy, but especially for the Department of Defense in relation to the production of atomic bombs.²² By the 1950s, Varian Associates was the largest microwave tube corporation in the US, benefiting from the high demand brought on by the Cold War. According to Christophe Lécuyer, Varian Associates helped facilitate on the San Francisco Peninsula (soon to be Silicon Valley) "the emergence of another component industry: semiconductor manufacturing." Lécuyer reports that due to "a major shift in defense procurement in the 1960s," Varian Associates was forced to expand its production activities and began to manufacture semiconductors itself, as well as scientific and medical instruments.²³

20 P. E. Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon...*, 5.

21 Christophe Lécuyer, *Making Silicon Valley: Innovation and the Growth of High Tech, 1930-1970*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 2006, 55-61.

22 C. Lécuyer, *Making Silicon Valley...*, 93-116; see also Stuart W. Leslie, "The Biggest 'Angel' of Them All: The Military and the Making of Silicon Valley," in: Martin Kenney (ed.), *Understanding Silicon Valley: The Anatomy of an Entrepreneurial Region*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2000, 48-67: 55-56.

23 C. Lécuyer, *Making Silicon Valley...*, 10-11.

Rudolf Steiner

Around the time the Temple community moved to California, Austrian-born philosopher Rudolf Steiner was becoming deeply engaged in the activities of the Theosophical Society on the other side of the Atlantic. Steiner grew up around transformative technologies in a working-class environment in Kraljevec, Austria-Hungary (modern-day Croatia), his father being a telegraph operator on the Southern Austrian Railway. He received a doctorate in philosophy from Rostock University and went on to make a name for himself editing Goethe's scientific papers and complete editions of Schopenhauer's philosophy, as well as writing for local periodicals. At the turn of the century, he joined the Theosophical Society, essentially ending his academic career, and began working enthusiastically as the General Secretary of the German Branch of the Theosophical Society before splitting with Adyar to found his own Anthroposophical Society in 1913.

By 1904, Steiner was already warning audiences and esoteric pupils about the dangers of overextended reliance on electricity, the mechanization of the human organism, and the merger of humans and machines. Characterized as an early futurist by one scholar, Steiner developed ideas that were "post-conventional, innovative and futures oriented."²⁴ Steiner concerned himself with what technology represented and sought to understand its "purpose" for "human evolution." His ideas participated in the larger conversation that sought to explain the "essence" of technology and present it as having an autonomous or objective intention, thereby fitting in into the history of European thought and culture. He was therefore not the only one discussing the role of science and technology in human evolution and the relationship between humans and machines. Already in the 19th century, Karl Marx had argued that the industrial competition among the ruling class capitalists and the drive for profit had engendered the technological innovations and radical changes that proliferated in capitalist societies. He referred to this doctrine as the "materialist conception of history," and it was eventually encapsulated in the concept of "historical

24 Jennifer M. Gidley, "Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925)," in: Norbert M. Seel (ed.): *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, New York: Springer 2012, 3188-3191: 3188; see also Jennifer M. Gidley, "Educational Imperatives of the Evolution of Consciousness: The Integral Visions of Rudolf Steiner and Ken Wilber," *The International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 12/2, 2007, 117-135. For biographies of Steiner see Ursula B. Marcum, *Rudolf Steiner: An Intellectual Biography* [Ph.D thesis], Riverside: University of California, Riverside 1989; Helmut Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, München: Piper 2011; Miriam Gebhardt, *Rudolf Steiner: Ein Moderner Prophet*, München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt 2011; Christoph Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner: A Biography*, Great Barrington: Steiner Books 2012.

materialism,” a method of historical analysis that rests on the conviction that economic changes are at the root of historical change.²⁵ Contemporaries of Steiner who were engaging this problem include Werner Sombart, Max Weber, Ernst Jünger, and Oswald Spengler.²⁶

Yet Steiner’s combination of esotericism, science, and technology is unique. Building upon the cosmology and teachings of the Theosophical Society, he developed his own esoteric system in which “the Christ impulse” – a type of universal yet highly evolved spiritual condition – mediated between two opposing forces: Mephistophelean entities he called Lucifer and Ahriman. The latter, Ahriman, was adopted from the Zoroastrian religion and in Steiner’s system represents the god of materialism, abstract intellectuality, technology, and unfeeling mechanization.²⁷ In a lecture in Berlin, Steiner claimed that if humanity doesn’t infuse spirituality into its technology, in the future a “War of all Against All will break out in the most terrible way. Great and mighty forces will ensue from discoveries that will turn the entire globe into a kind of self-functioning electrical apparatus.”²⁸ Steiner had in mind a war of human beings against a machine mentality that lacked an ethical foundation or any sense of compassion. He believed that “a higher body is being prepared for us today – a body of the future,” but that Ahriman was attempting to deceive human beings into accepting technological evolution over spiritual evolution.²⁹

As a result of WWI and the terrible carnage it caused, Steiner upped his rhetoric and warned in 1917 that “the welding together of human beings with machines will be a great and important problem for the rest of the

25 See especially Part I of Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology*, a text originally written between 1845-1846 but not published in full until 1932. See Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1938.

26 For more on this context, see Johannes Hanel, *Assessing Induced Technology. Sombart’s Understanding of Technical Change in the History of Economics*, Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag 2008; Werner Sombart, “Technology and Culture,” in: Christopher Adair-Totef (ed.), *Sociological Beginnings: The First Conference of the German Society for Sociology*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2005; Vincent Blok, *Ernst Jünger’s Philosophy of Technology: Heidegger and the Poetics of the Anthropocene*, London: Routledge 2017; Oswald Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik*, München: C. H. Beck 1931. On similarities concerning technology in the thought of Weber and Steiner see Aaron French, *Disenchanting and Re-Enchanting German Modernity with Max Weber and Rudolf Steiner* [Ph.D thesis, online], Davis: University of California, Davis 2021, <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2059q49x>>.

27 On Steiner and technology see also Tim Rudbøg, “The Incarnation of Ahriman: Rudolf Steiner and Modern Technology,” in: Sergey Pakhomov (ed.), *Asem*, 2017, 194-209.

28 Rudolf Steiner, *The Temple Legend and the Golden Legend: Freemasonry and Related Occult Movements: from the Contents of the Esoteric School: Twenty Lectures given in Berlin between 23rd May 1904 and the 2nd January 1906*, trans. John M. Wood, London: Rudolf Steiner Press 1997, 115-116.

29 *Ibid.*, 206.

earth-evolution.” Anticipating something like artificial intelligence, he added that in the future we would “create remarkable machines, but only those that will relieve man of work, because they will carry a certain power of intelligence within themselves.” He concluded, “human vibrations will reverberate in a definite way, will continue to vibrate within the mechanical performance of the machine. The cosmos will bring motion to the machines....”³⁰ With such statements, Steiner was not ignoring the weapons of destruction (which he commented on elsewhere) but highlighting that the boundary between humans and machines would become increasingly blurred.

This increase in technological dependency and saturation became a significant concern for Steiner, as he foresaw such developments paving the way for Ahriman to gain total control over humanity. In his cosmology, Steiner connected this scenario to the mysteries of what he called “sub-nature,” which represented the realm of electromagnetic forces and quantum scale phenomena, a realm in which human beings could gain knowledge of nature and the innermost function of atoms. Although he explained to his followers that such developments were necessary and played an important role in “earthly evolution,” he urged them to cultivate a spiritual life suitable to the modern condition as an antidote to being dragged into sub-nature through the forces of technology. Human beings living in a modern technological civilization needed to develop “inner strength *not to go under*,” by which he meant *under nature*, into the realm of the electrical.³¹ Matter was the realm of Ahriman, the cosmos the realm of the gods, and therefore, according to Steiner, the further one penetrated into the earth the more “evil” – or at least “alien” to humans – the energies became.

Gary Lachman has suggested that Steiner’s views on technology are comparable to those of the philosopher Martin Heidegger.³² Heidegger

30 Rudolf Steiner, “The Wrong and Right Use of Esoteric Knowledge” [online], Lecture 3, GA 178, London: Rudolf Steiner Press 1966, <<https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA178/English/RSP1966/19171125p02.html>>, [25 January 2021].

31 Rudolf Steiner, “From Nature to Sub-Nature” [online], *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, March 1925, <https://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA026/English/RSP1973/GA026_c29.html>, [25 January 2021].

32 Gary Lachman, *Rudolf Steiner: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin 2007, 257, note 21. Although Lachman is correct in pointing out this similarity, Heidegger himself was not directly influenced by Steiner. Furthermore, Steiner did not see the rejection of technology as the rejection of Judaism, as Heidegger did. Rather, Steiner claimed that humans did not need to reject technology but rather let its “evil” forces enter into us and transform us for the spiritual upliftment of all humanity. However, both Heidegger and Steiner did belong to the German romantic tradition, which sought to rectify science and reason with spirit and organicism.

saw technology as transformative, challenging, and yet threatening to the essence of human being in the world, what he referred to as *Dasein*. In other words, technology, especially modern industrial technology, orders in a particular way both our thinking about, and our experience of, the world. In his now famous essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, originally published in 1954, Heidegger warned that:

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral ... Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. We will, as we say, “get” technology “spiritually in hand.” We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control.³³

Steiner may well have agreed, insofar as technology and its extensions – particularly *machines* – are not neutral phenomena but have specific “truths” to “reveal,” to use Heideggerian language, concerning humanity’s experience of the world and their future cohabitation with machines. In a passage anticipating Heidegger, Steiner wrote that:

[I]n the age of Technical Science hitherto, the possibility of finding a true relationship to the Ahrimanic civilisation has escaped man. He must find the strength, the inner force of knowledge, in order not to be overcome by Ahriman in this technical civilisation. He must understand Sub-Nature for what it really is. This he can only do if he rises, in spiritual knowledge, at least as far into extra-earthly Super-Nature as he has descended, in technical Sciences, into Sub-Nature.³⁴

However, Steiner was not a Luddite, and in 1914 he admonished his audience that “it would be all wrong, if you were to now say, that you have to resist what technology has brought us in modern life, you have to beware of Ahriman, you just have to withdraw from this modern life.”³⁵ What Steiner meant by this statement is that modern technology was not to be rejected but “moralized.” As he said in a 1906 lecture, the “mechanical and the moral must interpenetrate each other, because the technical is nothing without the moral.”³⁶ Steiner described moralized technol-

33 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, New York: Harper and Row 1977, 4-5.

34 Rudolf Steiner, “From Nature to Sub-Nature,” *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, quoted in G. Lachman, *Rudolf Steiner...*, 229.

35 „Es wäre das Allerfalscheste, wenn man nun etwa sagen würde, da müsse man sich sträuben gegen das, was nun einmal die Technik uns in dem modernen Leben gebracht hat, man müsse sich hüten vor dem Ahriman, man müsse sich eben zurückziehen von diesem modernen Leben“ (author’s translation). Rudolf Steiner, *Kunst im Lichte der Mysterienweisheit*, Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag 1990, 26.

36 R. Steiner, *The Temple Legend...*, 285.

ogy as an “etheric technology.” This idea was based on an earlier American theosophist inventor named John Keely, who purported to have developed the “Keely Motor” which ran on the “vibratory sympathy” and “etheric forces” of the operator.³⁷ Steiner’s version of this type of “etheric technology” placed more emphasis on the “moral forces” of the operator to make the machine function. He told his audiences that Keely:

[W]as not deceiving people about this; for he had in him that driving force originating in the soul, which can set machines in motion. A driving force which can only be moral, that is the idea of the future; a most important force, with which culture must be inoculated, if it is not to fall back on itself. The mechanical and the moral must interpenetrate each other, because the mechanical is nothing without the moral.... In the future machines will be driven not only by water and steam, but by spiritual force, by spiritual morality.³⁸

In other words, machines would not work by running electricity into them, but rather by whether or not the operator was a spiritually good person and the vibrations that person introduced. Later, Steiner explained that:

[A] time will come when a machine will stand there motionless, at rest, and a man will step up to it who knows that he has to make a certain movement with his hand, then another movement in a particular way, and then a third, and through the air-vibrations produced by this definite signal, the motor, having been tuned to this signal, will be set in motion.³⁹

Steiner depicted these ideas in his four *Mystery Dramas* (ca. 1910-1913), esoteric theatrical plays he produced to convey his teachings.⁴⁰ In these dramas, a character named Strader invents a machine that works in exactly this way, referred to as “Der Strader-Apparat” by anthroposophists. One of Steiner’s followers, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, attempted to create such a device based on indications given personally to him by Steiner, but he was unsuccessful. This led Steiner to conclude that human beings were

37 Relatively little has been published on John Worrell Keely. See, for example, Theo Paijmans, *Free Energy Pioneer: John Worrell Keely*, Kempton, Ill: Adventures Unlimited Press 2004.

38 R. Steiner, *The Temple Legend...*, 285.

39 Rudolf Steiner, “The Karma of Vocation” [online], Lecture X, November 27, 1916, <<https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA172/English/AP1984/19161127p01.html>>, [25 January 2021].

40 Rudolf Steiner, *Four Mystery Dramas*, trans. Ruth Pusch – Hans Pusch, Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Steiner Books 2007.

not yet ready for such power.⁴¹ However, attempts to design such machines continue to this day.⁴²

Steiner's deep ambivalence about the technologies that had been developed in his lifetime and his fear of the kinds of technologies that might be produced in the future were central to his esoteric philosophy. To counter the now familiar tropes of transhumanism – the use of technological advancement to enhance humans beyond their biological limitations – he warned his audience during the war that:

Darwinism contains no occult truths, but its application to direct experiments on human beings would have horrible results ... it will [become] possible to use them for obtaining enormous power over men – if only by a continual selection of the “fittest.” But things will not stop there. There would be an endeavour to use a certain occult discovery for making the fit ever fitter and fitter....⁴³

Steiner insisted that “the human element must not be related to machinery in such a way that the Darwinian natural selection theory is used to determine the working capacity of human beings...”⁴⁴ It is fascinating that toward the beginning of the 20th century Steiner foresaw and warned against Darwinism being deployed rhetorically to instantiate the merging of human beings and machines and to support certain individuals in bringing about the emergence of a super intelligence operated by AI, or a super-human race, for that matter. Although he drew on sources considered anathema by mainstream scientists and academics, Steiner seems to have worked out the logics of Darwinism, technological determinism, and the coevolution of humans and machines to their logical ends. He was, of course, not the first to make such a connection. The idea of machines supplanting humans was first uttered, perhaps, by Samuel Butler in his 1863 article “Darwin among the Machines.”⁴⁵ However, Steiner understood the

41 Thomas Meyer, *Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. A Modern Quest for the Spirit*, Chestnut Ridge: Mercury Press 2010, 167. For more information about Steiner's indications for building such devices, see Paul Eugen Schiller, *The Schiller File: Supplements to the Collected Edition of Rudolf Steiner*, Delabole: Henry Goulden Books 2007.

42 Although Steiner appears to have rejected making these kinds of devices on the grounds that they could be misused, contemporary anthroposophists are still trying to create them. See Linus Feiten, “Rudolf Steiner on Technology. A Review,” trans. David Heaf, *Jupiter* 7, 2012, 3-64. See also Paul Emberson, *Machines and the Human Spirit: The Golden Age of the Fifth Kingdom*, Edinburgh: Dewcross Centre for Moral Technology 2013.

43 R. Steiner, *The Wrong and Right Use...*, Lecture 2.

44 *Ibid.*, Lecture 3.

45 Samuel Butler, “Darwin Among the Machines,” Canterbury Press, 13 June 1863; reprinted in Henry Festing Jones, (ed.), *Canterbury Settlement and other Early Essays*, vol. 1 of *The Shrewsbury Edition of the Works of Samuel Butler*, London: Jonathan Cape 1923, 208-210.

dangerous logic inherent in social Darwinism, which, when taken to its end, means something like survival of the fittest and evolution of only the strong and enhanced. This theme played out in various forms of fascism as well as in the eugenics movement during the first half of the 20th century.

G. I. Gurdjieff

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff was born in Armenia during the period of Russian rule in the late 1860s to a Greek father and an Armenian mother. He, like the Russian founder of theosophy, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, claimed to have spent many years pursuing secret groups and occult teachers throughout Southwest and Central Asia, as well as in the Middle East, in search of a pristine doctrine of esotericism that had existed since primeval times. According to his writings, especially his autobiography *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (published posthumously in English in 1963 and later turned into a film), Gurdjieff purported to have located these teachings in a hidden Sufi group he called the Sarmoung Brotherhood.⁴⁶ He claimed to have met a representative of this group, with whom he studied for some years in a monastery outside of Bukhara. It is more than likely that Gurdjieff invented this group as a teaching device.⁴⁷ Sufism scholar Mark Sedgwick argues that “the Sarmoung echoes Blavatsky’s mythical Mahatmas [or Ascended Masters].”⁴⁸ Johanna Petsche has also shown that Gurdjieff consciously appropriated theosophical language and terminology in order to attract followers in Russia at a time when the Theosophical Society was at the height of its popularity.⁴⁹

After being exposed to what he determined to be the genuine esoteric knowledge of antiquity, Gurdjieff set out to promulgate his manifestation of the teachings, which he referred to as The Fourth Way. Historian of technology and religion Erik Davis explains that Gurdjieff “not only synthesized a variety of teachings and techniques into an eminently practical

46 Farzad Mahootian has pointed out resonances between the Islamic philosophy of a “perfect human nature” and the transhumanism project. On the connection between Sufism and Transhumanism, see Farzad Mahootian, “Ideals of Human Perfection: A Comparison of Sufism and Transhumanism,” in: Hava Tirosh-Samuels – Kenneth L. Mossman (eds.), *Building Better Humans? Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2012, 133-156.

47 Mark Sedgwick, “European Neo-Sufi Movements in the Inter-war Period,” in: Nathalie Clayer – Eric Germain (eds.), *Islam in Inter-War Europe*, New York: Columbia University Press 2008, 123-227.

48 Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age*, New York: Oxford University Press 2016, 176.

49 Johanna Petsche, “Gurdjieff and Blavatsky: Western Esoteric Teachers in Parallel,” *Literature and Aesthetics* 21/1, 2011, 98-115.

form of esoteric work, but creatively integrated a number of modern psychological and scientific ideas into the ancient goal of gnosis.”⁵⁰ Principle among these was the idea that the “psychic processes” of consciousness are materially constituted and located in the physical brain. Additionally, he adopted the theosophical notion of involution and evolution, by which is signified the descent of spirit into matter over billions of years, ultimate entanglement there, and final recapitulation in the release of matter back into spirit. The entity at the heart of this dramatic cosmic journey, in the Gurdjieff system as well as in theosophy, was the vehicle of consciousness.

Davis refers to Gurdjieff as an “alchemical modernist” and “spiritual godfather of the Extropians,” a group from the late 1980s and 1990s whose interests and philosophy could be considered the precursor to modern-day transhumanists. The main influence on Extropianism was Max More, who, like Gurdjieff and his followers, believed that humans had to transcend their limited biological condition. When inquired as to the point of enhancements for modern transhumanists, More responded that “[t]he Enlightenment and the humanist perspective assure us that progress is possible, that life is a grand adventure, and that reason, science, and good will can free us from the confines of the past. ... Meaningfulness and value require the continual making and breaking of forms, a process of self-overcoming, not a stagnant state.”⁵¹

Gurdjieff articulated a similar version of self-improvement and overcoming the limited self. He considered human beings to be machines, always reacting in an automatic way to their environment, never fully awakening but subsisting in a state of somnambulism, a condition that the modern culture exacerbated.⁵² To use a present-day metaphor, human beings were automatic robots or technologized zombies, entities whose machinery was “on” but whose operating system was asleep. Gurdjieff said of this condition, “[t]he law for man is existence in the circle of mechanical influences, that state of the ‘man-machine.’”⁵³

The key to escaping this mechanical imprisonment, to use a current metaphor again, was to hack the operating system of the human brain and

50 Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2015, 137.

51 Max More, “On Becoming Posthuman,” *Free Inquiry* 14/4, 1994, 38-41, <<http://www.maxmore.com/becoming.html>>. See also Anders Sandberg, “Transhumanism and the Meaning of Life,” in: Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan – Kenneth L. Mossman (eds.), *Building Better Humans? Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2012, 3-22.

52 E. Davis, *TechGnosis...*, 138.

53 Pyotr D. Ouspenskii, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, New York: Harcourt, Brace 1949, 47, quoted in E. Davis, *TechGnosis...*, 138.

install a newly released software upgrade, a version more capable of running at a higher-level of intelligence. Interestingly, Davis refers to the Gurdjieffian work as “an explicitly spiritual analog of the Extropians’ brash commitment to master the sluggish body, control the emotions, and reprogram themselves for immortality and self-realization.”⁵⁴ However, unlike current transhumanists, Gurdjieff admonished his students to eschew technology, science, and media, focusing on what he called “the Work,” a rigorous self-diagnostic and reordering of the human machine, which would result in a “self-remembering” and sense of purpose. Such work would reveal that the human self was not a unified whole but a plurality of moving, interconnected parts, which could be upgraded and re-configured. Gurdjieffians and Extropians both believed that a process of self-overcoming generated meaning out of a stagnant or mechanical state, and that a struggle for liberation would result in some form of enhanced human.

One of Gurdjieff’s closest students was the Russian journalist and ardent theosophist P. D. Ouspenskii, who met Gurdjieff in 1915 and later introduced Gurdjieff’s teachings to England in the 1920s. Ouspenskii’s book *In Search of the Miraculous* depicts an interview between Ouspenskii and Gurdjieff, and through this dialogue the essence of the Forth Way teachings is revealed. Scholars have debated the extent to which the mature Gurdjieff system was developed fully by Gurdjieff or influenced by P. D. Ouspenskii, especially his book *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* written in 1911, which Gurdjieff had read before meeting with the journalist.⁵⁵ As Andrew Pilsch has noted, Ouspenskii’s reframing of Nietzsche’s *Overman* as the potential next step in evolution was crucial for developing an evolutionary concept of futurism: “Ouspensky’s synthesis of this magical [i.e. theosophical] milieu and Darwinian discourses of evolution ... reveals the mystical impulses at the core of transhuman thought...”⁵⁶ Ouspenskii’s concept of the “higher mind” represented a merger of magic and science and informed an evolutionary futurism that made possible new forms of cognition and embodiment. It was through “technologies” of self-development and spiritual practice that such an enhanced evolutionary condition could be reached.⁵⁷

Gurdjieff taught that human beings were soulless amalgamations of interrelated yet disconnected parts, or disjointed centers, but through the

54 E. Davis, *TechGnosis...*, 140-141.

55 M. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism...*, 177. See also Pyotr D. Ouspenskii, *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1922.

56 Andrew Pilsch, *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017, 42-43.

57 *Ibid.*, 52.

“self-remembering” of Fourth Way work one could develop soul, being, meaning, and self, a higher state of spiritual consciousness and embodiment. Ouspenskii had claimed that “man ... is, in substance, an automaton” in his *Tertium Organum*, which was influenced by Harvard psychologist William James and the theosophist Annie Besant.⁵⁸ As Davis remarks, such ideas, which became an applicable esoteric practice in the Gurdjieff system, are in some ways prescient of the theories of later cognitive scientists who posited consciousness as an emergent phenomenon, organizing itself into an apparent unity from out of a network of connections and processes underlying a seeming whole.⁵⁹ Consciousness researcher Kingsley L. Dennis situates Gurdjieff’s concept of the “man-machine” within the context of the experimental psychology of Timothy Leary and the theories of intelligent machines by thinkers such as Hans Moravec and Marvin Minsky.⁶⁰ It should not be surprising, then, that Gurdjieff’s psycho-spiritual techniques and technological analogies have been compared to the Dianetics of the Church of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard⁶¹ and that *Meetings with Remarkable Men* was both read and watched by a young Steve Jobs.⁶²

Conclusion

Acknowledging what late 19th and early 20th century theosophically informed movements and groups believed concerning the role of science and technology in human evolution and the overcoming of biological limitation offers insights into the pronouncements of present-day transhumanists. When a public scientist such as Michio Kaku proclaims “We Will

58 P. D. Ouspenskii, *Tertium Organum*..., 89; quoted in M. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*..., 177.

59 E. Davis, *TechGnosis*..., 139-140.

60 Kingsley L. Dennis, *The Sacred Revival: Magic, Mind and Meaning in a Technological Age*, SelectBooks 2017, Chapter 5.

61 E. Davis, *TechGnosis*..., Chapter 5; Johanna J. M. Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/de Hartmann Piano Music and Its Esoteric Significance*, Leiden, Boston: Brill 2015, 48; Elliot Benjamin, *Modern Religions: An Experiential Analysis and Exposé*, Swanville, Maine: Natural Dimension Publications 2013, 218-220; Peter B. Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective: A Study of Religious Change in the Modern World*, London: Routledge 2006, 99-100.

62 Ellen Petry Lease, “Steve Jobs and Dan Kottke’s ‘Spirit Bookshelf’ – The Mission – Medium” [online], *Medium*, May 1, 2015, <medium.com/the-mission/steve-jobs-dan-kottke-s-spirit-bookshelf-92e6f51e95be>, [25 January 2021]; Chrisann Brennan, *The Bite in the Apple: A Memoir of My Life with Steve Jobs*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 2013, 231; for examples of how Jobs’s religious imagination has permeated the aesthetic of our current technoscience culture, see Brett T. Robinson, *Appletopia: Media Technology and the Religious Imagination of Steve Jobs*, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press 2013.

Become Like the Gods” in response to anticipated technological developments, we see that such a statement is neither surprising or new.⁶³ Furthermore, the quest to eliminate human illness and aging through the use of scientific and technological advance finds parallels in the esoteric thinkers and movements outlined above. The relationship between human beings, evolution, and technology was being worked out by esotericists over a hundred years ago. As scholars living in the “future,” about which many of these groups and their founders seemed so anxious, it is worth our time to revisit their ideas to try and understand how they shaped and anticipated current techno-spiritual trends.

The metaphor of a future human that had overcome the body to achieve a superior state can be found in both theosophy and transhumanism, which suggests an important connection that has not been fully explored. At the same time, the former promoted a type of spiritual evolution toward an *Overman*, whereas the latter envisions a purely technological post-humanity, a new super-intelligent species whose substrate arises out of silicon and circuits. This implies that, although the logics and metaphors are similar, the first is idealistic and spiritual, while the second is reductive and materialistic. Yet both expressions developed at a time when advancements in technology were causing fear as well as excitement, inspiring utopic dreams and apocalyptic nightmares. How are we to understand these imaginative futures and the desire to flee the flesh?

This question seems especially important in the 21st century, as technology continues to saturate our environment and integrate itself into every aspect of our lives. If these new devices (e.g. smartphones) and new concepts developed in modern science (e.g. Darwinian evolution) provoke such strong and imaginative responses, that human beings can actually *overcome* their bodies and transform into something new, something superior, it seems we should harness this response in constructive and beneficial ways. Should we look forward to an entirely spiritual or an entirely materialistic future and evolutionary condition? Or is it possible to harmonize these two seemingly opposing polarities? Through reading theosophy and transhumanism together, we may perhaps move a step closer toward answering these questions.

63 Michio Kaku, “In the year 2100, we will become the gods we once feared” [video, online], *Big Think*, 1:21, <<https://www.facebook.com/BigThinkdotcom/videos/michio-kaku-well-be-gods-in-2100/10154204098338527/>>, 22 January 2017 [25 January 2021].

SUMMARY

Parallel Metaphors in Theosophy and Transhumanism

In *The Singularity Is Near* (2005), pioneering transhumanist Raymond Kurzweil described the end goal of a six-epoch evolutionary cosmogony, claiming that “once non-biological intelligence gets a foothold in the human brain ... the machine intelligence in our brains will grow exponentially... Ultimately, the entire universe will become saturated with our intelligence. This is the destiny of the universe”. A hundred years earlier, Helena Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, rolled out her own evolutionary cosmogony in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), in which the “spiritual nature” of human beings, along with the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, as well as the chemical elements, are all developed through a complex cyclic progression of seven planetary stages, linked together via “rounds” and “chains,” culminating in the spiritualization of all matter in the universe. At a glance, it may seem these two conceptual models, separated by years of history, have little to do with one another. Yet as I argue in this paper, the contemporary ideas of transhumanists share the logics of turn-of-the-century theosophists and theosophically informed esoteric groups, albeit in a reductive, materialistic, and technologically deterministic mode. Both intellectual expressions are anchored in a historical context awash in new forms of technology and scientific advancement and therefore share in the utopic hopes and apocalyptic nightmares about the transformation of human bodies and human consciousness. To highlight these similarities, I use three case studies: the Temple of the People in Halcyon, California; the prognostications of Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophical Society; and G. I. Gurdjieff’s notion of the “machine man”. These case studies point to a link between the logics and use of metaphors in esotericism and transhumanism – the one religious, the other scientific – as well as the application of evolutionary principles to the developing stages of human consciousnesses and the cosmos.

Keywords: transhumanism; esotericism; technology; theosophy; anthroposophy; Gurdjieff

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