

# Like Shattered Glass

A review of Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*; (2005). Viking Penguin: New York.

by Benjamin Butler

For Verena Buob

It is important that light is shed on this book and its clever author, Ray Kurzweil. Anthroposophists in particular should be aware of Kurzweil's predictions and technological research especially because of the nature of the thoughts presented. I became interested in Kurzweil through discussions with friends about the dark aspects of transhumanism, the movement to augment people with technology. Author Daniel Pinchbeck has also been a great source of inspiration.<sup>1</sup>

Ray Kurzweil (b. 1948) is an American inventor, author, and futurist. He is currently the Director of Engineering at Google, working with them closely on robotics, AI (artificial intelligence), and natural language recognition. Google is one sponsor of his Singularity University. At the time of this book, he was on the Army Science Advisory Group. He has invented scanners and text-to-speech technology utilized by the blind. His other books include *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999) and *How to Create a Mind* (2012).

I offer that the central key to understanding what underpins this book and the methods used to arrive at the

conclusions presented in it, is summed up in Kurzweil's proclamation that *intelligence supersedes cosmology*.<sup>2</sup> *The Singularity is Near* takes intelligence to an extreme at the expense of everything else including the cosmos itself. Ultimately, the human being and cosmos are reduced to machines for intelligent computation.

Ray Kurzweil foresees a future in which each organ of the human being is gradually replaced by intelligent nanobots or otherwise synthetic materials. The heart and brain are seen as flawed in design, badly in need of an upgrade, because they are run by outdated biological programming.<sup>3</sup> Kurzweil describes his discomfort with his physical body, thus he seeks to radically "reprogram" it by taking 250 pills a day so as to completely change his metabolic processes.<sup>4</sup> He does this so he can live for further biotechnological innovations which he foresees will allow humans within a few decades to become immortal by uploading their consciousness into computers. He sees the "nonbiological" intelligence increasingly taking over inside augmented human beings as biotechnology comes

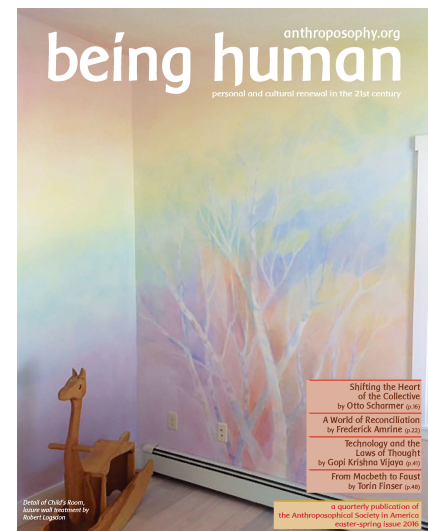
*I became interested in Kurzweil through discussions with friends about the dark aspects of transhumanism, the movement to augment people with technology.*

1 See his work 2012: *The Return of Quetzalcoatl* (2006), pp. 152-160, 103-106.

2 p. 364.

3 pp. 306, 198-199.

4 p. 211.



to actually replace their biological brain.

Kurzweil believes that in the 21st century “strong AI” will emerge: an inherently uncontrollable super-intelligence. Because he holds intelligence as the highest value, his vision culminates with swarms of nanobots blasting out into the cosmos, saturating “dumb matter” with intelligence, while using the stars and planets, including the sun, as computational substrates.<sup>5</sup> His description of the ultimate cold computer and the possible computational potential of black holes really show the dark extreme of thought here presented.<sup>6</sup>

In coming decades Kurzweil foresees virtual reality taking over basically every domain of human activity. The various senses will be augmented for virtual reality (including touch) and people will project different virtual bodies for different audiences. Kurzweil appeals to the pleasure-seeking impulse in people when he describes the possibilities virtual reality (VR) offers regarding sex. He claims that along with humans meeting in VR, artificial-

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ly intelligent programs will fulfill sexual desires. This discussion of sex in VR is revealed in one of the many end-of-chapter sections where Kurzweil has characters discuss aspects of the singularity among other characters and himself. It all has a very odd quality when his invented “Molly 2004” character talks to “Molly 2104” and “Ray” about nanobot bodies and digital sex.<sup>7</sup> The critical point is that the boundary between real and virtual reality will disintegrate just like the boundary between the biological and new,

“nonbiological” parts of the human being, as Kurzweil sees it.

Kurzweil’s thinking leads him to see nothing else in the world except *information patterns*; believing the cosmos to be empty he seeks to imbue it with the intelligence he feels it to be so badly lacking. *Technology is his bridge between the “I” and the world.* The details could fill themselves in: nanobots in the blood, nonfluid nutrient delivery systems in the body, “reprogramming” cells, human cloning (“weak immortality” as he refers to it),

<sup>5</sup> pp. 349, 434-435.

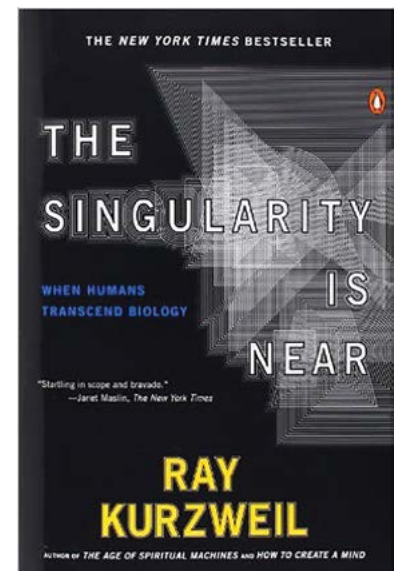
<sup>6</sup> p. 362.

<sup>7</sup> pp. 319, 203.

cloned animal meat, manipulation of bacteria’s limbs and the destruction of their metabolisms, increasing stiffness in computer systems so as to reduce thermal effects, and an appreciation of straight lines over curves for their efficiency.<sup>8</sup> **All stem from a worldview striving to exhaust technology in an empty cosmos.**

The individual with this worldview seeks preservation at any cost. Kurzweil and other transhumanists wish to evade death and become immortal. Although this is his aim, *The Singularity is Near* reads like it constantly seeks to displace living life, one could say in anthroposophical terms “the etheric,” with death.<sup>9</sup> It is a book about death: death of what makes human beings true feeling beings and warm-blooded active beings. Kurzweil calls religion “deathist rationalization” and urges his followers to hold strong, looking forward to the singularity, an event which supposedly will allow the transhumanists to conquer death.<sup>10</sup> This goal of uploading human beings into computers could be seen as nothing less than putting people into the ahimanic “preserving jars” described by Rudolf Steiner.<sup>11</sup>

Rudolf Steiner shared that Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* and *The Anti-Christ* were actually written by Ahriman,<sup>12</sup> the supersensible being who wants to divert humanity from any spiritual understanding, diverting them especially through dense materialism. He is the ossified intelligence, the opponent of the light, and we live in an era when the “ahimanic” forces are especially active. I believe this book by Kurzweil to be inspired by Ahriman. The predominance of illusion, deception, frozen intellect, and technological dominance, at the expense of beauty, art, and warmth is indicative of the inspiration behind this work. It is not



<sup>8</sup> pp. 254, 306, 221, 224, 236, 238, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Kurzweil foresees respiration, digestion, and reproductive systems eventually becoming unnecessary.

<sup>10</sup> p. 372.

<sup>11</sup> In Lecture 1 of the cycle entitled *Lucifer and Ahriman*, given in Dornach November 1, 1919.

<sup>12</sup> *Karmic Relationships* Volume 3, Lecture 11.

an accident that Kurzweil brings up Nietzsche, citing his concern that man balances on a “rope over an abyss” with regards to technology use and the future, and then slyly encourages readers that humanity is in no such position, that the path to the singularity goes up and not down into the abyss.<sup>13</sup>

Of interest to anthroposophists is Kurzweil’s honest statement that he doesn’t understand why his (mind) “pattern” is continually attached to and perceives the feelings and experiences of the one person called “Ray Kurzweil.”<sup>14</sup> Questions arise for his outlook: how is it that consciousness arises in the body? Why isn’t his specific information pattern inside a different body? It all appears

random, accidental. Without any knowledge of the relation of body, soul, and spirit, or of reincarnation, this baffles him. I appreciate that he included this comment; it reveals a riddle which eludes his sharp thinking.

The ideas and aims of individuals like Ray Kurzweil should be given careful attention and permeated with insights from anthroposophical spiritual science; they serve as a clear warning of the times. We must see the one-sidedness of such viewpoints. We are tasked with facing what comes with the firm conviction that *we know the spirit in the human being and in the cosmos*. We must love what we create and what we see ourselves becoming.

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<sup>13</sup> pp. 373-374. See also the article: “Rudolf Steiner’s Meeting of Destiny with Friedrich Nietzsche and the Adversary of Our Age” by C.T. Roszell in *being human* Spring Issue 2015

<sup>14</sup> p. 381.

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