

The Next Age Assembly – Homo Deus

When people are asked to describe a belief system, they tend to think of religions, but arguably the most powerful belief system in the UK today is not Christianity or Islam, but liberalism. Liberalism and its values define our age - it guides the beliefs by which many people organise their lives in this country. Freedoms of conscience, speech, religion and choice are founded upon it. Most of our institutions are shaped by it, such as the systems of law, democracy, education, even capitalism. It is founded upon three important assumptions:

- The first is that we are each of us assumed to have a single essence which cannot be divided into any parts or subsystems. True, this inner core is wrapped in many outer layers. But if I make the effort to peel these external crusts, I will find deep within myself a clear and single inner voice, which is my authentic self.
- The second assumption is that my authentic self is completely free.
- The third is that, because of the first two assumptions, each of us knows things about ourselves that nobody else can discover. Since only I have access to my inner space of freedom, only I can hear the whispers of my authentic self. This is why liberalism grants the individual so much authority. I cannot trust anyone else to make choices for me, because no one else can know who I really am, how I feel and what I want. This is why (under liberalism) the voter knows best, the customer is always right and beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

However, all three of these liberal assumptions have been all but demolished by recent developments in thinking.

Here I want to introduce an interesting word to help us with the next stage in the argument - algorithm. An informal definition could be "a set of rules that precisely defines a sequence of operations" which would include all computer programs. It is a much older word than you might think – in part it comes from the name of Muḥammad ibn Mūsā Al-Khwārizmī, a 9th century Persian mathematician - one of the fathers of algebra. In English, the word algorithm was first used in about 1230 and then by Chaucer in 1391.

It is a mathematical concept, but increasingly humans and other organisms are also seen as algorithms, expressions of code – in our case written in DNA. Understanding us as algorithms undermines the three rules of liberalism.

- It means humans are not individuals - they are an assemblage of many different algorithms lacking a single inner voice or a single self.
- Secondly the algorithms constituting a human are not free. They are shaped by genes and environmental pressures and take decisions either deterministically or randomly, but not freely.
- It follows that an external algorithm could theoretically know me much better than I can ever know myself. An algorithm that monitors each of the systems that comprise my body and my brain could know exactly who I am, how I feel and what I want.

But is this right? Are we no more than algorithms, which can perhaps be best understood not by other people, but by other algorithms? A part of me rejects the idea out of hand – but am I right to do so? It turns out I am wrong.

A recent survey commissioned by Facebook shows that already today the Facebook algorithm is a better judge of human personalities and dispositions even than those people's friends, parents, husbands and wives.

The study was huge – it was conducted on 86,222 volunteers who have a Facebook account and who completed a detailed personality questionnaire. The Facebook algorithm predicted the volunteers' answers based on monitoring their Facebook Likes - which webpages, images and clips they attach the Like button. The more Likes, the more accurate the predictions. The algorithm's predictions were compared with those of work colleagues, friends, family members and spouses. Amazingly, the Facebook algorithm needed a set of only 10 Likes in order to outperform the predictions of work colleagues.

It needed 70 Likes to outperform friends, 150 Likes to outperform family members and 300 Likes to outperform husbands and wives. In other words, if any of you in this Hall happen to have clicked Like more than 300 times on your Facebook account, the Facebook algorithm can already predict your opinions and desires better than any other person in the world.

The research concluded with a prediction: 'people might abandon their own psychological judgements and rely on computers when making important life decisions, such as choosing activities, career paths, or even romantic partners. It is possible that such data driven decisions will improve people's lives.'

The same study implies that in the next US presidential elections Facebook could know not only the political opinions of tens of millions of Americans, but also who among them are the critical swing voters, and how those votes might be swung. Facebook could tell you that in Oklahoma the race between Republicans and Democrats is particularly close, Facebook could identify the tens of thousands of voters who still haven't made up their mind, and Facebook could determine what each candidate needs to say in order to tip the balance.

How does Facebook obtain this priceless political data? We provide it for free. And since Facebook knows better than you do how you would like to vote, and probably can work out better than you which politician would suit you best, why not cut out the middle man and have Facebook cast your vote for you? Why vote at all?

In the 21st-century our personal data is probably the most valuable resource most humans still have to offer, and we are giving it to the tech giants in exchange for free email services and funny videos. The power and influence that, in the past, belonged to an elite few in society was backed up by authoritarian, often religious, belief systems. When democracy and the rule of law replaced them, the new faith for the new age was liberalism, which placed so much store in the autonomous self.

Now we are perhaps embarking on yet another way of seeing ourselves and describing our connection with the world. This is a new age, which may require new religions and new ways of thinking about the world. The old ways will linger on, just as our age carries elements of the past, but will become increasingly unnecessary.

The future is unwritten, but the general direction of travel can be discerned. I hope to explore what this new age might bring in a future assembly – after all, if we are moving into a new age and a new way of thinking, this is the age in which you will be the leaders and the decisions you make will shape it. That is, unless you let an algorithm do the thinking for you.