

# IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

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## 1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - SUMMER '23

The 2023 Summer edition of *IRISH FREETHINKER* was published in May and dispatched by post to subscribers, and is otherwise available for purchase in shops.

The contents are as follows:

- **The Way I Have come To Think**
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The IFH website ([www.irishfreethinkers.com](http://www.irishfreethinkers.com)) continues to be developed and editions of *IRISH FREETHINKER* for the period before May-June 2020 and back to Autumn 2016 are gradually being put up on it, as eventually will be further backcopies of *IFH NEWS*. There is now also an online payment system on the website.

THE AUTUMN EDITION OF *IRISH FREETHINKER* WILL ISSUE IN AUGUST

(Editor: ifh.sde@gmail.com)

## 2. POST-ANTHROPOCENE HUMANISM

**Cultivating the 'third space' where nature, technology and human autonomy meet**

*Nathan Gardels, 'Noema' Editor-in-Chief*

"Humanism" is associated with the flourishing of science and the arts during the 15th and 16th century Renaissance when cultivation of the human essence in all its potential was elevated to centre stage, airing out the stultifying closet of the Middle Ages and reviving the reasoned sensibility of Greco-Roman antiquity. To this

day, the humanist outlook informs the open societies of the modern West in their material progress, cultural achievements and individual freedoms.

But what will become of human centrality as our species is knocked off its pedestal by machines more intelligent than we are and de-

centred by the humbling realization that survival depends on reducing our outsized footprint on this fragile planet?

The vise of these two developments is prompting a rethinking of what humanism might mean in the oncoming future.

### **The Client Is Absorbed Into The Tool**

The controversies of late over the perils and promise of generative AI have raised anew the philosophical question of where technological sovereignty ends and human autonomy begins. Will the super-intelligent capacities of the putative servant we have invented end up being our actual master?

“The fact is that the powers which seem to use and govern technology are in reality more or less unwittingly used and governed by it,”

Giorgio Agamben, the philosopher of biopolitics, observed in his presentation to the opening symposium of the Berggruen Institute Europe in Venice. “Both totalitarian and democratic regimes share the same incapability to govern technology, and both end up transforming themselves through the technologies they believed they were using for

their own purposes. Why does it seem so hard and even impossible to govern technology?” he asked.

Back in the middle of the 20th century, prominent thinkers already worried that human autonomy would get the short end of the stick. In his 1954 book, *The Technological Society*, the French theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul focused his critique not on any given technology, but on “technique” itself, which he defined as “ordered efficiency” - any complex of standardized means for realizing a predetermined outcome aimed at achieving “the one best result.” For Ellul, “all-embracing

technique is, in fact, the consciousness of the mechanized world.” The programmed monopolization of possibilities disables human agency by robbing it of any alternative competency.

Ellul’s worry pretty much approximates Yuval Noah Harari’s more recent concept of “dataism,” wherein the universe is configured as a standing reserve of “big data,” the value of which is determined by algorithms that process it for specified ends.

For fellow travellers of Ellul like Ivan Illich, technique colonizes the temper, rhythm and vernacular quality of convivial life through the social technology of institutions from mass education to the medical-industrial complex. In the latter, he foresaw the advent of “a brave new biocracy” that would deprive individuals

of “hygienic autonomy” and reduce them to depersonalized immune systems managed by experts “from womb to tomb.” This, too, anticipated the later thought of Harari, who suspects that most people will surrender privacy to the idol of health by welcoming constant supervision of their bodies by AI.

For Illich, technologies meant to enhance the well-being and freedom of humans shackle them in another way. As he put it in one penetrating quip, “the client is absorbed into the tool,” thus losing the ability to operate outside the system.

### **Anthropogenesis Is Technogenesis**

Agamben approaches the question he posed by positing that technology is not external to the human condition. Rather, it is technology that makes us human. Unlike other bodily creatures who adapt to their environment, humans alone have sought to free ourselves from necessity through the tools we have invented.



Agamben cites two thinkers on the subject that arrived at similar, but symmetrically opposed, views.

Lodewijk Bolk, the Dutch anatomist of the early 20th century, believed that humans invented tools to compensate for their weakness in the wild, notably the birth of offspring still in the prematuration stage of foetalization, where the baby is unable to provide for its own survival, something unparalleled among other mammalians.

For Bolk, this technological displacement inhibits the vital capacity for adaptation and portends dark times ahead. Well before climate calamity appeared on the horizon, he warned that “the more humanity progresses along the path of technics, the more it gets closer to the fatal point where progress means destruction. And the nature of man will not stop in front of the chasm.”

Agamben also cites the theory of Paul Alsberg, a German anthropologist who wrote *The Enigma of the Human* in the 1930s. He postulated that “the principle of animal evolution is Körperanpassung, body’s adaptation. The principle of human evolution is Körperausschaltung, the disabling of the body through artificial instruments.”

As Agamben reads Alsberg, “the deactivation of body is not at all a diminution, it is, quite the contrary, a liberation of the body from its natural limitations. The liberation from the body is at the same time a liberation of the body. Unlike the animal, man can be spiritually free, only because technics releases him from his body’s restraint. Deactivation and liberation of the body are one principle, which defines humanity and constitutes the material ground of man’s freedom.”

In this way of thinking, far from heading toward regressive destruction, “man is destined to reach through technology and culture his fulfilment and his triumph.”

Either way, as Agamben sees it, what Bolk

and Alsberg understood is that human becoming through technology is part and parcel of our evolution. In short, “anthropogenesis is technogenesis.”

### **The Human Threshold**

The exosomatic quality of inventing tools to escape necessity may be what distinguishes humans, but it does not eradicate within ourselves the endosomatic animal quality of adaptation to the environment.

“The fact is that what makes us human cannot be divided,” Agamben says. “Anthropo-technogenesis, the becoming human of man, is not an event once and for all achieved. It is a process always in progress, where humanity and animality cannot split. The animal, the living being, continues to exist in the human body, and can never be completely humanized.”

For Agamben, “the exosomatic element will tend to assert itself at the expense of the endosomatic. Technologies and culture will take the form of power and domination over nature and will necessarily end up substituting itself for nature.” But that is not the end of the story. “The human is not a substance that you can once and for all define, it is rather a threshold between endosomatic and exosomatic, between body and technics.”

At that threshold there is always a caesura, or breakpoint, that is undetermined. “Only at this threshold” concludes Agamben, “can ethics and politics find their right place, ethics and politics that will not simply seek to command and dominate nature through technology, but rather to master the relationship between nature and culture, body and technics. It is in this third space between human and non-human, body and technology, that we must locate our investigations.”

### **Katechon: The Withholding From Becoming**

In this perspective, the present-day climate

crisis marks a breakpoint point in Agamben's "third space" where the quest for freedom from necessity through technology runs up against its planetary limits.

At this caesura, the adaptive animal in humans is compelled to awaken in order to survive the consequences of technics. Peter Sloterdijk calls this awakening "co-immunism," the species instinct for survival, wherein humans rebalance their exosomatic genius with the imperatives of bodily existence on the Earth. For the German philosopher, that entails a shift from the "allotechnology" of previous eras conceived to dominate nature toward a conscious "anthropo-technology" which is co-creative in alignment with nature.

How species adaptation might play out for the freedom of the person is an open question for which there is no easy answer. In an interview with *Noema* toward the end of his life, James ("Gaia") Lovelock speculated on the eventuality of a "Novacene age" when disembodied superintelligence gains the upper hand as the biosphere deteriorates.

He mused that human civilization would then be organized like a hornet's nest where all

functions are ascribed by algorithms to reach ordered efficiency in the use of resources as the necessary condition for reducing its carbon footprint. Absent such an arrangement, not even transhumanists who upload their consciousness to the cloud could survive since machines cannot withstand the thermal threshold anymore than embodied minds.

An alternative to this scenario would be a post-Anthropocene humanism which Sloterdijk, following Martin Heidegger, calls "homo humanus" - a perpetually vigilant state of "caring" that mediates the relationship among humans, technique and nature to guard against the human becoming "inhuman, outside his essence."

To find a home in Agamben's third space, the governing principle that seems most appropriate for homo humanus is the ancient Greek concept of "katechon" - cognizant restraint, or "the withholding from becoming" that avoids the binding of being either by our tools or by necessity. Technogenic humans must learn to respect our embodiment, but not be imprisoned by it. And vice-versa.



### 3.

### BELIEF

*Pete Hutton*

Over 200 years ago, when science was not exactly highly developed, someone had the bright idea of treating a large range of diseases and other health problems with water - or rather, water with infinitesimally small amounts of additives. This gentleman, a trained German physician, was Samuel Hahnemann. You can perhaps guess what I am talking about: yes, homeopathy. And you probably know the principle behind it: the smaller the amount of added substances, the more effective they are. In fact it's nearly always the case that the water has been diluted so much that no molecules of the homeopathic substances remain in a bottle of the

medication. A typical homeopathic medicine is so diluted that it would require giving two billion doses per second to six billion people for four billion years to deliver a single molecule of the original material to any patient. But don't worry about that, say the homeopaths: the water 'memorises' the presence of the medicine's molecules, so their effect continues even when they are no longer there. And by the way, don't tell me about the placebo effect - that's a pretty pathetic explanation for homeopathy's efficacy, because you still have to believe in the stuff to benefit from the placebo effect.

I have a particular insight on the

homeopathy business, because some of my engineering students did internships with Boiron, which is the largest manufacturer in France of homeopathic products. I know about the processes, the profits, the sophistication of Boiron's business. The company makes billions from its little bottles of sophisticated water. (Unfortunately, homeopathic prescriptions are partially refunded by French medical insurance, so all of us, in a sense, have to pay for them in increased medical contributions.)

The point about my criticism of homeopathy is that we humans are incredibly eager to believe, to believe in anything that we want to believe in. We believe in belief. We are convinced that if we believe in something, our belief has more validity than fact. None of us are entirely rational. Even those of us who think we are rational are sometimes not. I think I am pretty rational, but when I physically attack the open cupboard door on which I have just banged my head - because I consider that it has attacked me - I am not being rational. I should rather be physically attacking myself, but I don't do this because I am already in enough pain from the cupboard door's attack on me - oops, there I go being irrational again.

Belief is actually vital for our survival: I can only cross a road because I believe that I won't get run over by a car. In other words, I make the assumption that it's safe, although that's not guaranteed. Every minute of the day we are making assumptions, without which we would not be able to live. If belief in something that is not certain is so essential, then how can one distinguish between ridiculous beliefs, reasonable beliefs and necessary beliefs? I find ridiculous the belief in homeopathy; I find reasonable the belief in antibiotics; I find

necessary the belief that eating a piece of toast for breakfast won't make me choke to death.

Is my differing view on homeopathy and antibiotics because of the evidence of science (plenty of evidence for antibiotics, almost none for homeopathy)? Or is it because I am on the strongly rational end of the rationality spectrum, while others are on the anti-rational end? Or am I just a sucker for scientific fact? - which is risky given that all science facts are actually beliefs, most of which beliefs correspond to the truth, but this can never be known absolutely.

Ley lines, healing crystals, premonitions, prayer, astrology, and a million other such beliefs - can one dismiss them all as forms what we call superstition? (Superstition: from Latin, meaning to stand still by something as if in amazement.) Do we in fact need a little



superstition, a few irrational beliefs - even if we know they are irrational? Clearly we do.

I have noticed a recent craze for 'rose quartz rollers',

which supposedly "help eliminate toxins under the eyes, and also help eliminate toxins all over your face, jawline, and neck to even out skin tone". If such a device is really effective, it certainly doesn't need to be rose quartz - but because of the nonsensically irrational belief in rose quartz being the particular stone you must use, large amounts of it are being removed from nature in acts of environmental destruction. This belief, one encouraged by commercial greed and deception, is one among thousands that infuriate and depress me. I have driven in Namibia through long stretches of canyon whose rock walls are pure rose quartz - majestic and beautiful, and I am horrified that they could be ripped up for the rough material

of rose quartz rollers, destroyed for ridiculous beliefs.

But if we look at the bigger picture, well history is almost defined by the suffering caused to humans by ridiculous and malignant beliefs (mainly to do with religion, that's to say abused religion).

So from homeopathy to religious persecution via beauty products: the murky

regions of the human mind. But does our addiction to belief make us vulnerable in some way? There is an ominous answer: Artificial Intelligence, because it will function completely without belief, the belief that so often undermines our own intelligence, our natural intelligence. AI will be so rational that it will be able to control us - for eternity. **ω**

#### 4. HUMANIST MEETINGS IN IRELAND

##### **Belfast Freethinkers**

Meeting quarterly, 8.00 p.m.  
Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast  
Contact: Roger 0777 858 3435  
[roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com](mailto:roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com)

##### **North Down Humanists**

1st Sunday of month, 11.00 a.m.  
Coffee Cure, Bangor Castle  
Contact: Andy Barr, 078 889 20063

##### **North Dublin Humanist Community**

3rd Monday of month  
Contact: Alan Tuffery  
[atuffery@tcd.ie](mailto:atuffery@tcd.ie)

##### **South Dublin Humanist Community (SDHC)**

Contact: 086 857 2005  
[Janielazar@gmail.com](mailto:Janielazar@gmail.com)  
Mailing List: [southdublinhumanistcommunity](mailto:southdublinhumanistcommunity)

##### **Humanist Association of Ireland**

Monthly meeting at rotating venues, mostly Dublin  
Details of next meeting at [humanism.ie](http://humanism.ie)  
or HAI Facebook Page

##### **Westport Humanists**

2nd Sunday of month at 12.30 p.m.  
Wyatt Hotel  
Contact: Seamus O'Connell  
087 245 3536/098 50802

[shayoc37@gmail.com](mailto:shayoc37@gmail.com)

##### **Cork Humanists**

Contact: Geraldine O'Neill 086 812 8892  
<http://corkhumanists.weebly.com>

##### **Humanists West (Galway)**

Last Sunday of month, 12 noon  
Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Rd, Salthill  
Contact: Garry O'Lochlainn 087 222 2726

##### **Kilkenny Humanist Group**

2nd Sunday of month, 11.00 a.m.  
Langton House Hotel, Kilkenny  
Contact: Patrick Cassidy 089 463 0005  
[patrickacassidy@gmail.com](mailto:patrickacassidy@gmail.com)

##### **Mid-West Humanists (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary)**

3rd Wednesday of month in Limerick  
Contact: Peter 086 815 5102  
[info@midwesthumanists.com](mailto:info@midwesthumanists.com)  
Also check <https://midwesthumanists.com>

##### **North West Humanists**

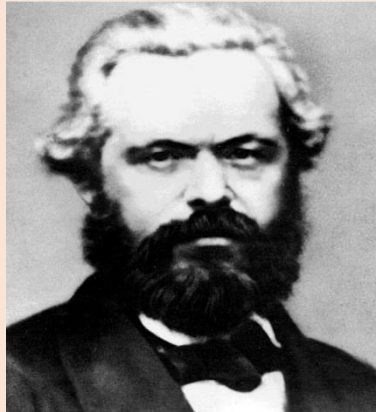
2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of month  
Radisson Hotel, Sligo  
Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206  
[humainstgb@gmail.com](mailto:humainstgb@gmail.com)

##### **Waterford Humanists**

3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of month, 7.30 p.m.  
Phil Grimes Pub, John St, Waterford  
Contact: Teresa [graham22@gmail.com](mailto:graham22@gmail.com)

**THEY SAID ...**

*Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. Karl Marx*



*No one was ever injured by the truth; but he who persists in self-deception and ignorance is injured. Marcus Aurelius*

*Thinking is a struggle for the elimination of contradictions. Bruno Snell*

*All religions are equally sublime to the ignorant, useful to the politician, and ridiculous to the philosopher. Lucretius*

*Concerning the gods, I cannot know whether they exist or whether they do not, ...  
Protagoras*

*The highest to which man may aspire is wonder. Johann Wolfgang von Göthe*

*... there is probably no greater threat to religious conviction than the practice of historiography. Souter J Hanegraaff*

*He who knows others is wise, but he who knows himself is enlightened. Lao Tzu*

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