

THE TECHNICAL BOOK OF JOB: Reading Job from a Transhumanist Perspective

Stipe Odak

Introduction — Reading that never begins and never ends

In this paper we will contrast the book of Job with some prominent ideas of the trans-humanism and post-humanism. The article starts with an argument that technology deeply influences human development and self-understanding. The rise of new information-technologies opened for the first time a possibility to imagine the future in which all human limits will be overcome. The main limit in this sense is the limit of a human body. Therefore, trans-human and post-human philosophies envision the state of existence in which all human limitations, such as limitations of knowledge, potency, and place will be successfully removed. It does not surprise us that these utopian premises resemble religious eschatological narratives, describing the post-humans state in terms that were traditionally prerogatives of God — omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. This post-human state can be seen as a project of a perfect system, an informatics-utopia. However, unlike religious eschatological narratives, this utopian originates from within the system. Therefore, the basic outline of the trans/post-human project would be to define the system with its limits, and then to enter the state of beatitude by overcoming them once forever. Perceived this way, trans/post-humanist project is deeply an eschatological project.

However, we will try to prove that there are many ideological contradictions hidden behind this techno-utopian agenda. We will base our criticism on the re-reading of the book of Job against some challenges of trans/post-humanism. The sole nature of reading uncovers the contingent nature of human state. The reading can be endless precisely because humans are not able to conceptualize the reality in an unequivocal way. Reading (and rereading) rises as a product of human need for actualization, from the belief that there is some important message in the text and textuality that cannot be articulated once for all. It is essential to realize that the possibility of reading is, at the same time, the possibility of identity and subjectivity. A reading is always a process of recontextualization of both a text and an identity. In other words, text without its receptive community ceases to exist. At the same time, read-

ers confront their status with the text in order to find some meaningful answers in it. Various schools of criticism, different theories of texts, they altogether dawn on the necessity to reclaim the relevance of the text for their own context. Perceived that way, an interpretation becomes a struggle for an identity, monopolized and endangered by the mainstream meta-narratives. One who can read can read *for* oneself and *about* oneself. It is not a historical coincidence that the reading has always been the main axle of political struggles.

At the outset, it is important to confess the subversive character of this very act of reading. As we have already hinted, reading is trans/post-human subversion. This can be the case because they are somehow internally incompatible with reading. If trans/post-humanism eventually comes into force, then we will probably stop reading forever. An idea of connection of all consciousness into one singular reality entails the elimination of interpretation, an ultimate zero-degree of thought. The first *universal thought of all-conscious-beings* would also be their last thought, because every particularity would immediately disappear in an imposed consensus. The consensus would in that instance be complete and eternal.

In this article, we will endeavor to give a recontextualized theological interpretation of both, the biblical text and the technological context. That is, we will try to offer a technological reading of the book of Job, but also a “Jobian” reading of the technological context. Our aim is to shed a new light on the contemporary debates via dialogical confrontation in which biblical text and transhumanism participate as interlocutors.

Firstly, we will offer a short overview of technological challenges, paying an attention to cultural genesis of contemporary mentalities. Due to the limits of discussion, our scope will necessarily be limited. We will proceed then on methodological background of our inquiry and, finally, we will try to give a fresh reading of the book of Job.

1. *Mind Children*

The surgeon's hand sinks a fraction of a millimeter deeper into your brain, instantly compensating its measurements and signals for the changed position. The process is repeated for the next layer, and soon a second simulation resides in the computer, communicating with the first and with the remaining brain tissue. Layer after layer the brain is simulated, then excavated. Eventually your skull is empty, and the surgeon's hand rests deep in your brainstem. Though you have not lost consciousness, or even your train of thought, your mind has been removed from the brain and transferred to a machine.

Hans Moravec — *Mind Children*

A desire to transcend limits that are characteristic for the human state has always been a *topos* of religious, philosophical and technological imagination. Ancient stories of human–animal hybrids, artificial creatures or technologically enhanced individuals have deeply influenced the imagination of the Western culture. Clark even claims that *humans* have always been *cyborgs* in some degree. This is to say that humans have always lived in some hybrid co-existence with technology, using technology to expand their physical and mental activities.¹ Thanks to technology, human agents have never been completely confined to the limits of their physical body. The possibility to transcend the time and space by means of writing, the expansion of human knowledge through archives and libraries, etc. — all these cultural developments can serve as examples of a growing symbiosis between humans and technology. Nevertheless, it is important to note that technology does not occupy a merely instrumental position in the process of human development. It would be much more correct to say that technology played (and still plays) a constitutional role in human self–understanding. Sheehan gives an illustration for this case:

When Plato looked for a metaphor to describe the way the universe functions, he spoke of a “spindle of necessity” with which the fates spin human destiny into the world. In the *Timaeus*, he compared the creator of the universe to a carpenter and a potter. Only in the seventeenth century, with the rise of a new cosmology, did the most important technological metaphors become mechanical rather than manual. The clock replaced the carpenter's lathe or the potter's wheel as a way of understanding how the universe operated. Like a clock, the universe was thought to be at once complex and comprehensible, a mechanism set in motion by a divine

1 Andy Clark, *Natural-born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

maker who, quite unlike the potter at his wheel, gave his creation the power to operate without his constant supervision.²

Observing technological and philosophical development side by side, we can clearly see how the idea of human uniqueness slowly declined, especially in light of mechanical similarity between all “mechanical” objects. Throughout the 17th and 18th century, steam-engine became a dominant conceptual metaphor for understanding of human physiology — La Mettrie’s book *L’Homme machine*, published in 1747, serves as a paradigmatic example. Nevertheless, human uniqueness was still retained, mostly because of human intellectual abilities which could not be matched by any technological product. This conviction started to erode in the 20th century. The groundbreaking book of Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or the Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1949), eventually erased the essential boundary between humans, animals and machines, reducing all them to systems of communication and control.³ Rapid development of information technologies reinforced this process of metaphorical transformation. It didn’t take long before societies started to understand human beings in terms of bodily *hardware*, and mental *software*. A resurrected tendency to overcome the limits of human state appeared as a logical step forward.

It is interesting to note that the limits of humankind have typically been identified with the limits of human body. Topological constraints of *being-human* were confronted with a new utopian space — the space of information. Interestingly enough, an *information*, conceived as a “pure” and decontextualized sequence of signals, offered an intellectual basis for the visions of “disembodied embodiment.” Wiener in early 60’s famously said that “it is conceptually possible for a human being to be sent over a telegraph line.”⁴ That specific standpoint is grounded in a basic cybernetic principle of division between information and meaning. As opposed to meaning, information is a sequence of signals that stays stable and independent of context, i.e. it can be preserved intact in any context. Understood that way, information gets an almost religious status, a charisma of pure essence freed from every accidental meaning. The informatics revolution suddenly promised an era of a pure digital existence, well-articulated in Marshall McLuhan’s vision of global consciousness: “If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of

2 James J. Sheehan and Morton Sosna, *The Boundaries of Humanity: Humans, Animals, Machines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 135.

3 Ibid., 136–38.; Noreen L. Herzfeld, “Cybernetics”, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 3:2111.

4 Norbert Wiener, *God and Golem, Inc.: A comment on certain points where cybernetics impinges on religion* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990), 36.

man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?"⁵ Many theorists of post-human future located their imaginative vision in the context of technological developments which will transcend the traditional limits of body (and bodily constrained intellect). Hans Moravec, Ray Kurzweil, Eric Drexler, and Marvin Minsky are only some among the battalions of adherents of the project of post-humanity. Even though their visions significantly vary, aforementioned conceptual metaphors and unquestionable trust in technology form their common denominator.⁶

Generally speaking, future development of humankind is envisioned in two phases: 1) phase of trans-humanism, when human abilities will be enhanced by technology and 2) post-human phase of universal consciousness.⁷ Katherine Hayles, in her book *How We Became Posthuman*, summarizes four characteristic post-human assumptions. First, information patterns are the essential bearers of nature of being, where biological substrate is seen merely as a secondary historical accident. Second, consciousness is regarded as an evolutionary epiphenomenon. Third, the body is seen simply as a prosthesis we learn to use and manipulate. Consequently, it can be replaced or extended. Finally, the posthumanism views the human being as completely compatible with intelligent machines.⁸ In addition, it might be helpful to highlight that behind every of these assumption there is a more fundamental postulate that humankind (by means of technology) will be able to clearly define all laws and principles of human-state. The credo of post-humanism can be articulated in the following words: *conditio humana* can be analyzed and defined, and — once analyzed and defined — it can be overcome. It does not surprise us that this belief has a clear parallel in religious reasoning. In monotheistic traditions, knowledge of everything, including the knowledge of the human as such, is a prerogative of God. Consequently, only God has a true knowledge and intelligence which penetrates the essence of all creation. Therefore, it

5 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, NY: The New American Library, 1964), 36.

6 A very influential theory is Moore's law which claims that the development of technology grows exponentially.

7 Jeffrey P. Bishop, "Transhumanism, Metaphysics, and the Posthuman God", *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 35, no. 6 (2010): 700–20, 701; *Transhumanist Declaration* (2009), <http://humanityplus.org/learn/transhumanist-declaration/> (accessed January 6, 2012); Robert Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 140.

8 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2–3.

does not surprise us that many post-human theorists operate with some kind of eschatological vocabulary of final unity. Kurzweil's concept of "Singularity" serves as a clear example of eschatological narrative clothed in technological vocabulary.⁹

1.1 Contradictions of the "next phase"

As we could see, transhumanism relies heavily on a negative attitude towards body and towards the limits of human state. Yet, in its philosophy and application it bears numerous unresolved "human" problems. The greatest of them all is the sole notion of limit. Even if we accept the presumption that one day we will be able to translate *all* our knowledge into its digital counterparts, the question still remains: How can we know what constitutes "all"? The old myth of Oedipus Rex can serve us as a metaphor of the circularity of knowledge. When sphinx posed a riddle to Oedipus, he has given a solution and freed a city. However, the solution — "a man" — is even a greater puzzle than an initial question. An idea of X being "translated into" Y rests upon the presumption of possibility to define X and Y, and the relationship between them. The realization of essence is, however, never obvious. When we deal with the question of the definition of a human person, this problem becomes very tangible. The ideology of post-humanism eliminates the possibility that a system cannot be comprehensively defined from within the system. In Platonist view, the theory of self-replication that leads to self-transcendence would be comparable to the genesis of art. It is stated that art (as an imitation of reality) is not able to create a reality higher than the Reality. Such a quest is always a mere replication of a replica. The platonic Truth and Good exist only in the realm of ideas that should be contemplated, not replicated. Post-humanism, hence, is comparable to the illusion that a digital retouching of photography can create a *more real* reality. In its basis, post-human philosophy proposes that the one final interpretation of everything is possible. Nevertheless, it never offers any strong grounds for this conviction. It is human's limited nature that must be taken seriously in any human and, consequently, post-human philosophy. Montaigne emphasized this fact in the notion that "we self-conscious beings are always both *what we are* and *what we are not* — be-

9 "Our civilization will then expand outward, turning all the dumb matter and energy we encounter into sublimely intelligent — transcendent — matter and energy. So in a sense, we can say that the Singularity will ultimately infuse the energy with spirit." Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*; Frank Tipler operates with a similar concept of "omega point" which is a compression of all information that ever existed; cf. David B. Hart, "The Anti-Theology of the Body", *The New Atlantis* 3, no. 2 (2005): 65–73, 70.

cause in formulating what we are to ourselves, we are also the formulator and as such not formulated in the formulation.”¹⁰

2. *Human, all too human ... — Putting Job in a transhumanist perspective*

The book of Job, more than any other biblical book, describes the difficulties of the human state that trans-humanism wants to supersede. Job is a perfect human-agent, deprived of a control over his own conditions, and subjected to unpredictable external influences. Opening chapters of the book (Job 1–2) set the scene for the later sequence of the events. Already at the outset, narrative structure defines two epistemological levels. Higher level of heavenly events, where dialogue between JHWH and God’s sons (בְּנֵי הָעֲלִיִּים Job 2:1 WTT) happens, is made known only to a reader. Job, however, is placed in the position of cognitive deprivation. The whole subsequent narration resonates that dissonance in perception. It is interesting to note that a reader occupies a privileged position of an observer, just one level below the omniscient God. In other words, a reader is located in an interesting position of a trans-human spectator (the reader knows more than a human would normally know), whose involvement into the text will require him to “fall” from heaven in order to empathize with Job.

This situation of different levels of knowledge evokes the creation narrative from the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. Intriguingly, the genesis of the universe is described in linguistic terms. Created through the God’s word, all reality has been called into existence in goodness. (cf. Gen 1:4) In a language of a Creator there is no potentiality — every word becomes an act. If we read that fact in terms of structuralist theory, we could say that God’s language is not interpretative, but purely performative. God’s knowledge is, at the same time, the expression of the essence and existence of any created object. Human knowledge, on the other hand, is derived knowledge. Human beings can truly *know*, only by virtue of their relationship with God. In other words, knowledge of the world is created both on the horizontal axis of beings placed within the network of creation, but also on the vertical axis of beings united with the Creator who only possess the complete and comprehensive knowledge.

The whole danger of the serpent’s narrative lies in the attempt to exclude the vertical axis of knowledge. The sentence “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,

10 Cf. Fred Baumann, “Humanism and Transhumanism”, *The New Atlantis* 8, no. 3 (2010): 68–82, 82.

knowing good and evil.” (Gen 3:4–5 NRS), promises the achievement of the full knowledge already at the horizontal level of creations. The very phrase “knowing good and evil” — יָדָעַי טוֹב וָרָע (Gen 3:5 WTT) — implies a superordinate interpretative position, it promises the transcendence of human limitations. Knowledge of good, as we have seen earlier, is a privilege of God. At the same time, the phrase “good and evil” functions as an idiom of universality (c.f. Num 24:13; 2Sam 13:22), it encompasses the reality as whole.¹¹ This suggests that the attempt to gain the knowledge of “good and evil” is not only an endeavor to reach the perfection of moral reasoning. It is strive to reach a fullness of knowledge, to obtain control over reality as whole.

Creature, no matter how perfect, exists in a relation with all other particles of creation. Hence, the interrelation of creations entails their cognitive limitedness. A creation can never interpret all the rest of the reality precisely because it is embedded in the very reality that is yet to be interpreted. A linguistic parallel would be an attempt to rephrase the whole language only through the single word. An attempt to transcend, and get control over the whole creation also implies a destruction of creation, a beginning of a different order.

As we have already mentioned, the meaning and purpose of creation is a part of God’s knowledge. Human knowledge of good and evil, in that respect, is always a secondary knowledge. The book of Job reaffirms that fact. A human, no matter how righteous, can never reach the state of an unequivocal interpretation. Every attempt to do so ends up in an exile.

2.1 A Possible Transhumanist Interpretation of Job

Let us now try to imagine a possible trans-humanist interpretation of Job. From this perspective, Job would be all too human character. His situation is precisely defined with his limits — he is deprived of knowledge, he is physically endangered, and mostly confined to his bed. The place for his initiative is seemingly absent. From the structural viewpoint, the narrative of his suffering and restoration would be a structure of a comedy. Focusing on the irony of the book, Whedbee came up with this unusual thesis that completely reverted the traditional readings. He basis his interpretation on the crucial constructive elements of a comedy: “(1) its perception of incongruity and irony; and (2) its basic plot line that leads ultimately to the happiness of the hero and his restoration to a harmonious society.”¹² This statement is in line with Frye, who

11 *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2000), s.v. “tôb”.

12 J.W. Whedbee, “The Comedy of Job”, *Semeia* 7 (1977): 1–39.

claimed that: “Comedy has a U-shaped plot, with the action sinking into deep and often potentially tragic complications, and then suddenly turning upward into a happy ending.”¹³ From trans-humanist perspective, the “tragic comedy” of Job is based on the inability of the character to overcome his ignorance that makes him just a puppet in a broader show. If we would really accept this interpretation, then the book of Job would be very much alike a video-game, where the end is always a “restart” of the initial position. Technically speaking, Job would be just a blind participant in the virtual reality, permanently unaware of its matrix. Perceived this way, the end of the book is comic (in a very dark sense), rather than being genuinely happy. However, if Job is “all too human” character, then the trans-humanist ideal would be Satan, who is described as a free agent that provokes reactions even from God. Satan, trans-humanist might argue, has overcome his position of dependence and became a part of “corporate personality” of God.¹⁴ Very similarly, the trans-humanist’s dream would be to reach a state of final singularity, to become the “sons of God,” who are “an embodiment of God’s accumulated wisdom, continuing self-deliberation, and multifarious acts of decision.”¹⁵

2.2 Job the Destructor — A Reverse Conclusion

The transhumanist reading we have just proposed is, in a way, a construct with a mechanism of self-destruction. In this final chapter, we will try to challenge it through the reverse reading of the book of Job. In a sense, we will try to develop a “Jobian” reading of the technological trans-humanist context that discloses its ideological elements. We have already mentioned that trans-humanism (post-humanism) is characterized by a tendency to comprehensively define the living system and overcome its limits. This epistemological ideal can be compared to the successful bite from the “Tree of knowledge”, which would result in the knowledge of the whole system within the system, producing the state of the unequivocal interpretation, the blissfulness of singularity. However, the problem that we have here is the old problem of every totalitarian ideology; and it is precisely a presupposition that the idea of the perfect future society justifies all steps that are to be made in order to achieve it. The case should be the opposite, i.e. all the steps that we make should be justified and critically revalued against the desired future

13 Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 25.

14 cf. J. W. Rogerson, “The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-examination,” *JTS* 21 (1970): 1–16.

15 David J. A. Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary 17 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 21.

aim. As soon as a narrative eliminates its internal critical mechanisms, it tends to turn itself to a dangerous close narrative that can lead to destruction of everything that is different.

Three Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, are precise examples of a closed narrative. They approach Job with a definitive model of the universe, articulated in the idea of a retributive justice. In a consequence, this way of reasoning only reduces the plurality of Job's situation to a generalized image of "universally human".¹⁶ For them, pain cannot have any positive function. It is interpreted in a very technical, trans-human way, as a virus that attacks system by system (his family, his property, his social status). Finally, even his core system (his life) is endangered. In other words, pain is seen as a punishment that leads towards complete destruction. Even Job's wife figures prominently in this attack on Job: "His wife said to him, 'Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!'" (Job 2.9) This very negative appraisal of Job's situation suggests that neither she does see any sense in his "tragi-comic" struggle. Nevertheless, in a final phase of the exposition, their position has been discarded as an invalid. (Job 42:7–9)

Surprisingly enough, Job who is constantly seen as a man of limit, is the only character that succeeds to overcome the limits of closed and poisonous "knowledge" of retributive justice. We could ironically say that only Job ends up being genuinely trans-human. It goes without saying that his type of *trans-cendence* is of a different kind. Job via his persistence and reliance on God becomes a participant in an eschatological reality, the reality that transcends the limited perception of human state. He is a part of a process that Ted Peters designated as a "retroactive ontology", which means that we, our existence, and — ultimately — the whole creation is determined not from our past but from our future. This implies that it is future that defines the past, i.e. the processuality is measured against finality.¹⁷ Notwithstanding the positions of people around him, the pain in Job's case does not have only a negative function. It is a mechanism of growth and positive learning, encapsulated in the ancient Greek adage *pathemata mathemata* (knowledge comes through suffering).

Recuperation of limitedness in the Book of Job happens through the act of melting human horizons with a God's perspective. Only as a participant in God's vision, which supersedes everything temporal, Job can revive the right interpretation. It is through his preserving of the vertical axis of knowledge that he manages to restore his horizontal axis of right interpretation. And he is indeed a part of a redemptive future that appears as a beatific vision: "For I

16 Cf. Lev Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), 71.

17 Ted Peters, *Anticipating Omega: Science, Faith, and Our Ultimate Future*, Religion, theology, and natural science, vol. 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 12.

know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” (Job 19:25–27 NRS). It is God’s act that transforms Job from a comic into a cosmic man.

Conclusion

The book of Job illustrates many important characteristics of the human condition. One of them is limitedness of the human knowledge. As the narrative structure of the book suggests, human agents operate within the context of the created order. Placed within the network of creation, human beings are not independent signifiers of the universe. Therefore, every attempt to reach the state of the “perfect knowledge” brings a danger of ideological manipulation. Drawing a parallel with the book of Genesis, two axes of knowledge have been highlighted: the horizontal one (that pertains to the network of creation), and the vertical one (that relates to Creator or the transcendent in general). Both of them are indispensable and incommensurable with regard to humans. Therefore an attempt to reduce the transcendental dimension of knowledge to the horizontal axis of prediction is a characteristic of totalitarian ideology. The same can be applied to the trans-human and post-human ideologies. The transcendental dimension of knowledge signifies something unreachable; it is a symbolic representation of the principle of uncertainty, of something that we as humans do know, and cannot know. In monotheistic religion, this knowledge is primarily related to God. The book of Job clearly illustrates the importance of this dimension. At the end of the story, there is no final resolution in the form of an explanation. On the contrary, the end brings a long list of questions that are there to show the gaps in human knowledge. The only possible answer on every question is: “I do not know.” Consequentially, it is only God who truly knows. The book of Job points towards the danger in every ideology that claims to have the true knowledge of a human being (or that is convinced in eventual achievement of such knowledge). In that sense, the book of Job can be used as a creative criticism of the trans-human and post-human philosophies that are embedded in the conviction that such finite models of a human will be possible one day with the help of technology.