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# Just Download Your Mind and You'll Live Forever

Sylvie · Thursday, June 20th, 2013

Not long ago I was editing a study guide for a play about the complex potential of the future of mind-downloading. Now I know exactly zero about this subject, but the way things have been going lately, I must believe that anything is possible. As I read, though, I came across a line that stopped me utterly:

*"Ian Pearson, chief of British Telecom's futurology unit, [believes] 'it will be possible to download your brain to a supercomputer by the middle of the 21st century…. so when you die it's not a major career problem."*

Not a major career problem…? Does this suggest that we have to go on working after we are dead? Oh, Brave New World. Retirement may not be what it's cracked up to be and lots of people work happily into old age, but posthumously…?

*"Mind downloading,"* this guide went on, *"is defined as 'the hypothetical process of transferring or copying a conscious mind from a brain to a non-biological substrate by scanning and mapping a biological brain in detail and copying its state into a computer system or another computational device.' "*

This is not poetry, is it, which I would greatly prefer, even when I don't understand it. But moving right along:

*"It is discussed in AI publications [Artificial Intelligence to you and me] and is an important part of life extension technology. While some scientists are skeptical, research and development is being done in such areas as faster supercomputers, virtual reality, animal brain mapping and connectomics, the science of studying the connectomes in the brain."*

Lost me there. *Connectomics* and connectomes are not in my known vocabulary, although I favor connection in any form.

These futurists—people who make a handsome living mapping out your and my collective future, whether they are to be trusted with it or not—are looking at *"how one can structure a computer that could become conscious… Consciousness is just another sense of the brain…. In other words, there could come a day when computers will become more intelligent than human beings."*

Now that's plain dumb. We must be idiots if we're willing to turn over our perfectly serviceable intelligence to a machine and ask it to run our lives as it sees fit…

*"In fiction there are many examples of mind downloading. For example…*

*in Robert Silverberg's* To Live Again (1969) *an entire world economy revolves around the buying and selling of 'souls' (persons that have been tape-recorded at six-month intervals) allowing the very wealthy the opportunity to spend millions on a medical treatment that downloads the most*

*recent recordings of 'archived personalities into the minds of the buyers.' "*

It's always about money and the rich, isn't it? No fiction there. Sheesh…

*"Raymond Kurzweil, a futurist and researcher in Artificial Intelligence, acknowledges that computers are becoming better and faster; therefore, there might come a time when they are capable of something close to human intelligence. He calls this era the Age of Spirituality when Artificial Intelligence and superintelligent machines will become the dominant forms of life."*

The Age of… spirituality?

*"For one, many of the brain's characteristic methods of organization can be simulated using conventional computing. The brain constantly rewires itself; while most of the details in the brain are random, not every dendrite and axiom has to be explored to reproduce it."*

Dendrite… Is that a variant of dandruff?

*"Kurzweil also knows that the brain can hold multiple viewpoints because it has an architecture of regions such as the corpus callosum, the limbic system, the hypothalamus, etc.… [He] believes the brain is imperfect, but good enough to outwit competitors and revive itself."*

Well, that's a relief. Why didn't he say so sooner…

*"Kurzweil… insists that medical advancements will help his generation live long enough for the growth of technology to intersect and surpass the processing of the human brain. By that time scientists should be able to create a simulated human brain inside a computer. The only factor Kurzweil and company can't comprehend is the operating process of the brain."*

Let me see. Even I can tell this means that the only factor Kurzweil and company can't comprehend is the key one: how life—animation—begins.

*"Naturally, Kurzweil's speculative reasoning and predictions have been heavily debated and challenged. For example, Carl Zimmer in the article 'Can You Live Forever? Maybe Not—But You Can Have Fun Trying' in* Scientific American, *December 22, 2010, writes, 'Computer Scientists don't understand how the brain works. They think it's just a piece of hardware and that all we have to do is replicate it, write out our code and voilà!' "*

My kind of guy, Zimmer.

*"In* IEEE Spectrum, *John Horgan in his article 'The Consciousness Conundrum' says, 'Neuroscientists still do not understand at all how a brain… makes a conscious mind, the intangible entity that enables one to fall in love, find irony in a novel and appreciate the elegance of a design.' "*

Woo-hoo. My kind of guy that Horgan, too. Keep talking…

*"According to Dan Hurley in* Discover Magazine *(April, 2012), memories are stored in engrams that 'exist in vast webs of connections, not in a particular place but in distributed neural networks running through the brain.' "*

I'll trade you my dendrites for your engrams.

*"Enter young Sebastian Seung, a well-regarded computational neuroscientist from MIT who believes our identities lie in a pattern of connections between brain neurons that change slowly over time as we learn and grow. These connections are called connectomes."*

Well, finally. A rose by any other name…

*"'Without them, your uploaded self [uploaded self?] would not be able to store new memories or learn new skills.' At present, it's difficult to simulate all the molecules in the brain because our computational power is limited as well as 'the difficulty of obtaining information to begin to initialize the simulation.' However, computers have forced us to re-examine the issue of mechanism."*

Z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z.

*"Seung compares uploading to ascension to Heaven. 'Heaven is a really powerful computer.' "*

Now there's a new way to define it. So it exists? Technologically anyway? Heaven…?

*"Seung writes, 'Eventually these technologies will become so powerful that we will use them to know ourselves—and change ourselves for the better.' "*

Well, I say from his pen to God's ear, which should be easy enough to locate in Heaven. Humanity can certainly use the improvement. But if all of these scientists and futurists don't stop meddling, I wonder what happens to the concepts of nuance, choice, creativity, art, poetry, song, dance and, most importantly, of the possibility of divinity and the idea that we human beings might, in whole or in part, possess such a thing?

For myself, I plan to forget all of this as quickly as possible, which should be very soon. I happen to think this kind of silliness is the reason we have to die (aside from making room for newer people). I mean, would we really want to survive in a world that had become so completely unrecognizable…?

Until then, I'll settle for my MacBook Pro, a good bottle of wine and a good time while my dendrites, engrams and consciousness are still my own, while I can do more or less what I please, while I may still experience nature, love and joy on my terms, and, above all, not have to work after I'm dead.

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