



Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics

JIME

ISSN 2601 - 5749, ISSN-L 2601 - 5749

published by

Center for Socio-Economic Studies and Multiculturalism
Iasi, Romania
www.csesm.warter.ro

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A CENTURY OLD DREAM THAT MAY TURN INTO A NIGHTMARE

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Abstract

A history concerning the augmentation of homo sapiens, of his transformation into *homo extensis* begins in ancient times and continues, at a much faster pace up to the postmodern secular present day. To a certain point this is a natural desire, an outcome of human nature, a wish of human consciousness to regain the original balance and perfection. Up to now, having manifested itself merely as technological progress, augmentation not only failed to resolve the initial problem, but has on the contrary lead homo sapiens further away from the intended target. Together with the technological development and the almost unlimited possibilities it offers to mankind, the problems connected with the spiritual nature of man have multiplied, producing critical developments on the background of the widening gap between an ever faster technological advance and a spiritual stagnation that sometimes turns into regress.

The 21-st century has already known the unfortunate return to spectacular comebacks of radical attitudes and rituals that we were commonly called medieval but that are nothing else but the desperate expression of the above mentioned lack of balance. The activation of extremist elements, as a result of the Islamic invasion of Europe could be considered a recent example.

It has become obvious to anyone who has shown some interest in these troubles that any gain in speed may as well mean progress, while any excess of speed usually leads to a tragic end.

Keywords: homo sapiens, homo extensis, bioethics

1. *The Temptation of the supernatural or man attempting at a vain and useless competition with his creator*

" I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me" (*Flp* 4, 13)

We are offered a way through faith and it is our choice to follow or not. We are also free to imagine that there are one or more shortcuts, free to count on the fact that we might get sooner and with less effort to our destination and that sometimes we have an opportunity to get ahead of those who follow the regular path. It is pointless to silence or deny this possibility, on the contrary, there is meaning in discussing it. The assumption that the supposed "shortcut" is the right way does not deserve immediate rejection without thorough verification. Our existential explorations make sense when the analysis leads to an acceptance of the discovered truth, a process that implies the recognition of error in case it has occurred during the proceedings. It is obvious that besides choosing the right track, the fairness of the runner is equally important, as well as the capacity of the latter to withstand the temptation of self-delusion, while trying to manipulate others. Conscious of the at least partial appreciation of any human activity that resides in its value and not in the means employed and not ultimately in the results gained, Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympic

Games has attempted to protect the olympic slogan "Citius, Altius, Fortius" (faster, higher, stronger) including the following paragraph into the olympic oath:

"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well"(MacAloon, 2007).

Human nature including good as well as evil is made for succes and/or failure and following this logic of uncertainty that is often more difficult to deal with than simple failure, pushing the ego towards the stenic pathos of confrontation, adding a transcendent fatality to human life, a situation that suggests *desperate remedies* like a temptation. It is also known that the more gifted a person the likelier his/her inclination towards doubt, as compared to the less gifted following the apparently safe track of mediocrity.

This is a subject of reflection for bioethics which at first sight cannot lead to radical conclusions, but when approaching aspects created by the existential situations in a differentiated manner an interpretation of the latter in their depth and the wording of relevant opinions become possible, albeit these should never turn into verdicts.

1.1 Icarus in ancient mythology.

The myth of Icarus is one of the relevant messages of ancient Greece with an echo to the present day¹. Researchers suggest that the symbols to be found in this myth reflect a reality that is impossible to be known otherwise than by direct personal experience or through the intellect (Campbell, 1972). Actually we make contact with the vast and mysterious realities of creation, the echo of which comes through up to the present day. As far as the moral significance of the myth of Icarus is concerned and the point where most references converge is that of the middle path, preventing excess, in the Greek sense of "sophrosyne" (σωφροσύνη), which ethymologically means in sound mind, that is to say temperance, guided by balance and knowledge. in Book 2 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristoteles defines virtue in median terms of moderation, of refraining from any kind of excess, an advice that is worth being thought upon from a present perspective and not only regarding the traps that wait for man along his path when he runs after performance, as faith has no balance, faith lacking social justice becomes fanaticism and those who will follow will leave the right path and turn over. This is why we are told in the Bible: "*you shall not turn aside from the sentence which they shall show you, to the right hand, nor to the left*" (Dt 5. 32; 17, 11).

1.2 The Legend of doctor Faustus, from Marlowe to Lessing and Goethe.

One of the fundamental themes of European literature from its beginnings is the drama of the learned man who dreams andlessly to overcome his condition. The subject as such is much older being mentioned for the first time in Acts of the Apostles (ACTS 8, 9-24). Ever since biblical times people thought that dealing with magic will lead inevitably tot he eternal damnation of the soul, as magic in those times did refer not only to the esoteric rituals but also to the scientific research performed with the means available.

¹ Icarus is the son of the Athenian craftsman Dedalus who built the labyrinth for King Minos of Creta next to the latter's palace in Knossos in order to hold the Minotaur captive, a monster half man and half bull. Minos locked Dedalus into the labyrinth as he had given Ariadne – King Minos's daughter – a ball of thred meant to help Theseus, an opponent of Minos, to survive in the labyrinth and defeat the Minotaur. Dedalus made two pairs of wings form wax and feathers for himself and his son. Before flyinf away from the island he warned his son Icarus not to get too close to the sun or the sea and to follow the established route. Overwhelmed by the feeling of flight Icarus did not follow his father's advice, flew too high where the sun melted the wax from his wings and he fell close to Icaria, an island in the Aegean Sea.

Simon of Samaria is saved bringing the Gospel to Philip:

"But there was a certain man, Simon by name, who used to practice sorcery in the city, and amazed the people of Samaria, making himself out to be some great one, to whom they all listened, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is that great power of God." They listened to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his sorceries. But when they believed Philip preaching good news concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself also believed. Being baptized, he continued with Philip. Seeing signs and great miracles occurring, he was amazed" (ACTS 8, 9-13).

For Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's contemporary, this drama is invested with the confrontation between the ideals of the Renaissance and medieval scholastics. The climax is usually the acceptance of the biological condition of the individual, filtered through the enthusiasm due to the rediscovery of classical antiquity, admirer of the divine creation, which refers to man in his physical harmony and the balance of the forms of his body rejected for centuries. We notice a revival of the ideal of balance and caution, recommended in ancient times by Aristoteles (Aristotle, 1999, p.22-33).

The legend of Faustus has circulated in the Germanic cultural space as well, where the hero was given different first names: Johann, Georg or Heinrich. The myth was brought into literature both by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose manuscript has been lost, and by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, whose version is probably the best known in world literature. The fundamental difference from Marlowe to Goethe is the ending of the drama. While Marlowe regards the damnation of his character as inevitable, the play ending with the character being claimed by the underworld, Goethe's vision consists in the redemption of the same Faustus who discovers in the last moment compassion for his fellow men to whom he dedicates his last moments being thus saved (Schmidt, 2011).

The positive trace the crosses thought and art since ancient times from Aristotle to the European classic Goethe can be noticed. The balance, the middle path are instruments of redemption permitting compassion and preventing final damnation. We are to be met with the battle between moderation and excess with a positive ending up to the German classics, especially Goethe, while romanticism produces a crack in convictions and faith in final redemption becomes a matter of relativity.

1.3 Frankenstein, Ondine – the myth of the artificial man.

The myth of the artificial man is no longer an augmentation of homo sapiens but a creation of the latter entering an unhappy competition with his creator and opens a new chapter with reference to philosophy and art with regards to the modification of the initial balance and the risks of such an undertaking.

This change from the serenity of classical antiquity to the romantic turbulence of the 19th century can be illustrated by the evolution from Galathea to Frankenstein. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Galathea represents the statue of a young and beautiful woman with whom Pygmalion the artist who has carved himself the object of his passion falls in love with we find a more complex and troubling message in the antropomorphism with morbid nuances thought and written by Mary Shelley at the beginning of the 19th century.

The reflexive consciousness permitting us to understand and predict the behaviour of other beings based on our own experience was not a very familiar notion in the time of Ovid. The expansion of consciousness brings other changes in time. If Galathea is the outcome of Pygmalion's work, talent and inspiration that do not go beyond his working tools, Victor, the embodiment of Frankenstein is no longer content with chemistry and does not resist the

temptation of alchemy, a mixture of empirical chemistry and occultism that has inflamed the imagination of man throughout the Middle Ages.

Frankenstein is definitely not the augmented man in the sense we understand the word today but he is beyond doubt the product of an augmented consciousness not held back by self-imposed traditional limits but led by the principle of forcing these limits at any rate. The limits of knowledge are not the only ones to be crossed, the same happens to imagination, chemistry shakes hand with alchemy and the automatons that have attracted man since classical antiquity from the walking statues of Pindar to Leonardo Da Vinci's mechanical bird all imitating biomechanics and becoming capable to lead a life of their own. The expansion of consciousness. The expansion of consciousness calls for an expansion of reality and as a consequence the natural balance is upset and the consequences are tragical as a rule.

It was the cartesian ardour of the Enlightenment to describe man as a machine with a soul or, not so often, like Julien Offray de la Mettrie, who published in 1748 "*L'Homme plus que Machine*", stating the origin of the soul in the biochemical processes of the body a theory that caused an outrage so that the author had to flee to his native Holland. These exaggerations that transform the natural into something monstrous lead to the loss of the elastic capacity of consciousness to regaining the primordial balance. Meanwhile the story of young Victor Frankenstein is being re-written in contemporary perspective with no secrets concerning the genetic code but with no guarantee that some day man will not be overcome by a technological advance he is no longer able to cope with (Shelley, Shelley, & Robinson, 2008)².

1.4 Cyborg, nothing but a SF product?

These characters and their spiritual meaning are nothing but peripheral events to the history of literature while the development of the secular postmodern society proves that reality in the sense it had been aspired to by the writers long time ago has already overtaken both imagination and ourselves while we continue to refer to it in an attempt to understand what is going on.

In order to keep to the unity in terms used which make distinction between reality and superreality which is a product of an expanding and ambitious consciousness we are going to attempt rephrasing the former paragraph with reference to the superreality that meanwhile has become reality and that is not always understood because it is no longer a product of our consciousness, it is no longer attempting to invent, it is forced to adapt and does not succeed otherwise than taking refuge into spirituality.

The American writer Erik Davis, one of the best known analysts of the interaction between technology and spirituality suggests in order to study the horizon of spiritual expectations and the religious imagination of people which he considers far from extinct in the secular era we are living and which continues to fuel utopian dreams, apocalyptic visions, digital phantasy and alien obsessions all together in the technological unconscious of our contemporaries, we have to free ourselves from the utilitarian layer of technology (Davis, 1998).

² "Frankenstein" or a modern Prometheus is a novel of the British writer Mary Shelley, published for the first time in the year 1818. It is supposed that the author was inspired by the name of the fortress Frankenstein when creating the monster. The novel tells the life of the young Swiss Victor Frankenstein, who studies at the famous university of Ingolstadt and who succeeds to create an artificial man. The novel is written due to the genre in form of letters the events being related by Victor in letters addressed to the person leading his research. In his letters Victor calls the attention of the reader to the fact that man has to admit the limits of his possibilities without competing with the divine creator. The character of Victor Frankenstein is similar to Faust or the mythical hero, Prometheus.

The terms and ideas of information society have infiltrated contemporary spirituality including the level of language in an attempt to regain the balance between man and machine, modernism and nihilism, technology and homo sapiens or in the evolution from monkey to angel, respectively from man to superman as Friedrich Nietzsche used to say in the last century. These ideas are sometimes included by movements that spread rapidly and that are vehemently controversial like the scientology movement with attempts to gain roots in Romania after 1990.

1.5 Cybernetics, between science and speculation.

Cybernetics appears in the Johns Hopkins guide for digital media as an indirect component of structuralism alongside with the theories of information and gaming according to the definition formulated by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (Ryan, Emerson, & Robertson, 2014). This is a definition that leads directly to Harold Adrian Linstone and *Multiple Perspectives For Decision Making*, that was first printed in the year 1984 (Linstone, 1984).

In interaction with their own experience in aerospace industry the two (Linstone & Mitroff) define three fundamental perspectives in decision making. The first in the technical perspective (T) with the following characteristics:

- The problems are simplified through abstractization, idealisation and isolation from the real world. The supposition that the process of reduction and simplification helps solving the problem is implicit.
- The data and the models form the basic blocks for research. Logics and rationality are the assumptions we start from as well as objectivity. Order, structure and quantification are looked for whenever the former are possible. Observation and model building experimenting and analysis are usually followed in order to improve predictive capacities. The validation of hypothesis and repeatability of observations are suppositions we start from. Elegant models and optimal solutions are particularly appreciated.

Second there are organisational perspectives (O) that concentrate on the process rather than on the product, the action, paying lesser attention to problem solving. Key questions at this level are "is it necessary to solve a problem and if yes, which?" "Who has to solve it and how?" "Which is the optimal solution?" In this context the recognition of a vertical authority becomes necessary with the observation that failure is likely if there is no support from the grassroots.

The third level is the personal perspective (P) regarding the world through the eyes of a single individual. It deals with the aspects that make up the relation of the individual with the system and is not concerned with technical or organisational perspectives.

Including these aspects into the ethical and moral considerations regarding the augmented man becomes essential if we refer to contemporary matters as the outstanding majority of subjects are part of the above mentioned structures.

2. The inevitable dilemma between cult and occult

The fact that *homo extensis* can be interpreted as the *augmented agent inevitably* connects the subject of this paper to the notion of *mind control*, with all possible and known applications from the MK Ultra programme in the US to the retraining in Pitesti part of the "glorious" post war Romanian history.

We approach the area of augmentation that is less technological and envisages directly the spiritual realm. Have you ever wondered why Alice in Wonderland is a story appreciated by children and... programmers?

"On that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (Rm 2, 16) is the answer orthodox Christians find in faith and contains an appeal to just

judgement an operation that is impossible to institutionalise, technologise as it belongs entirely to the personal matters, in this point we are to be met with an opportunity for as long as we make reference to *homo extensis*. The fundamental question is: do we understand by augmentation an enforcement and perfection of the spiritual profile of man conforming tradition or do we abandon the latter in order to venture into the unknown without any knowledge concerning the fact that our moral endowment and our knowledge are or are not sufficient to face such a challenge? The conservatives answer citing the wisdom that says all revolutions have managed to change the world and none has made it a better one while the reformists consider perseverance in keeping traditions a weakness in their attempt to convince everybody that another way is imperative to be chosen, a way that is usually presented as being the new one.

The complexity of the problem does not allow a radical answer.

3. Prosthetics, necessity, vanity and speculation or which is the moral difference (in meaning) between a dental and an "aesthetic" implant?

The existence of the Church of Body Modification in the US is a fact as it counts about 3.500 members and practices a non-deistic religion based on the enforcement of the ties between body and soul, modifying the former. From a pedagogical perspective the least productive approach is forbidding such practices. Any administrative intervention (bylaws, rules, etc) changes the ethical background of the problem and any dispute is transferred to the field of personal relations of the individual with the regulating institution implying as a rule emotional reactions that in their turn are not sorted out being either suppressed or exaggerated.

A more careful examination of the matter is practically recommended as the difference between physical and spiritual augmentation is not entirely an ethical problem but has first of all ethical implications.

This specific difference can have the meaning of perfecting an existing function (capacity) versus its artificial, usually technological improvement with reference to the physical and to a certain extent physiological limit of the concept of augmentation. Ethically speaking, perfecting (through exercise and perseverance) of a quality (function) already existing is to be preferred to the replacement of that ability with a device supplied by the technological evolution. It is obvious that the above statement contains its own limits like situations when we can no longer speak about the improvement of a quality (function) but we deal with the replacement of a missing organ by means of a prosthesis. It is this very precisely defined field that opens a new front to ethical debate with limitation by the concepts of need and abuse.

A patient who has lost an organ as a consequence of illness or accident and who will be enabled by a prosthesis to go on leading an active life is impossible to be placed on the same level as a person who will not refrain from abuses as technological progress will permit corrective measures in exchange for a sum of money.

If on the other hand we make reference to spiritual augmentation we are going to state from the beginning that the former has no connection whatever with the technological progress and is strictly tied to the spiritual level of society representing in fact the common denominator of the aspirations belonging to the individual who form the mentioned society.

4. An applied reading of the Bible: The Garden of Eden and the forbidden tree

The biblical theme of the tree of good and evil, more exactly of the knowledge about them, in order to make the difference does not so much refer to the opposition between the already known good and the evil that is about to be discovered but to the process of knowledge itself that is irreversible after the forbidden fruit of knowledge has been consumed. This one way road is more evident in our days when several trends of thought

(minimalism is probably the most notable one) try to reverse to archaic simplicity altogether with the awareness of the drama of impossible return.

In Judaic tradition consuming the forbidden fruit signifies the beginning of mixing good and evil suggesting that no one will ever be able to get one without the other. The separation is possible only by respecting the canons of a two stage process that separates the good at the beginning while the evil will be gradually annihilated by the former. Without going into depth, the subject being in fact a vast one, the condition of rigour present already in the thought of the antic philosophers who call it temperance. But respecting a set of rules is nothing else than a particular case of regulating temperance.

The tendency of postmodern man is in general a pragmatic one that does not have to get into conflict with ethics especially if the principles of the latter ensure a long term pragmatic solution to concrete problems.

The term "forbidden" deserves special interest as dialectically any interdiction gives birth to temptation in the opposite sense. We think that humanity is past the adolescent stage of its spiritual evolution and that at present we are confronted with far more serious problems created largely by ourselves so that the ever faster and complex possibilities to augment homo sapiens have become a part of the problem before they are going to be a part of the solution.

5. Final Discussions

It is necessary and mandatory to make a difference between spiritual and physical augmentation. Spiritual augmentation plays a primary role as in the absence of any moral values physical augmentation becomes dangerous and counterproductive as people have realised already in ancient times.

Religion has always made along centuries reference to the preservation of balance between matter and spirituality a principle that has lost momentum in the postmodern system of values. Voices calling today the return to religion have grown weaker while the pragmatic approach highly appreciated by secular postmodernism should tell us that demolishing, even at a symbolical level a building that is in our case of spiritual essence is not and can not be sufficient. In this situation instead of becoming the solution, religion becomes itself a part of the problem and it is impossible to find a solution otherwise than by reconstruction as time does not flow backwards.

Secular bioethicists using the values of the contemporary world based on biotechnology try to shape a more efficient system of values as compared to the one suggested by traditional religions. They are not always very convincing and as there is no way to stop technological progress we have no means to postpone *sine die* the moral problems we are confronted with. The extent to which these problems remain unsolved becomes the extent of the crisis we manage punctually without removing the actual causes.

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