

# **The Issue of Self-Identity**

**Transhumanism and  
the Bahá'í Writings**

# WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

- Transhumanism or H+ is an intellectual and cultural movement whose ultimate goal is to merge biology with computer technology in order to enhance human capabilities and, in the long run, to achieve human immortality.



# WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

- Transhumanists trace the origin of their undertaking in the inter-civilizational efforts to curb aging and conquer death.
- Those aspirations go back to ancient Egypt and China and to the search for the Fountain of Youth or the alchemists' Elixir of Life.



# WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

- One of the more immediate precursors to the philosophy of Transhumanism was a 19th-century Russian Orthodox thinker Nicholas Fyodorov (1829 – 1903) who “advocated radical life extension, physical immortality, including even resurrection of the dead, using scientific methods.”



# WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

- In 1923 in an essay “Daedalus: Science and the Future” the British geneticist J.B.S. Haldane outlined the basic ideas of Transhumanism.
- In 1957 biologist Julian Huxley who is commonly credited as its founder, coined the term for the movement.



# WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

- In the last decade of the twentieth century the efforts of individual thinkers began to coalesce into a coherent school of thought with the establishment of The World Transhumanist Association (WTA) in 1998 and the issuing of Transhumanist Declaration in 2002.



# WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

- The fundamental philosophical assumption of Transhumanism is that the functioning of the human brain is based on the very same principles and is subordinated to the identical procedures as the operation of a highly sophisticated computer with advanced capabilities.



# WHAT IS TRANSHUMANISM?

- The supposition that artificial and human intelligence are fundamentally identical is known as the Church – Turing thesis that was independently advanced by an American mathematician and logician Alonzo Church (1903 – 1995) and a British computer scientist Alan Turing (1912 – 1954) back in 1937.



# TERMINOLOGY

- “Turing Test” – In 1950 Alan Turing articulated the standard by which to decide whether the machine does possess intelligence.
- According to Turing, the main criterion for judgment is purely empirical. If a person cannot distinguish his IT interlocutor from a human being, then the machine is intelligent and should be treated as such.



# TERMINOLOGY

- “Moore’s Law” – In 1965 a co-founder of Intel Gordon Moore observed that “transistors were shrinking so fast that every year twice as many could fit onto a chip, and in 1975 adjusted the pace to a doubling every two years.”
- The rule of exponential growth of integrated circuits proved right for the last fifty years.



# TERMINOLOGY

- “Whole brain emulation” (WBE) – or mind uploading, mind transfer, mind copying, which is an exact simulation or high-tech replica of the human brain.
- It is a hypothetical procedure of transferring mental content of the brain to an artificial neural network that will function in essentially the same way as the human original.



# TERMINOLOGY

- “Technological singularity” – In 1965 I. J. Good formulated the idea of technological singularity, which suggested a possibility of merging human biology with computer technology. A resulting “post-” or “trans-” human hybrid will possess a super-human intelligence and capabilities, including the capacity to live an infinitely long life.



# THEORIES OF HUMAN IDENTITY

1. SOUL THEORY – a person’s nature is nonphysical (soul, spirit) and can survive the death of the body.
2. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUITY THEORY – a human being is essentially his or her memories and ability to reflect on oneself (one’s overall psychological configuration or “pattern”).



# THEORIES OF HUMAN IDENTITY

3. MATERIALIST THEORY – you are essentially the material that you are made out of.
4. NO SELF THEORY – The ‘I’ is a grammatical fiction (Nietzsche). There are bundles of impressions but no underlying self (Hume). There is no survival because there is no person (Buddha).



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

- Kurzweil defines evolution as “a process of creating patterns of increasing order.”
- Six epochs of world evolution — beginning with atomic and molecular levels studied by physics, chemistry and biology, then the appearance of neural patterns and the brain, the development of information technology, and, finally, up to the future technological singularity and the “waking up” of the universe.



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

- One of the pressing issues in the discussion of evolution, as Kurzweil notes, is whether “*an intelligence [can] create another intelligence more intelligent than itself?*”
- His proposed solution to the problem takes the form of two mutually related arguments. In their logical reconstruction they run as follows.



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

1. The evolution is efficient but extremely slow;
2. Given the long period of time it achieved its results, evolution's IQ is only slightly greater than zero (zero stands for truly arbitrary behavior);
3. Yet evolution created human intelligence with higher IQ;
4. Hence, evolution can create something higher than itself.



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

1. Evolution has created something higher than itself;
2. Human intelligence is part of evolution;
3. Human intelligence works at a much higher pace;
4. Therefore, human intelligence can create machines that are higher than human intelligence.



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

- Now Kurzweil turns to the problem of human identity, which may be affected by the eventual merger of human biology with superior computer technology.
- Here he proposes two thought experiments that in their logical formulations look as follows.



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

1. Let's assume that it is possible to scan and download a complete replica of the human brain (AI scientists call it "brain emulation");
2. "You-2" is behaving exactly like you;
3. Is it really you?
4. It seems that "You-2" is another person and has a different identity.



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

1. Your brain is replaced part by part with implants until there is nothing original in your brain;
2. Is this person still you?
3. In this case you still exist except for the fact that the conclusion of thought experiment #2 came into contradiction with the thought experiment #1.



# ARGUMENTS FOR SINGULARITY

- Kurzweil believes that in both cases we are dealing with one and the same person, and that “You-2” of the first thought experiment is you no matter how counter-intuitive this sounds.
- This conclusion is based on Kurzweil’s view on the nature of human identity that he himself labels “patternist.”



# BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS ON HUMAN NATURE

- Human nature has two components – material and spiritual – body and soul.
- “In man there are two natures,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says in Paris Talks, “His spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature... Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man’s spiritual nature, whereas all the imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature.”



# **BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS ON HUMAN NATURE**

- Human character includes the innate, inherited, and acquired aspects.
- The innate character reflects various abilities and inclinations people possess from their birth.
- The inherited character depends on the strength and weakness that are inborn from man's parents.
- The acquired character is developed by education.



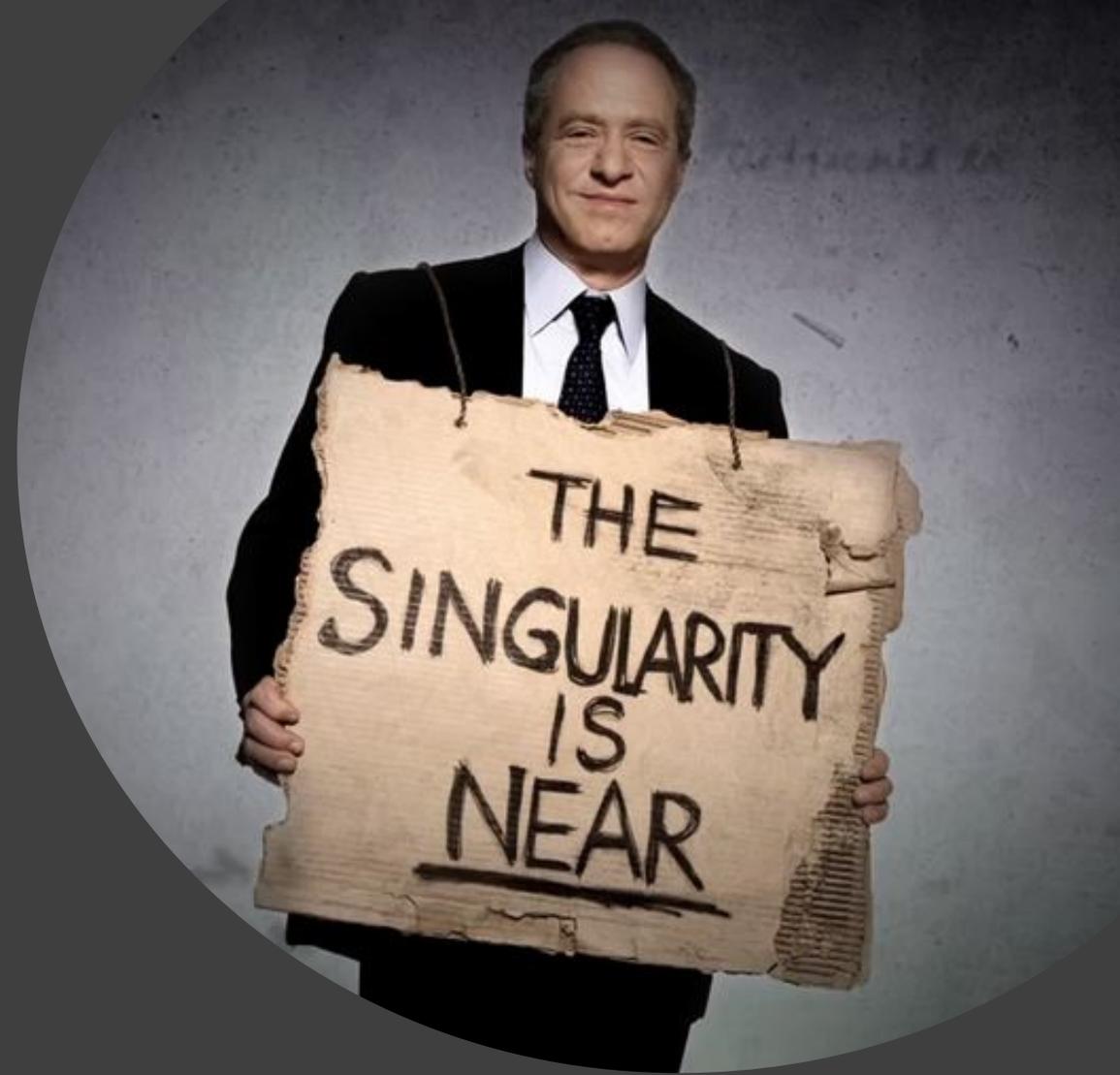
# BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS ON HUMAN NATURE

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá pays special attention to the inter-relationship between human body, mind, and spirit.
- Human spirit (or the rational soul) distinguishes man from the animal.
- Human mind is the power of the spirit: “The spirit is as the lamp, and the mind as the light that shines from it...The mind is the perfection of the spirit and a necessary attribute thereof.”



# BACK TO THE ISSUE OF EVOLUTION

- Kurzweil's argument about evolution rests on an empirical observation that evolution works its way from simple to complex forms and produces human intelligence that is lacking in nature.
- Human being is a product and part of evolutionary process; he could create an even higher intelligence and evolve into a super-being with extraordinary physical and intellectual abilities.



# BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS ON EVOLUTION

- The observation about natural evolution is empirically correct but logically confusing.
- If we accept evolution on its face value, then we arrive at a conclusion that a lesser entity can produce something that is greater than itself.
- At the end of logical chain it means that nothing can evolve into something, which is absurd.



# BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS ON EVOLUTION

- Kurzweil's evolutionary paradox is resolved in Bahá'í thought by a differentiation between the spiritual and material elements in human nature.
- The material component of humanity that is the body, is subject to evolution while the human spirit is not.
- Human spirit always existed in nature – potentially, even if it could not be detected empirically.



# BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS ON EVOLUTION

- Material evolution does not “create” human intelligence but allows it to be manifested on the physical plane of existence by producing more complex bodily organisms.
- In fact, the observation that material evolution leads to the emergence of human intelligence attests to the idea that human spirit is not of material nature.



# BAHÁ'Í TEACHINGS ON EVOLUTION

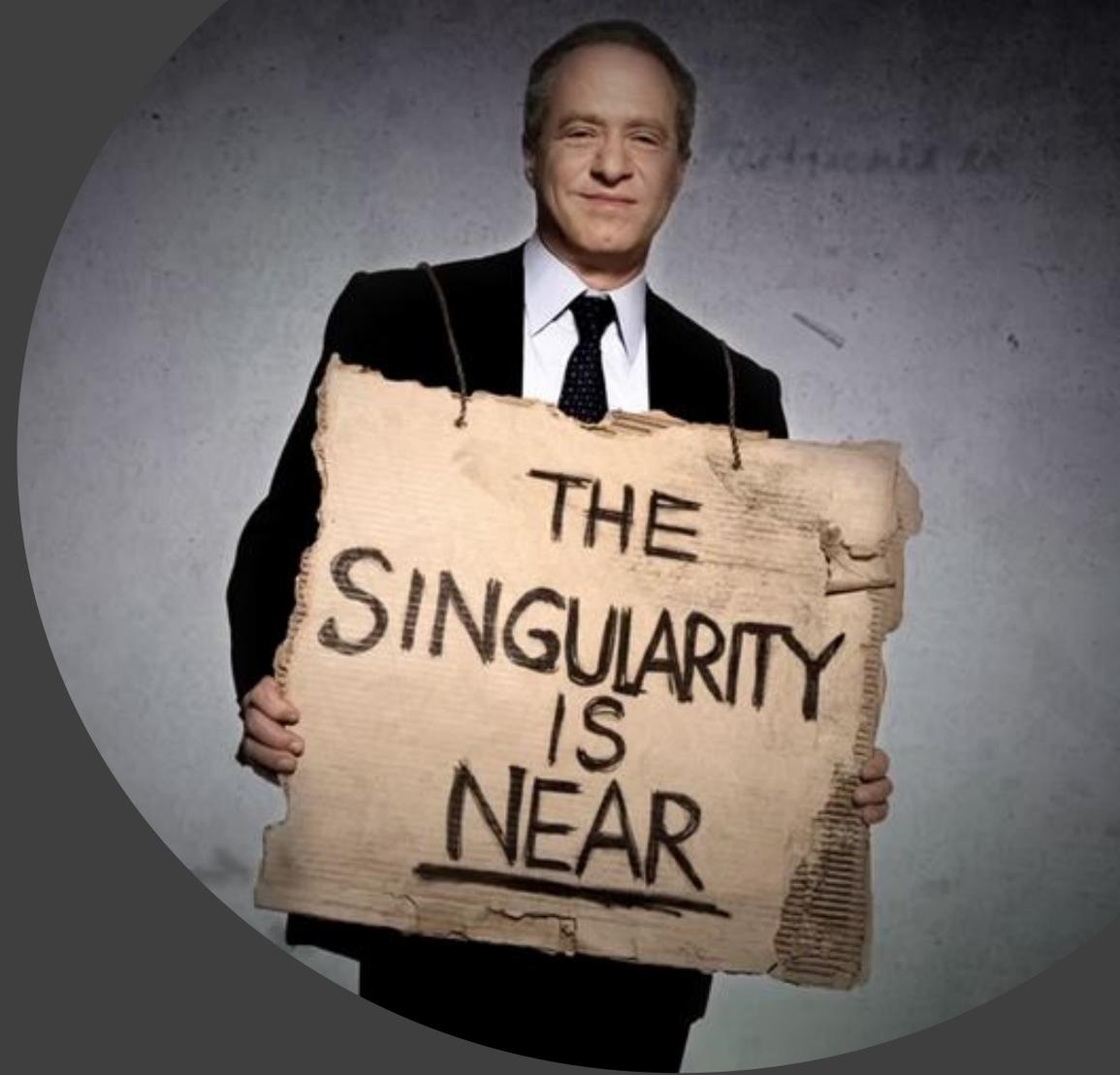
In its logical form 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument runs as follows:

1. What is present in parts should also exist in the whole.
2. Humans have intelligence but the natural world as a whole lacks it.
3. Therefore, human intelligence is not part of the natural order.



# BACK TO THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY

- The second part of Kurzweil's argument states that as part of the evolution man could transform himself into a new immortal creature of infinitely superior intelligence.
- This hypothesis involves the crucial issue of human self-identity that we must now explore further from a Bahá'í perspective.



# **BAHÁ'Í VIEWS ON SELF-IDENTITY**

- First, since the mind, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá contends, “is the power of the human spirit,” it is not the seed of human identity – the spirit or soul is.
- Second, as far as the soul is not a material but spiritual entity, the power of the mind is also essentially spiritual and is only partially reflected on the physical plane through the instrumentality of the brain.



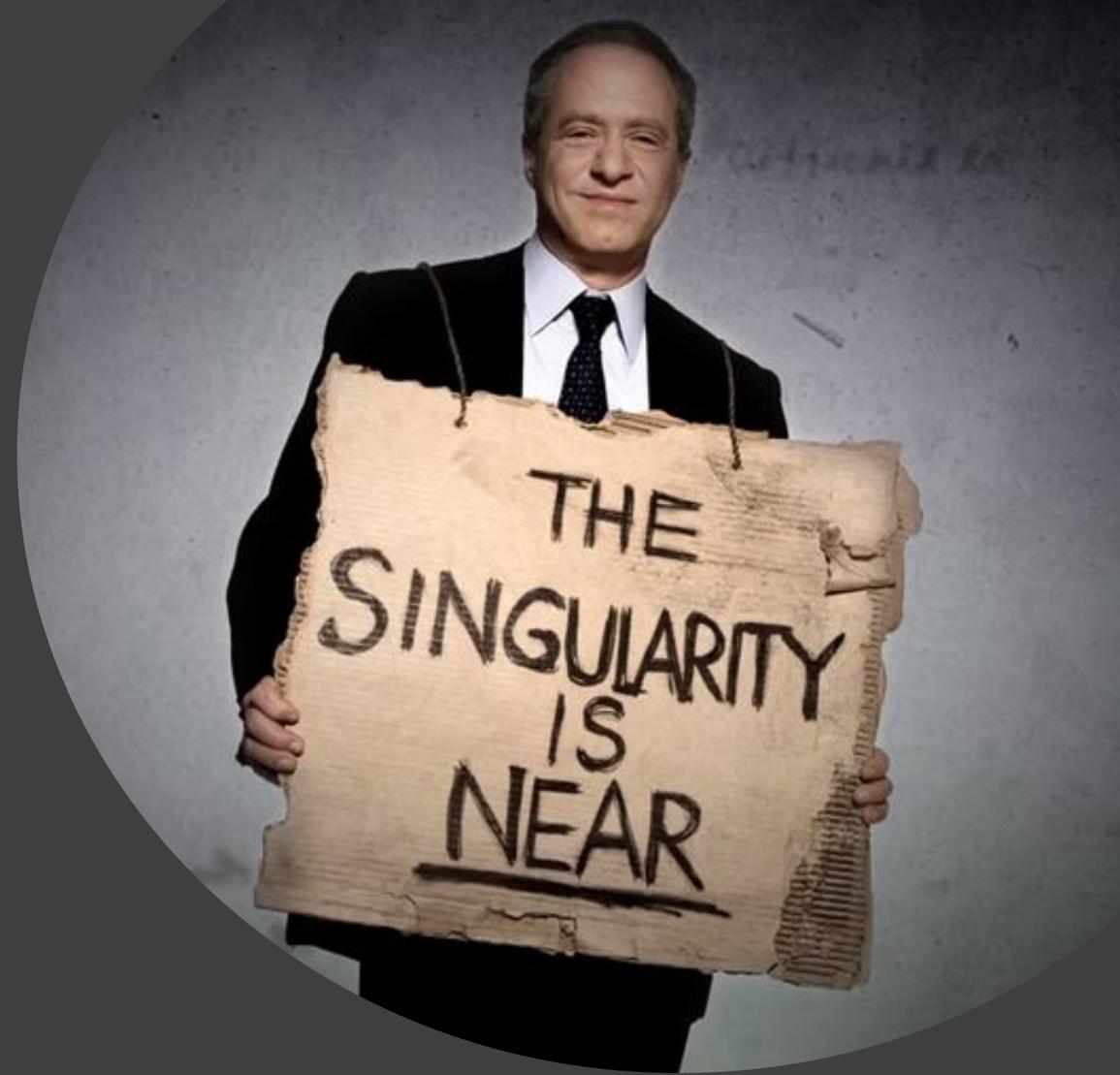
# **BAHÁ'Í VIEWS ON SELF-IDENTITY**

- According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the potential spiritual powers of the mind are much greater than what human reason and sense perception are capable of.
- Those hidden abilities are only partially expressed through human intuition, visions, and dreams, which are possible due to the interconnection between material and spiritual realms.



# HUMAN IDENTITY AND SINGULARITY

- Would it be possible for humans to increase their intellectual capabilities by inventing a machine with intelligence that supersedes their own? Yes, in my view, it would.
- If we imagine the invention of artificial intelligence that overtakes our own, we may conclude then that we are able to transform ourselves into something (or someone) else.



# BAHÁ'Í APPROACH TO SINGULARITY

- First and foremost, from a Bahá'í perspective human self-identity, which is expressed on the physical plane through self-consciousness, is not a material but spiritual reality.
- Hence, no manipulation with or augmentation of human intellectual abilities will affect our spiritual nature.



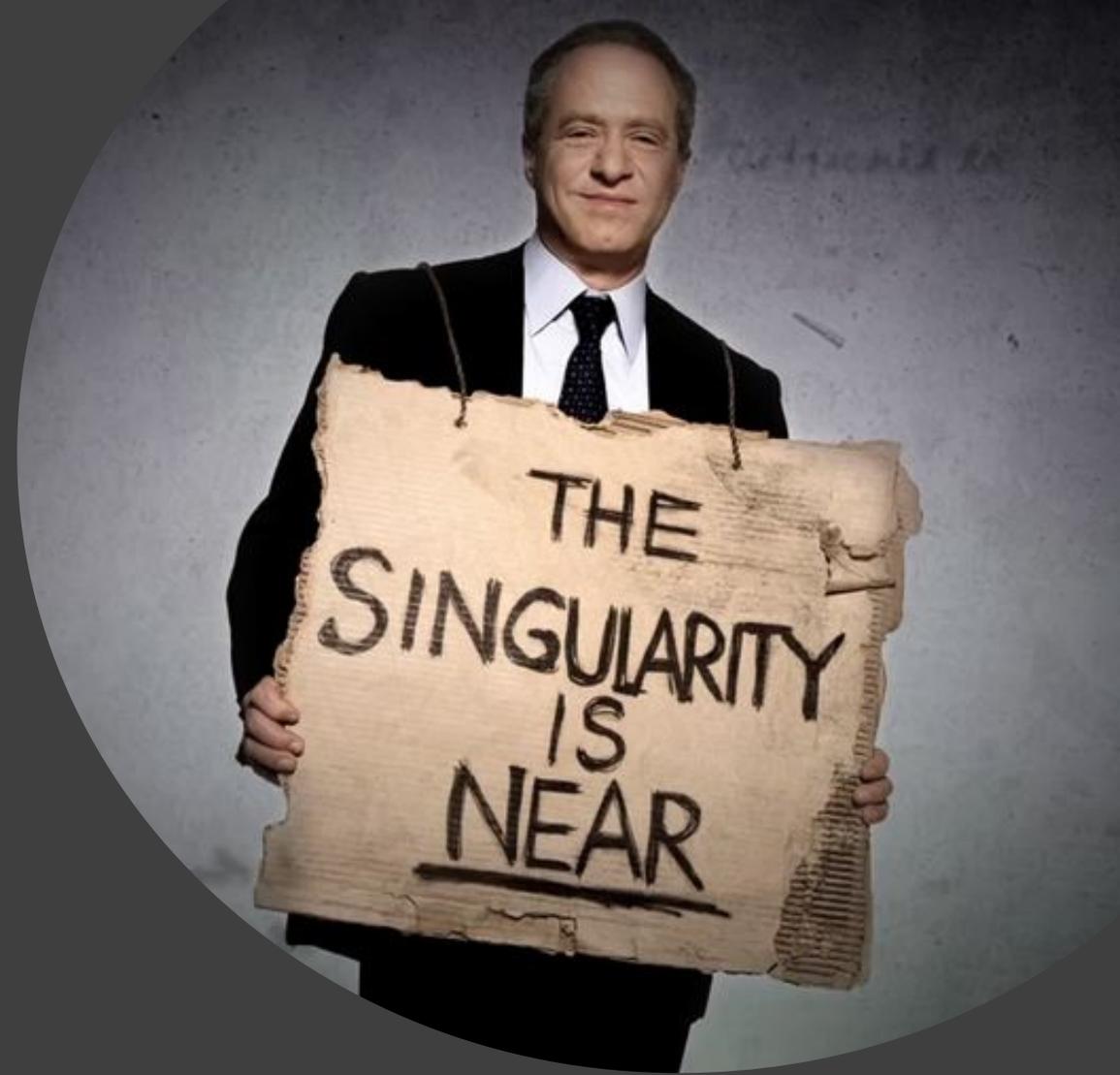
# BAHÁ'Í APPROACH TO SINGULARITY

- Second – and this is no less significant – as far as research into artificial intelligence remains within the limits of material reality, even the emulation of the whole human brain would imply only the capability to simulate some of our intellectual capacities.
- The hidden psychic powers of extra-sensory perception, visions, and, most importantly, revelation would continue to be inaccessible.



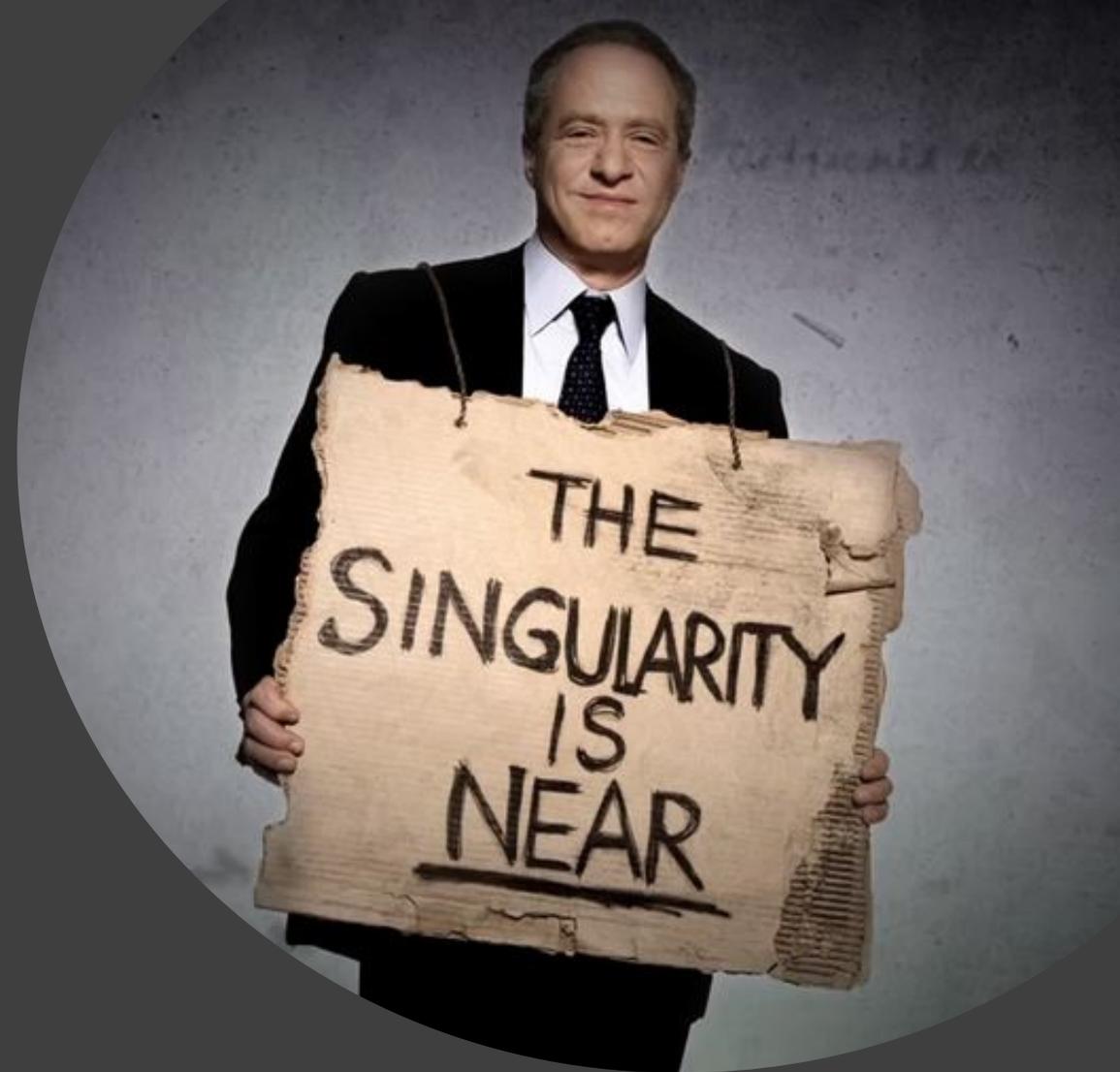
# HUMAN IDENTITY AND SINGULARITY

- Let's imagine that our technology is capable of scanning and downloading a complete replica of the human brain. Would such a "You-2" be really you?
- In my opinion, no, it would not. A material replica will always remain what it is – an incomplete copy of the person that is lacking the source of that person's spiritual identity.



# HUMAN IDENTITY AND SINGULARITY

- Then what if we are able to replace someone's brain with an artificial brain implant. Would that person retain his or her own original self-identity?
- The answer to this question depends on whether the implant is capable of retaining a mysterious connection between the spiritual and material parts of the human being.



## REMARKS IN CONCLUSION

- Many thinkers and researchers of AI are warning about the competition between humans and robots, in which artificial minds will supersede the intelligence of their inventors and eventually render all of us helpless and powerless.
- Yet, in my view, this is not the only “present and clear” danger that humanity is facing as a result of the super-intelligence explosion, which is looming on the horizon.



## REMARKS IN CONCLUSION

- The ultimate aim and promise of singularity is for humans to achieve physical immortality. But immortal life on earth would necessarily involve infinite suffering.
- Hence, transhumanist project may result in the creation of hell on earth. Since, what is hell if not an unending suffering with no expiration date, no prospect of release, no light at the end of the tunnel?



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