Digital Technology and Spirituality Conference

…some reflections, questions and imaginations...

In early February of 2024, the global Youth Section of the anthroposophical movement hosted a long-weekend conference at the Goetheanum under the title *Digital Technology and Spirituality*. About 60 young people (roughly ages 18 to 35) attended. We hosted interviews and talks by speakers from around Europe and the Americas, held conversation groups arising from this spoken content, and witnessed artistic performances related to the theme.

By the close of the weekend, there was a sense that we had planted small seeds of wakefulness in a large - perhaps fallow - field of vital research. While aware of pressing outer needs as well - such as governmental regulation and creative responses needed in education, culture, health, and economy - we focused mostly on interior landscapes. In future, we would hope to expand dialogue to include more outer, practical concerns. But to make effective outer progress, a certain degree of shared understanding of the role of technology in human development is essential. And so, the following are just a few extracts of questions, ideas and imaginations to frame a very wide-spectrum topic.

The overall landscape of thoughts we shared

The first panel's subtitle was the phrase: "*dignified and dystopian trajectories*". What aspects of our humanity are at risk of disappearing? What essential qualities require active nurturing? Our healthy sense of self, our sleep, our ability to think and act creatively,

our warmth of heart, our sense of meaningful work… all these certainly seem at risk of dissolution, individually and collectively. And yet our confrontation with technology can force us to ask more seriously than ever what we value cultivating in our lives.

We noted that many things once given by a local culture or religion are largely no longer passively received but must be actively sought out in an individualized way. Rituals (meals, farming, communing, prayers, meditation), social engagement, artistic activity, local community, crafting, honest politics, free-thinking science, and so on, are not guaranteed to remain common in human life experience.

On the other hand, many things that were once hard are now easy: travel, communication, labor, etc. Many of us in wealthy countries are seemingly presented by digital technology with a near infinite web of possibilities that calls us to entertain more distant ideas, make different choices, and cognize our connectedness to the world in a new way.

We can go online and truly learn something and value the technology at our disposal… or we can get sucked into a cult and be brainwashed. These two extremes can happen to some extent on the same day! We can start off working on a creative project, and get sidetracked by something less intentional, which becomes a habit, which might become a mild to serious addiction. We can try to cut off the addiction and ask ourselves what real need lies behind it… Our sense of freedom in navigating the oceanic digital sphere can be both immense and paralyzing. We are free to see, hear and do so much, and yet are much more aware of our boundaries in our own psychology, habits, inspirations or lack of inspiration.

In the best case scenario, how can it help us to grow into the more dignified aspects of ourselves? How can we not fall prey to innumerable snares?

These kinds of thoughts filled our hearts and minds at the conference in February. We related to each other around diverse experiences, such as cultivating and interacting with an online persona, online dating, how to deepen real relationships, and how to make the most of digital opportunities for creativity and increased humanity.

Past self verses future becoming

There was some discussion in the opening panel around the idea that digital technology, working only on the statistically quantifiable, has no access to anything 'of the future' or 'of our becoming'. Once we have done something (i.e. clicked a link, recorded our voice, shot a video) it exists digitally *in the past*. Even an analog record on a record player may contain a physically embedded signal that is theoretically repeatable and replicable for eternity, but it is replaying only the past. By contrast, what in us is 'of the future'? When a child is born, their future self finds its way into a body, and the physical body then holds its 'past'. The question is: 'who is incarnating' and why? Anything truly creative, we thought, comes from this future self making its presence incarnate in a world of the past.

Subnature's implicit initiation

Audiovisual records of our activity form a part of the world that Rudolf Steiner called '*subnature*' in his last letter to members of the Anthroposophical Society.

We traced the evolution of subnature through the atmospheric engine's piston vacuum chamber, to the lightbulb's entombment in a glass vacuum, to the modern binary computing hardware, as a process of increasing mechanical *isolation*. Similarly, *psychic isolation* is a common experience that mirrors the fact of us interacting with devices built upon hyper-rigid automation of the state of silicon chips.

In a mysterious way, what Rudolf Steiner called subnature is an aspect of the world that already exists in our mechanical, rigid, logical intellect, which is finding its way to externalization through our continued technologizing. Subnature absorbs and replicates all the qualities with which we imbue it from the collective psyche. Subnature mirrors and works back upon our will; it has the quality of thinking and will bound together without the moderation of feeling, of soul.

What is a healthy orientation to strive for in relation to this subnatural world described above? Throughout the conference, the theme re-emerged that we are neither able to run away from our digital devices as they approach ever closer to our bodies, nor do we want to get sucked into technology totally unconsciously and lose all our human agency. This wrestling with subnature is initiatory, holding us in its liminal double-bind.

The hopeful outcome of this ongoing initiation is a more refined awareness of who we are and what we are doing here on earth. The dystopian possibilities become fully manifest only if we do not realize that this confrontation is to be taken up more and more consciously. We have to continue wrestling with our own monsters.

The infinite and the finite

On another avenue of thought, we were aware that social media and entertainment feeds our soul and, like overeating, *can* cause passivity, habituation, and addiction. However, our creative engagement with audiovisual software and tactile/robotic hardware can help us to develop in ourselves, by contrast, qualities that we do *not* find inherent in these media.

Just as staring at red creates in us a kind of visual residue of green that we call its after-image, so we are awoken, through our staring into screens, to the soul-faculties that complement the given sense experience. This only happens, however, if we take the time to reflect on our sense-experiences.

There was a pressing question as to what distinguishes human creativity from what "A.I." can produce in terms of sounds and images. We felt that the creativity of a composer or songwriter comes, at first, from a kind of deep listening to the infinite cosmos of trans-physical possibilities. When any artist has a will to physically embody something experienced spiritually, they always wrestle with practical constraints. The digital world does seem to remove certain constraints (we can listen to or watch almost anything we feel drawn toward). The tradeoff is that it can only work within what has already been created: past deeds. It can only manipulate, predict, or automate a finite and quantifiable past. Humanity, on the other hand, has potential access to future states of being. Creativity comes into being from the infinite future potentiality while the digital world only interfaces with statistical representations of our existing creations.

The interaction between the two is fertile ground for our coming to consciousness of more creative ways of being. On the flip side, if

not taken up with consciousness, we might walk a slippery slope into degenerate uncreativity and coldheartedness.

Flavors of transhumanism

An interesting conversation emerged that centered around 'flavors' of transhumanism relative to Rudolf Steiner's quote:

"*The point is not what is going to happen, for it certainly will happen, but how it happens — how these things are handled. The welding together of human beings with machines will be a great and important problem for the rest of the earth-evolution.*" *Rudolf Steiner – GA 178 – [The Wrong and Right Use of Esoteric Knowledge – Lecture 3](#) – Dornach, 25th November 1917*

Feelings toward technology's future can oscillate between excitement and anticipation, dread and horror. While understandable, none of these moods above are equilibrious or creative. A middle-path attitude toward technology's future is needed: to be engaged in the exacting 'how' of human-machine interfacing.

The often quoted remark by Rudolf Steiner above prophetically states that it is inevitable our technologies will increasingly merge with us. As 'phones' have nearly merged with most human beings in the last two decades, it certainly feels inevitable that more of humanity will have mechanized parts within and surrounding them in the coming hundred years. The digital world will constitute a large part of the reality we experience day to day, alongside the 'natural' world and the subtler, invisible worlds between.

We might easily confuse Rudolf Steiner's statement with that of a sort of one-size-fits-all transhumanist, and so it's important to

distinguish some motives in the transhumanist movement that can frame a rough imagination of a middle path.

We imagined two transhumanist tendencies at work in humanity today to help us contextualize this quote:

One 'flavor' of transhumanism seems to be the ideal of leaving the body behind to live in virtual reality. Indeed, this is already the case for what are called *hikikomori* in Japan. The physical body is forgotten, and the subtler bodies - life process and psychology - live in the digital world. A person may be inclined to neglect their physicality. In anthroposophical terms, this might be a more 'Luciferic' tendency.

A second flavor of transhumanism is to use technology - primarily biological and robotic - to make the human body superhuman, invulnerable or even immortal. Developments of technologies such as anthrobots and artificial limbs and organs point in this direction. The motive here places physical strength and health on a pedestal, and has a more 'Ahrimanic' quality overall.

Of course, one person can hold both motives strongly, and they are mutually supportive in terms of their technological requirements. And yet, neither of these flavors of transhumanism as *motives* is inherently supportive of human dignity of full sensory incarnation into a physical body on earth.

If the above examples gave a bad taste in the mouth, what is a conscious middle path for the inevitability of human-machine merging that Rudolf Steiner describes? Whatever it is, it has to include the continued striving for uplifting the dignity, selfhood, and inner freedom of all beings, human and non-human. To whatever extent technology serves increasing warmheartedness and creativity, we can feel

positive about its progress and grateful for the means it offers us. To the extent that it causes soul-detachment, brainwashing, physical ailments, extinction, unrestrained destruction of ecosystems, and so on, we have to be firm in pushing back against it as a global civil society.

Anthroposophy is evidently humanist as well as non-humanist (care for all beings). It is also *trans*-humanist in the sense that it is willing to integrate into our humanity all aspects of the world, including our own technological creations. It simultaneously holds in imagination the future spiritual states of human beings. There is no will to go 'beyond' the human in the sense of avoiding incarnation, or replacing humans fundamentally by robotic systems. But there is willingness to integrate and alchemize the mechanical aspects of ourselves ever more fully, in greater harmony with the surrounding world.

Mythology as method

A last theme to share in this overview of the conference is the role of imagination in relation to digital technology. In order to move forward in these technologically spiraling times, it feels essential that our thinking rises beyond mere intellectuality. A warmer, more imaginative thinking is being asked of us. In this light, mythological engagement can be a helpful means in wrestling inwardly with some of our spiritual challenges. Consider for example the mythos of Perseus and Medusa:

Perseus raises a mirror-shield to look at the *reflection* of Medusa's writhing snake-hairs and so not get turned into stone like all who came before him. What does it mean for a human being to be turned into stone? Their thinking becomes rigid and fixed, their

feelings become cold and uncaring, and their will becomes paralyzed, unable to move of its own accord. This is a real danger with which digital technology confronts us. Medusa is our collective initiation into the need to be reflective in a new way.
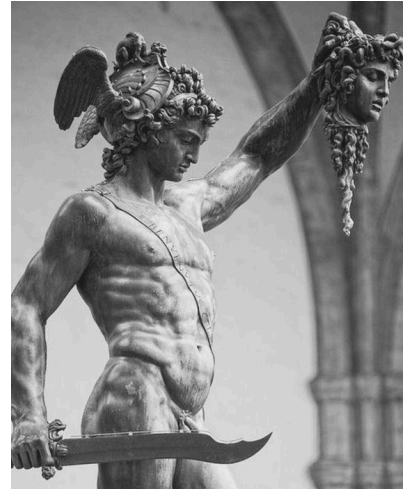
When Perseus beheads Medusa, Pegasus springs forth from her neck. Pegasus, a winged horse, is the boon at the end of the initiation trial. In many symbolisms, a horse is the intellect, the mind, which can run wild or be tamed. What does it mean for our intellect to grow wings and fly from the neck of our enemy? One response is that we are called to alchemize our current level of rational intellect to its next development: to become heartfelt, intuitive and imaginative while retaining its clarity and horse-like poise.

Concluding remarks

Overall, the conference gave us the sense of being affirmed in our collective thinking about the issues and ideas sketched above. We sensed that our inner work had only just begun, and hope to take up these themes in much more depth in the coming months and years. We felt motivated to think more into practical regulatory concerns, ecological concerns in relation to mining materials for technology.

The title of this conference was Digital Technology and Spirituality; indeed we felt we achieved in some measure our aim of spending a long weekend in contemplation on this complex theme. We are grateful for all the speakers, performers and friends who showed up, and wish everyone the best with their own wrestling into the many unique challenges of these times.