
Daniel Liechty
*Illinois State University*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Part of the Social Work Commons

**Recommended Citation**

Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol44/iss4/11

Kirk Schneider presents us here with another significant volume summarizing his perspective on an area of importance for theory, policy and practice alike, namely, the increasing merger of the human and mechanical spheres. Whereas not long ago it was quite simple to discern what was “human” and what were “tools” used by humans, we are fast entering a world in which this line of distinction is already considerably blurred. This blurring continues apace, as work in genetic engineering cross-pollinates with work in cognitive technology, nanotechnology and Artificial Intelligence (AI), even as increasing sectors of our job economy are made obsolete by robotics and mechanization. Furthermore, some of our most visionary minds point toward a “singularity” event in which the artificially intelligent artifacts of our own making move beyond the limitations of the human mind to become their own makers of the future.

Some of these visionaries, such as Stephen Hawking, Franklin Foer, and Elon Musk, warn us about the potential dangers inherent in the directions our technology may be moving. Our computerized machines now basically control almost everything people of our civilization depend upon for our continued survival, and we are already far down the road of linking these machines to one another. What might the results be if, at some point on the other side of the “singularity” event, our machines come to view large segments of the human species to be detrimental to their own well-being and improvement? Other of these visionaries, such as Ray Kurzweil and Mark Zuckerberg, scoff at such warnings, view them as a positive hindrance to technological progress, and proudly point toward the emerging “transhumanist” future their techno-wonders are creating, all the while suggesting that we might as well get onboard, because this future is inevitable anyway.

Having read Kirk Schneider’s previous books, such as *The Paradoxical Self* (1999), *The Psychology of Existence* (2006), *Recovery of Awe* (2009), and *The Polarized Mind* (2013), I half assumed as I
opened these pages that Schneider would come down firmly on the side of the naysayers. However, Schneider proves himself here to be much less predictable than this. As one who suffers himself from a longstanding physical condition, currently incurable but for which the “new medicine” may one day hold real hope, Schneider has pondered his way through the naysayers on the one side and the cheerleaders of technology on the other. This book contains his current thinking on the topic, and even a reflexive naysayer like me found plenty in these pages to reflect and cogitate upon—enough to cause me to change my mind on key issues.

There are many threads a reviewer could follow through this work. Perhaps the most intriguing is the relationship between transhumanism and what Schneider calls “adventure and awe.” Awe is a concept Schneider has pursued in previous books. In social science this concept is rooted in commentary at least as far back as Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), a book focused on the non-rational element in human affairs. Schneider’s work in existentialism and psychology stands firmly in this tradition. Schneider suggest that adventure and awe is “… key to the perpetuation of vibrant, evolving lives—and in combination with technological advances may bring marvels to our emerging repertoires” (p. 11). Adventure and awe are, in this reading, that which make us fully alive and fully human. Depression (here setting aside the biochemical definition) might be one way to conceive of the feeling from the inside of human life that has lost its sense of adventure and awe. Yet, while we can point to markers for what is meant as that sense of adventure and awe, it can never really be pinned down exhaustively with a scientifically valid definition. We know it when we see it; we certainly know it when we feel it from within. But exactly because it is the place of contact between human life and the irrational elements of human existence, it always eludes our attempts to wrestle it down to confinement within rational categories, whether the attempt be linguistic, biochemical, cognitive, mechanical or philosophical.

This is what separates Schneider’s approach from those of the naysayers. Schneider does not want to live in a world in which we simply cease to pursue scientific discovery. In fact, as illustrated in the passage above, not only does Schneider
recognize and respect the elements of scientific and technological pursuit in human life, he goes on to say in many places in this book that this pursuit itself is largely, for many people, integral to maintaining that very sense of adventure and awe. What concerns Schneider and makes the perspective presented in this book worthy of strong consideration is not scientific and technological pursuit itself, but rather the ‘spirit’ in which this quest in directed. Perhaps exactly because adventure and awe, as Schneider sees it, are integrally bound to the irrational element, they are too often simply discounted as irrelevant (at best) or viewed as directly opposed to the transhumanist conception of the human future, to be replaced by expedience and efficiency as ersatz goals for human society.

Schneider does not counter the move toward transhumanism, as currently exemplified in the extreme obeisance paid to STEM in education, to objectification of the body in medicine and of the brain in neuroscience, and the general devaluation of anything that cannot be digitized, with simple anti-technology diatribes. He sees each of these more as symptoms than as direct causes of the problems we face. What Schneider calls us to is something more on the line of a transcendent reawakening, a spiritual healing of the modern human soul. In a nutshell, he invites us to an understanding of adventure and awe, in all their glorious irrationality, as necessary complements to transhumanist trends, not in direct opposition to these trends. Significantly, Schneider presents this as an exercise itself in what he calls cross-cultural spirituality, and he draws directly on the experiences and methods of those disciplines that have endeavored over decades to bridge the gaps of understanding between large cultural divides.

The alternative, as Schneider sees it, is to remain locked in a state of a divided mind in relation to the rational and the irrational in human existence, with each side rejecting and closing itself off from the insights of the other. The features of the divided or polarized mind, especially that of an intolerance for ambiguity and permanently open-ended questions, were cogently explored by Schneider in his earlier book focusing, significantly, on understanding the thought patterns of fundamentals and terrorists in the modern world. Readers of this journal who easily would take this analysis in stride as applied to the mindset of religious
fundamentalists might be surprised to see this same analysis applied to leading edge advocates of transhumanist rationalism.

In summary, Schneider has produced a commendable work of passion, insight, advocacy and public vision on perhaps the most important social topic of our time. Furthermore, it comes in a very readable package of short, digestible chapters, ideally suited for discussion in classrooms, book groups, and other platforms of learning. Like the work of our best public intellectuals, it is a scholarly treatise in which the scholarship supports the message without interfering with or obscuring the topic at hand.

Daniel Liechty
Illinois State University


In this book, James Midgley attempts to shed light on three major questions. The first one is what comprises international social welfare. The discussion of social welfare is contextualized within a global era, in which social welfare is defined to cover three dimensions: meeting needs, managing problems, and maximizing opportunities. Global social welfare has its root in ancient thoughts about a one world perspective, dating back to the Greek philosopher Diogenes, who claimed himself a “citizen of the world.” Followers of Diogenes believed in the existence of natural law governing people of different cultures and languages.

The question remains debatable regarding which entity should have the authority to safeguard the rights that natural law entails. In history, competing schools of scholars have supported either a single political authority or a powerful theocratic figure. However, the most influential ideas come from the literal and social democratic views of cosmopolitanism that emphasize governing in the interests of citizens based on values of cooperation, equality and development. Such thoughts influence