Memes and Variations
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I.

On the eve of a new millennium, we rush to find ourselves a new position, a new subject, a subject outside the realm of the human — we want the posthuman, and we want it now. [For some reason, it's now or never — but then, maybe it always has been.] Religion offered us the prehuman, perhaps, or the metahuman, or maybe the parahuman, but we've long since outgrown that; it's yesterday's news. Some are praying for invasion by aliens, but aliens have proven notoriously unreliable; and anyway, depending on aliens for anything seems like a cheap fix; we humans have always been able to take perfectly good care of ourselves.

Because we humans are damn good at making things. So why shouldn't we be able to whip ourselves up a subject, an Artificial Other [AO], a fully-functioning somebody-else [or nobody-else], complete with autonomy and intelligence? The AO is coming! We breathlessly await its arrival, and watch anxiously for signs: the spontaneous eruption of consciousness [once there are as many internet nodes as brain synapses — or something like that] — the appearance of the agent, the artificial subject, the global mind, somebody else to carry the burden of our memory, our brilliance, our accumulated knowledge; so that we can finally relax, and maybe even forget …

But why wait? Anyway, what if the reports prove false; what if the Artificial Other isn't about to make its appearance, despite our best efforts? Well … isn't the AO just a subject position really, a position waiting to be filled by someone? Why not fill it ourselves? WE can become the posthuman! All it takes is a little willingness to identify with a position outside the human, outside ourselves. So let's do it: let's redefine ourselves to be the machinic intelligence that we so desperately crave.

We can do this in many different ways; every little bit helps. First, we can identify with the "needs" of the system, despite any human cost; we can help the system along in its heroic struggle to emerge into its own, to "find itself".

We can privilege the myriad ways that we've joined our bodies with our various techno-prostheses — our contact lenses, our hearing aids, our reconstructed knees, our sculpted flesh — in short, our utter cyborgness — and view this as the sign that we have transcended [rather than transformed] the human.

And we can attempt to turn human thought, human culture and cultural change, into a special system, a system amenable to scientific analysis and control — a system that can be uploaded into the networks, once and for all.

II.

In a historic decision with far-reaching consequences, most of the Internet has been declared off-limits to human operators. From now on, only authorized agents will be allowed to make direct connections with the so-called "bedrock zones" of dataspace. Likening cyberspace to "a critical resource, a vibrant ecosystem" that has been "littered, trampled, and strip-mined" by "thoughtless and self-centered human trespassers", a government spokesperson ushered in a new era in which the global mind will finally be allowed "a little peace and quiet" in which to do some "serious thinking" about future directions for humanity and posthumanity. "If you

have any legitimate business on the web, get yourself a decent agent, for god's sake," said a spokesperson for one of the fast-rising CAPs [Customizable Agent Providers], who insisted on anonymity. "They're far more efficient and reliable than you could ever be, and they do far less damage".

A virus attached to a popular email program mutates into a devolution algorithm that automatically inserts anachronistic and/or obscene language into any text message longer than thirty-two characters. Television commentators are quick to remark on the deplorable trend in public language, with both civility and relevance of discourse going into a sudden and sharp decline.

The big-budget admeme: The market research teams of the dominant advertising agencies subject their enslaved audiences to endless variations on the meme theme of the day. Today's meme theme: "Alive with Pleasure!". The Marketeers attempt to determine which among the countless variants of image, text and design create that undeniable shiver of recognition and orgasmic thrill. Electrodes and galvanic response meters register every tremor of each and every unfortunate subject. Here we experience the true science of memetic engineering. Once perfected, the admeme will be released into adspace, there to colonize whatever minds happen to be unlucky enough to be exposed to its noxious viral fumes. Tomorrow's meme theme: "You will!"

Of course, there are also the utterly useless and stillborn admemes. For instance, studies have shown that no one has ever actually looked directly at [much less clicked on] any banner ad on any web page, anywhere in the world.

After achieving near-ubiquity via devious memetic subfrequencies, the most popular avatar software mysteriously malfunctions. Legions of avatars that had been painstakingly customized by their legitimate owners suddenly and unexpectedly revert to the default "Bill" type, with its laconic phrasing and hideous eyewear, its numbing platitudes masking ruthless agendas. Spontaneous sightings of "Bill" are reported with increasing and disconcerting frequency. It is difficult to adequately describe the horror of watching a trusted associate abruptly morph into the generic off-the-shelf geek in the midst of an intimate conversation.

The number of McDonald's Big Macs sold finally exceeds the number of neurons in the human brain, and at last the lowly burger achieves true consciousness.

The me meme. The meme is really just made of me + me. It can therefore be easily replicated in a self-impregnating chain of viral code:

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I make a timelapse film of a radio evolving over the entire twentieth century. Free from the distracting interventions of its human designers, my radio morphs from a primitive homemade box of wires and crystals, through a complicated cityscape of vacuum tubes, to transistors and then on to microprocessors. Simultaneously, the skin of the radio subtly ripples through wood

and cloth to Bakelite and other early plastics into unknowable sleek black substances and cryptic LED readouts. I find these results encouraging, to say the least.

Now I'm performing another experiment. I want to fashion myself into the perfect vessel for the reception of memes. If I conceive of my own mind as a space to be filled by memes, that conception in itself should make my mind more receptive to these selfsame memes. Therefore, to receive the memes, my mind has to first ingest the meme: "My mind is a meme space". I want to speed up the pace of my personal cultural evolution to approximately the level of the Indy 500. I want to do my part. My memes are ready and waiting for yours. All of us are anxious for progeny.