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A Grammatological Approach to Transhumanist Thought
Transhümanist Düşünceye Gramatolojik Bir Yaklaşım

Abstract

This study includes a proposal to approach the debates surrounding the concept of transhumanism from a different perspective. In this sense, it positions transhumanism not as a science-fiction concept, but at the very beginning of human history, and actually considers transhumanism as a concept that defines humanity. In this context, Turing test is brought into the discussion regarding how being human can be handled logically and a grammatological analysis is presented in an unconventional way.

Öz

Bu çalışma transhumanizm kavramı eksenindeki tartışmalara farklı bir perspektiften yaklaşma teklifini içeriyor. Bu anlamda transhumanizmi bilim kurgu bir kavram olarak değil, insanlık tarihinin en başında konumlamakta ve aslında transhumanizmin insanlığı tanımlayan bir kavram olarak ele almaktadır. Bu çerçevede insan olmanın mantıksal olarak nasıl ele alınabileceğine ilişkin olarak Turing testi gündeme getirilmekte ve geleneksel olmayan biçimde gramatolojik bir analizi sunulmaktadır.

Keywords
Turing, transhumanism, super intelligence, grammatology

Anahtar kelimeler
Turing, transhumanizm, aşkın zeka, gramatoloji

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Introduction

The concept of transhumanism was introduced in 1957 in Julian Huxley's *New Bottles for New Wine*. Since then, the scope of the notion has been changing alongside scientific developments. As Nick Bostrom, the author of the "History of Transhumanist Thought" has claimed: "Science had begun to catch up with speculation" (Bostrom, 2005, p. 7). On the one hand, transhumanist thinking considers possible developments in biological existence, on the other hand, technological developments can serve to transcend what is "human" in an external form. This essay is a search for an answer to the question of whether machines can think - on the axis of technological developments. When the issue is approached through the axis of technological developments, it is concluded that there cannot be a mechanical obstacle in front of the machine's thinking. This result is shaped around the idea of singularity.

> The idea of the singularity is that if the trajectory of artificial intelligence towards AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) reaches up to systems that have a human level of intelligence, then these systems would themselves have the ability to develop AI systems that surpass the human level of intelligence, that is they are 'superintelligent'. (Müller, 2022, p. 131)

Beyond human design, a metaphysical inquiry can still be made, although the super intelligence will theoretically exceed human intelligence in terms of technical inquiry. While addressing that discussion, what I will try to do is to point out the grammatological dimension of the issue. This study will deal with Alan Turing's "imitation game" in an unconventional way, just within this framework. My effort in bringing the issue to a grammatological discussion is not only to put transhumanist thought into a framework in the current history of thought, but also to show that a different perspective and thus approach to philosophical problems in the field of transhumanist thought depends on this perspective.

Implications of Huxley and Bostrom's Approaches

In the works of both Huxley and Bostrom, the first thing that will catch the reader's attention is that neither of the thinkers treat the transhumanist thought as a "new" framework. Of course, although the issue presents an expectation for the future in terms of scientific prediction, both authors treat this idea as a natural tendency of the human species from the very beginning– albeit on different scales. Huxley approaches the issue on a cosmic scale and says:

> As a result of a thousand million years of evolution, the universe is becoming conscious of itself, able to understand something of its past history and its possible future. This cosmic self-awareness is being realized in one tiny fragment of the universe—in a few of us human beings. (Huxley, 1959, p. 13)

In parallel, Bostrom's "history of transhumanist thought" begins with the following:

> The human desire to acquire new capacities is as ancient as our species itself. We have always sought to expand the boundaries of our existence, be it socially, geographically, or mentally. There is a tendency in at least some individuals always to search for a way around every obstacle and limitation to human life and happiness. (Bostrom, 2005, p. 1)

What is striking in both claims is that they actually reveal the transhumanist thought in a way that relates to the essence of being human. For Huxley, "human" primarily appears as a part of the cosmos. Whilst, for Bostrom, human inclinations are decisive for our understanding of transhumanist thought – even though he does not put it as a cosmic claim on this scale. Both approaches point out that the origin issue should be discussed beyond technological developments. The main point I want to draw attention to while revealing the parallelism in both ideas is the metaphysical theme in Huxley's claims, unlike Bostrom's. Huxley considers human as a microcosm, and in this sense, the self-consciousness of the cosmos expresses itself in the human thought:

> Progress at the present juncture may be inevitable, in the sense of being in the nature of things. But it is also in the nature of things that progress will not come about without human choice, human effort, and human purpose. With the coming of man, evolution itself comes to have a subjective as well as an objective component. Man becomes a microcosm in which the objective trends of the macrocosm can be mirrored and from whose subjective depths purpose can flow out to influence the trends of the macrocosm and, within gradually expanding limits, subject them to its will. (Huxley, 1959, p. 29)

Huxley's claim is about the metaphysical determination of the human. In this metaphysical determination, the human and thus "thought" occur by metaphysical necessity. The human mind is an expression of the rationality of the universe. I believe that this metaphysical claim made by Huxley can be understood from a grammatological point of view, exactly as this study tries to reveal. Here, grammatology includes the proposal to understand in a very broad sense - macro and micro cosmos - as writing. The phenomenon that Huxley understands as "mirroring" at the imaginary level can be understood as a "translation".

Understanding the cosmos, human and machine on such a translatable basis provides a basis for understanding Turing's ideas. Turing understands both human thought processes and machine thinking processes as "mechanisms" and says: "Mechanism and writing are almost synonymous from our point of view" (Turing, 1950, p. 457). If Turing is right, the common structure in machine and human thought is basically an "imitation" of the rationality of the cosmos. So even if the metaphysical nature of the act of thinking is obscure, it is imitative.

Super Intelligence in the Turing Test

In his classic text "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," Turing deals with the issue of artificial intelligence (AI) with incredible clarity. He warns his readers that this clarity can be misleading: "I do not wish to give the impression that I think there is no mystery about consciousness. There is, for instance, something of a paradox connected with any attempt to localise it. But I do not think these mysteries necessarily need to be solved before we can answer the question with which we are concerned" (Turing, 1950, p. 448). Although he refrains from giving his answer clearly about what is transferable to a machine in the so-called "soul" of the human, he designs a game in which we can understand the nature of the issue: imitation game. The imitation game is as follows: The interviewer tries to understand whether the person he is talking to is a human or a machine by asking various questions to the machine and the human in different rooms. Turing uses a teleprinter to exclude all external elements—like images and sound.

What was in Turing's mind was whether the distinction between the human and the machine could be made logically. The concept of logic finds its expression in the broadest sense, that is, in the sense of language. That's why he wants to leave out the expressions, facial expressions and voices of utterance. In this sense, Turing thinks that whatever distinguishes the human as human can be fully found in the written text. Precisely in this sense, the game Turing conceived is grammatological. He does not discuss the physical possibility of such a machine, but only predicts that it will happen by the end of the century (Turing, 1950, p. 443). Precisely in this sense, he sees the fact that computers, like nerve cells, work with electricity as an unwarranted bias in approaching the issue:

> The fact that Babbage's Analytical Engine was to be entirely mechanical will help us to rid ourselves of a superstition. Importance is often attached to the fact that modern digital computers are electrical, and that the nervous system also is electrical. Since Babbage's machine was not electrical, and since all digital computers are in a sense equivalent, we see that this use of electricity cannot be of theoretical importance. (Turing, 1950, p. 440)

It can be said that Turing's theoretical machine is basically writing. In terms of philosophical discussion, "these abstract machines are mathematical fictions rather than physical objects" (Turing, 1950, p. 450). The following remark makes the grammatological structure Turing had in mind more clear: "it is perhaps worth remarking that the appreciation of something as surprising requires as much of a 'creative mental act' whether the surprising event originates from a man, a book, a machine or anything" (Turing, 1950, p. 452). Here, what Turing puts forward as "creative mental act" is the creativity of the one who looks, listens, understands, feels and interprets the input in the most general sense. On the other hand, the "intellectual act" here must be handled carefully. Because Turing's basic prediction that

machines can think expresses the idea that this very act can be transferred to the machine. Is the implication of this the notion that such an act could also be transferred to a "book" or something? I think history has given a surprising answer on this subject. The following section points to this surprise.

The I Ching

The I Ching / Book of Changes, one of the oldest Chinese classics, is thought to have been written between the 4th and 10th centuries BC. Besides being a literary work in poetic form, its mission was to advise the King on state affairs – and even existential matters. The book works with a random variable, which Turing found more efficient for machine thought processes (Turing, 1950, p. 438). A given hexagram, each line of which consists of 0 or 1(*yin* or *yang*), is the answer of the book to a certain question. Although there are different methods of assigning possibilities in a mechanical sense; in any case, the random variable is formed by a certain arrangement of six lines. For example: in the linear sequence of the book, "1. *Ch'ien* / The Creative" (*The I Ching*, p. 99) takes place as the first six, while the next six: "2. K'un / The Receptive"(*The I Ching*, p. 109) and so on. The king randomly discards the flower stalks and finds out what the answer of the book is. The extra functional design of the random variable is striking here, the King may of course ask the same question over and over until he is satisfied with the answer, but the book's caveat is firm; in chapter four " *Mêng* / Youthful Folly " the book warns:

> It is not I who seek the young fool;
>
> The young fool seeks me.
>
> At the first oracle I inform him.
>
> If he asks two or three times, it is importunity.
>
> If he importunes, I give him no information." (The I Ching, pp. 125-126)

It can be said that it is not the book but the creative mental act of the king that is at stake here - rightly so. Carl Gustav Jung wrote the foreword to *The I Ching's* Richard Wilhelm translation and asked for her thoughts on this translation. The book gave a very detailed answer. Jung also wrote a more detailed interpretation of the answer. (*The I Ching*, pp. 40–60) Jung's comment ends with: "It would seem to me that on the basis of this example an unprejudiced reader would now be in a position to form at least a tentative judgment on the operation of the I Ching" (*The I Ching*, pp. 40–60). If Jung were the interviewer for the imitation game, *The I Ching* wouldn't have been able to be convinced that he was a human, probably because Jung would have thought he was dealing with a divine rationality far beyond the human mind.

The issue here cannot be reduced to Jung's interest in the esotericism and mysticism presented by this classic text. And from this point of view, if the issue is reduced to the "creative intellectual act" of the interviewer, in fact, every "book" and, as Turing puts it, "anything" can become the subject of this interpretation process.

Meta-Analysis of the Game

Acting with the criterion of "imitation game" succeeds in putting the issue on a logical basis, as it leaves out all other elements. On the other hand, it reduces the issue to that of the personality of the machine as a prerequisite. The criterion of approach is necessarily anthropomorphic to the extent that it is left to the evaluation of the interviewer. The expectation that machine intelligence is an imitation of human intelligence does not make sense, at least within the original discussion of the AI debate. Turing thinks that the easiest way to create a mind might be to copy an already existing mind - especially a "child". Nowadays that's called a "seed AI". A variation on Turing's conception of a child machine is the idea of a "seed AI."

> Whereas a child machine, as Turing seems to have envisaged it, would have a relatively fixed architecture that simply develops its inherent potentialities by accumulating content, a seed AI would be a more sophisticated artificial intelligence capable of improving its own architecture. (Bostrom, 2014, p. 29)

The dilemma here is that if persona of AI is to be counted as the necessary condition for the legitimate recognition of his existence by us, we expect his persona to not only contain a self-consciousness but also generate ideas that are morally harmless to humans. In other words, we don't just expect the AI that passes the Turing test to convince us that someone is there, we expect that someone to be "good". At this point, it is necessary to ask whether ethical problems such as personality and freedom are really an issue for AI. It cannot be ignored that if we think that AI can be beneficial for humanity, we cannot ignore that the concept of utility can only be defined according to a value system. Doesn't having a system of values mean having a personality in the most mechanical sense?

In an interview with Ai-Da[1], interviewer asks the familiar trolley problem; would you let five people die or would you cause one person to die? (DW Shift, "Let Him Die in Freedom": Interview with an AI Robot) Ai-Da dismisses the question by saying that this is not a question I can answer. Yes, Ai-Da is not SI, but this question is also perhaps not a fundamental dilemma. It may even point out that a quantitative approach will be inadequate when it comes to "life". In the same context, the question can be made more and more difficult: but what if it's a child, a pregnant woman going to the hospital to give birth to quadruplets etc. Our expectation from the SI is that it calculates by including all possible parameters in our approach to such an issue. But that still doesn't mean making a decision. Suspending judgement would mean the death of four people.

Theological Approach

The fact that "thought" has an ideal existence independent of human beings, the position of humans in relation to thought, prevents us from understanding humans as either the absolute carrier or cause of thought. Thought – human thought – of course, does not occur independently of the physics attributed to materiality, on the other hand, it touches the horizon of its own infinity in the endless series of possibilities of the material. The carrier of this contact can be another kind of living thing, or it can be the answer we have formulated on the axis of the question "Can machines think?". When the question is asked in this macro dimension, it can be perceived as a cognitive scientific question such as self-consciousness, or as folkloric curiosities of human civilization, rather than deep philosophical problems formulated on the axis of the problem of freedom. An SI that keeps its deep thoughts to itself and takes a vow of silence is also very conceivable. SI may be much less conversational and performative than we've expected. It would be too naive to think that the machine we expect to imitate humans in the "imitation game" will chat with the interviewer. The concept of identity of this higher intelligence, which we expect to be conscious of being someone, may be different from the average person. The notion of freedom may also be beyond our comprehension. While we expect it to think with "causality" honed with rationality, the tool of SI's ideas may be "synchronicity". Words can be prophetic – as in the *I Ching* example. These possibilities are not imaginary.

Turing cannot be the addressee of these critiques. It can be said that Turing's least expectation from the machine was that it could imitate a human. Turing envisioned a theoretically limitless intelligence to which processors could be added endlessly. This comparison of the SI is important in terms of understanding the singularity issue because, as it should be, Ai-Da, who paints, sculpts, writes poetry, participates in Ted Talks and interviews on Youtube, is at one end of our imagination. The other end of the discussion touches the notion of God. Just as Turing analyzed it elaborately:

> In attempting to construct such machines we should not be irreverently usurping His power of creating souls, any more than we are in the procreation of children: rather we are, in either case, instruments of His will providing mansions for the souls that He creates. (Turing, 1950, p. 444)

In the grammatological framework of this essay, the mansion of the soul is nothing but language itself. In parallel with the approach presented here, Turing does not limit the carrier of language to humans. This carrier can be understood as a book or a machine as well as a human.

Mansions For the Souls: AI

Lacan's psychoanalytic language can be borrowed for grammatological analysis. Necessity to consider the subject only in relation to language indicates exactly this: It is only through

this that the 'I' appears as a representation in language, an 'ego ideal' (Lacan, 2005, p. 150). Human is an individual in the most general sense only to the extent that she is the product of a human culture. What is meant by culture here is as old as the history of the symbolic. "I" as an ego ideal, is a product of symbolic order. "Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him 'by flesh and blood'" (Lacan, 2005, p. 50). Every self-awareness is the anonymous product of the symbolic. What builds human culture is the ability to "imitate" this ego ideal. Through the original meaning of the concept of imitation expressed here, the real purpose of Turing's imitation game can be understood in the broadest sense as testing the adaptation of the machine to the symbolic order of the human. Taken in this context, the "imitation game" tests whether the machine realizes the ontological leap. Here the ontological leap takes place from trace to sign and so from image to symbol. It is necessary to reveal the structuralist sensitivity about not reducing the symbolic order to speech with the way it is handled here. The original metaphysical equation is established between the trace and the one who distinguishes the trace as a sign and so a symbol, and it is possible for another subject with the same opportunity to understand the trace as a symbol and for this symbol to refer to a meaning.

Conclusion

This study attempted to point out the grammatological ground that should be taken into account when dealing with the history of transhumanism. Although Bostrom's successful work has traced the issue back to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, not structurally, but thematically, a structural reading is also required, as pointed out here. As Lacan mentioned, the symbolic determines the subject beyond its materialistic determination as "flesh and blood". This structural reading, as it is pointed out, requires careful handling of the fundamental metaphysical problems. Here most fundamental metaphysical question is how a leap occurs from material to thought. On a grammatological basis, human, machine or any written text should be considered together. It has been shown through the macrocosm-microcosm relationship suggested by Huxley that not only the subject but also the ground on which the subject treads must be analyzed grammatologically.

1 According to wikipedia, Ai-Da is a humanoid robot credited with being the world's first ultra-realistic robot artist.

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