

Human Co-becoming

Redefining What it Means to be Human for the Super Smart Society

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Limitations of the Modern Concept of Humans as Rational Beings

The vision of Society 5.0 being pursued by the Japanese government sees as its ultimate outcome a “human-centric super smart society.” This emphasis on the “human-centric” embodies a future that will not come about through a continuation of our current technology-driven approach to innovation. Rather, it presents an opportunity to place technology in a wider context, using the combined forces of the arts and sciences to address the question of what it means to be human.

This take on humanity is a modern construct that arose in the West as part of the process by which mankind sought to emancipate itself from God. The scientific and industrial revolutions gave rise to a strong belief that, rather than God, it is human beings equipped with reason who are able to provide the normative basis for society and its practices through rational decision-making. As exemplified by Friedrich Nietzsche’s claim that “God is dead,” this idea of humanity had already reached its zenith by the mid-19th century.

Based on this humanistic i.e., human-centric philosophy, what had once been the single field of liberal arts was split into the natural “sciences” and the human “sciences.” While both branches went on to make dramatic progress, the concept of humanity fell into the large gap that opened up between them.

The tragic consequences of this were the two world wars of the 20th century. It wasn’t just the advances in technology

that made these terrifying conflicts possible; ideologies like Nazism, it must be remembered, also featured along the path trod by democracy and the modern concept of humanity. While America emerged victorious from the war, the discord and contradictions that have frequently accompanied that nation’s attempts to spread its own form of democracy to the world are in a large part due to the particular understanding of humanity it embodies.

Those difficulties have exposed the limits of this view of humanity. What had emerged in the modern world as a replacement for God was the rational human being, an entity who possessed a near-god-like capacity for accurate reasoning. The reality, unfortunately, was that not everyone satisfied this ideal, nor was it uncommon for rational people to reach irrational conclusions. We have now arrived at a point of crisis with a concept of humanity that has run out of steam. That the 21st-century has seen a global resurgence in religion could be taken as a sign of having reached a critical state of affairs in which people are once again calling on God.

Unless we fundamentally revise our thinking on human beings, which is where the core of the problem lies, academia will have nowhere else to turn, neither to the sciences nor to the humanities. As such, in putting human beings at the heart of its vision, Society 5.0 is a timely initiative and presents a major opportunity for both branches to question anew what it means to be human.

Human Co-becoming What is Meant by Human in the Society We Want to Create?

The question then is, what is meant by “human” in this society we want to create? One way of addressing this question is to take a fresh look at the human relationship with capitalism, a social imaginary that has had a major bearing on modern society while also forming part of the background from which our concept of humanity emerged.

The Wealth of Nations published in 1776, the main work by Adam Smith, often called the father of modern capitalism, embodied a view of people as workers or producers. While this may seem astonishingly simple, coming at a time when economics was addressed solely in terms of the exchange of wealth, the idea that value is created by the labor of flesh-and-blood human beings not only led to a new concept of humanity, it also remains deeply embedded in our own modern-day

view of what it means to be human, one that is centered around work and employment.

The arrival of the 20th century saw the focus on humans expand beyond work and production to also encompass consumption. Crucial to consumption is to always be “coming up with something different,” with the relentless production of commodities that differ from each other in small ways being accompanied by the stoking of demand by advertising so that those commodities will find consumers.

This transition from the capitalism based upon things or goods produced by human labor to the capitalism of events, in which the differences built into products are the basis of consumption, was accompanied by a shift in the concept of human beings from those who work to those who consume. This represented a major transformation in values, with consumption becoming a virtue in place of frugality. This mode of capitalism has continued to this day.

A key point to note here is that, whether a worker or a consumer, the concept of ownership is central, and embedded in the concept of ownership is that of subjectivity. It is by owning lots of things, treasured possessions, and information of value that a person is enlarged. Ownership in itself becomes a thing to value. The trouble is, none of this changes the one who owns.

While there are people saying that searching the net for information or having a wonderful time do not fall under the definition of “ownership,” it remains doubtful where this might take us, being in fact no more than ownership in a different form. Rather, there is a need to inquire into what it means to be human in terms that do not come down to the rules of ownership.

Isn't what we really need at this point in time to engage with the world? It is through such “engagement” that we change ourselves (the act of “becoming”). It may mean becoming someone other than who we now are. Owning goods or searching for information on their own will not change who we are. What is needed to change one's self is to engage deeply with other people or subjects. This involves relationships or forms of knowledge that are based on an intimacy of engaging with other people to get at the heart of things, and it is this that will impart richness to society and its people in the future.

Rather than “human beings,” meaning independent entities who are cut off from one another, the prospect for the future is for “human becoming” in which people transform themselves

through engagement with the world. Moreover, people do not achieve humanity on their own. We become human through engagement with others and it is through mutual transformation that we are enriched. That is why I would urge people to think in terms of “human co-becoming” whereby we achieve humanity together.

It is this potential for individuals to change fundamentally that provides the opportunity missing from past visions of the future. For this new type of capitalism that places value squarely on people, I propose the term “human capitalism.”

Investment and Technology for Enhancing People's Capabilities

The custom of priests having their heads shaved and donning robes and the *Inkyo* system of retirement that once existed in Japan both served as ritual practices for making the transition to a new unfamiliar form of existence, in these cases a new way of life or facing up to old age. In his *Gakudō-yōjinshū* (Advice on Studying the Way) of 1234, the Buddhist priest Dōgen described two forms of study: *Sanshi-monpō* (taking instruction from a Zen master) for transforming the spirit and *Kufū-zazen* (single-minded Zen meditation) for transforming the body, noting that practice of the former in particular relied on the presence of a mentor.

Amartya Sen, the first person from Asia to win a Nobel Prize in economics, used the term “capability” to refer to what people are actually able to achieve in their real lives. In the case of people who live without access to water, for example, this means that rather than vending machines, their capabilities would be better enhanced by a way of digging wells. Likewise, for an isolated person in their own room, learning to ride a bicycle would help more than a digital versatile disk (DVD).

While technology focuses mainly on making lives more comfortable, uniform levels of comfort can be an obstacle to uninhibited thinking and does not necessarily lead to greater capability. There is a need to use technology to enhance situations in which people as biological organisms can actively participate and change. Human beings inhabit (not own!) their own body, being able to experience joy and sorrow in realms beyond the scope of calculation, and more than anything else live their heart-mind. Both the arts and sciences agree on this point. I hope that the engineers responsible for social innovation will work on their sensibility for things that go beyond algorithms.