

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 39: Do You Want To Become A Vampire?

- Tristan Harris: Two quick things before we dive in. First, the Center for Humane Technology is hiring. And second, the guest featured in this episode will be joining us for a Podcast Club on Friday, August 20th. Details of all that are at the end of the episode. And with that, here we go.
- L.A. Paul: Imagine that you're touring some castle in Romania, and you go down to the dungeon and you're exploring, and all of a sudden, then Dracula comes to you, and offers you the chance to become one of his own. He says, "You'll get amazing new sensory powers. There are some negatives, you become undead, and you have to drink blood, and sunlight will burn your skin in this horrible way. But all things considered, I think it's worth it. You've got 12 hours to decide. You'll never have another opportunity to do this."
- Tristan Harris: That's philosopher and cognitive scientist, L.A. Paul. She studies transformative experience. And to illustrate the nature of what makes a transformative experience, Paul uses the metaphor of becoming a vampire.
- L.A. Paul: By definition, you can't know what it's going to be like to become a vampire. This is a irreversible life-changing decision. And so, the question is, how do you even evaluate these options and know how to assign them value in ways that's going to be meaningful, like becoming a vampire versus living your life as a human and kind of passing up this chance? How do you evaluate those possibilities and determine your preferences?
- Tristan Harris: How do we determine our preferences about a transformative experience, when that transformative experience will change our preferences? Whose preferences should we prioritize? The person before being transformed, or the person after? The only way persuasion can be ethical is when the goals of the persuader align with the goals of the persuadee. But the plot thickens when the persuader is transforming us into someone who ends up wanting the thing that we were persuaded into. What if the persuader is a vampire, turning us into someone who enjoys feeding on human blood? What if social media is transforming us into attention-seeking vampires, who feed on the attention of other people? Technology isn't just persuading us or nudging our choices. It's fundamentally transforming who we are and what we want. And that has enormous ethical implications for design.
- Tristan Harris: Today, with L.A. Paul, we're raising the stakes of the social media conversation from technology that steers our time and attention, to technology that fundamentally transforms who we are. What if when you joined Reddit, it asked, "Do you want to be an online troll?" What if when you join TikTok, it asked, "Do you want to become an exhibitionist?" What if by joining social media, you were being asked the question posed by L.A. Paul, "Do you want to become a vampire?" I'm Tristan Harris.
- Aza Raskin: And I'm Aza Raskin.

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- Tristan Harris: And this is Your Undivided Attention, the podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. In L.A. Paul's vampire story, as it turns out, most of your friends and family members have already become vampires. And they say they love being vampires. And even though there's no real way for you to understand what it's like, you should definitely become one. So, you could decide whether to become a vampire based on the testimony of your vampire friends and family.
- L.A. Paul: But I think there's another question which immediately pops up, which is, on what basis do you rely on that testimony? Because it sure seems like becoming a vampire might work on you in a certain way, such that you really love being a vampire once you've become one. So, it doesn't really matter what you thought as a human. I like to draw an analogy to becoming a parent, even someone who doesn't want to have children, once they have a child, at least ordinarily, they attach very strongly to that child, and they're usually very happy they had that child. Something about you changes when you have a child, such that you love the very child that you've created, and that's a very natural thing. Even if, before you'd ever had children, and you really were strongly against ever having a child, so there's a kind of internal preference change that happens when you have a child and it could be something like that that happens with becoming a vampire.
- Aza Raskin: And if my memory of the research is correct, when you poll people post having child versus before having child, almost universally moment to moment, happiness for parents is lower than those who have not had a child. Which doesn't actually say anything about what the experience is like, but it's interesting.
- L.A. Paul: Yeah. There's a lot of questions about that, but that's right. Actually, one of the interpretations I like about some of that research is that maybe there's a kind of element of suffering in becoming a parent or being a parent that we still value. But it's not really right to say you're happier as a parent that kind of just isn't the right way to characterize it. But there's a non-obvious answer to the question of, should you become a parent? If you aren't already convinced that you want to become a parent. And I think the same kind of thing happens with respect to becoming a vampire, with a bunch of other potential life changes.
- L.A. Paul: So, basically, the question is, if you know that you're faced with the chance to have a new kind of experience, and if there isn't a kind of predetermined answer about whether that's something that you should do, it's not kind of legally mandated or socially mandated or morally mandated. In other words, it's a kind of self-interested choice, but you don't know what that experience would be like. And you don't know whether the self that you would become is a self that you now want to be, then on what basis do you make that choice?
- L.A. Paul: The first problem is that we haven't got the information we need to make the choice in the kind of informed way that we ordinarily want to. Like

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when I go to the store and I'm going to buy ice cream, I know I like Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk better than dairy-free vanilla. I like vanilla ice cream, but not dairy-free. So, I'm not going to go for the dairy-free option, ever. My preferences are defined, but if I don't have the relevant information I need to be able to know what these different life experiences are like, I can't have defined preferences in the way that I want to, so I can't make the choice in an ordinary way.

L.A. Paul: And, added this, the self that's going to emerge from this process could have quite different preferences from the self that I am now. Which self matters? Is it the self now that's making the choice that should be running the show? Or, is it the self that I would become? I don't think there's a kind of principle decision rule that we have for these kinds of contexts. And this adds to the complexity when we're thinking about real-life decision-making with respect to transformation. Because it's not like I think there is an obvious right answer.

L.A. Paul: There's a distinctive way that someone changes when someone is faced with a new kind of experience. When it's familiar experiences — you go for a run every day or whatever you know like it's something that you're planning ahead or forecasting or prospectively assessing — in a way where you know the kind of experience you're going to have, at least more or less, at least you can predict with some kind of certainty, obviously surprises can happen, but you have a kind of information when you're doing this, that's not available to you when we're talking about having a new kind of experience.

L.A. Paul: So, one extra moving part is that it's new experiences, in particular. It can be new to society or new to the individual. And when you get this new kind of experience that carries a new kind of information, that then also has this impact with new kinds of technology of certain kinds of social media designed to be persuasive, where it feels like it's just coming from you, really important, right? Because it's built into the program that you perform certain kinds of activities that then feel like a very natural progression of your own preference change.

L.A. Paul: I think the real issue is to be clearheaded about what we're doing here, to know what we know and in particular, what we don't know. And that's always a trap. We always like to think we know more than we actually do. You think, "I have control over how I think about the world. I have control over what I believe and what my preferences are." And you give me the information, I think very carefully and I do things. But this is in some sense, really quite a naive picture. And partly because there are these sub-personal processes that happen that get exploited with some of this technology involving certain kinds of cognitive processing and attention. Sometimes it's the brain acting as opposed to kind of our explicit choice. But also there's a way in which an experience can just come from the outside and influence us in ways that we don't expect that have nothing to do with our beliefs.

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L.A. Paul: And that's what's really hard for people to grasp. Because you feel like you have a kind of control, you actually don't have. Both at the level of the conscious, with respect to it's not just about your beliefs, but experience comes in and causes you to change. You walk out and you have a devastating accident. An experience caused you to change, and it wasn't about just thinking about your beliefs. And then also from below, there's this implicit way in which the stimuli are changing how you think. And so, these are two different kinds of causal processes, both of which don't happen at the level where you sit there and theorize and think about how you want to act and behave and care.

Aza Raskin: And in the case of technology, both of those things are happening simultaneously. It is both the case that I am choosing to engage with Facebook or Instagram and use it in some way. And I do not get to choose that the entire world is using Facebook and Instagram and that's modifying my environment, or that I'm forced to use my cell phone to interact with the people I care most about. And so, it's interesting that we have these two different types of transformative changes happening, overlapping at the same time.

L.A. Paul: And really interesting context, the way in which the experience works on you changes the structure of who you are such that after you've been changed, you don't actually regret eating all those french fries or drinking all that wine. So, consider the process of professional development where you undergo extensive expertise training. And so, the kind of person that you are once you've exited 10 years of intensive, let's say medical training and residency, is really just different from the person that you were when you started. Strictly speaking, you're the same person, but you're a different kind of person, I think of that as being a different self that realizes who you are. And your preferences are going to be different. Like, let's say you weren't sure if you wanted to become a doctor early on because you know there's long hard hours and you find blood a little bit stressful and it could impact your ability to have a family.

L.A. Paul: At the end of that process though, you're like, "Oh, I thought those were all bad things, but now I'm just so committed. My preferences are such that, I'm really wedded to who I am now." And this is actually in some sense, perfectly rational. Who you are has changed. In terms of your preference structures. Actually changed, as the result of those experiences. And I think that's another kind of transformative change that we need to think about as a society, and also as individuals. That in a certain way, by creating these technologies without actually thinking carefully about how they're affecting us, the end result could be quite significantly different. We would change who we are in a permanent sense, and in a way lose track then of the values that we once had.

L.A. Paul: Is that the kind of society that we want to have? That's an open question, which I think we should consider. Right now, I want to say it's bad, it probably is bad, but the real question is how do you understand the new preferences and the new values that we're going to emerge with after this

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process? And in any case, we should be clearheaded about what we're doing, as opposed to just getting there without even thinking carefully about the result that we're going to end up with.

Tristan Harris: If I think about just grounding this in a few tech examples, Facebook "Like" button co-inventor, Justin Rosenstein didn't know that the Like button would transform the relationship that we have to social validation, that we'd be addicted to checking likes, that people would determine their self-worth in terms of that. LinkedIn didn't know that it would transform the meaning of being a professional into suddenly needing to broadcast things in a feed or control your reputation on a profile. Instagram didn't know that it would transform the values, culture, and aspirations of an entire generation into being influencers along with YouTube channels. In each of these cases, we're transforming the basis again, not just of the individual who's becoming a kind of vampire, but I think the society at large is another patient, another person who's about to go through a kind of vampire-like change.

Tristan Harris: In my own work, on the topic of persuasive technology, I flashed back to 2013, 2014 when I had conversations with my friends at Google, on the Google bus. And I would talk about, "This social media thing. There's really a problem here. This is really not good for people. " It's warping their view of reality. It's distracting them. It's amusing ourselves to death in the classic Neil Postman sense, and the most common thing that I would hear over and over and over again was, "Who are you to say, what's good for people? If they're happy, and they're happy using Facebook. We're just a neutral tool or platform. If they're happy doing it, who's to say that they shouldn't be doing this? Or that we should be doing something different or we should tweak the newsfeed because they're enjoying it." One mistake we know we could make is claiming that we're neutral and we're not actually transforming any of those patients into vampires.

Tristan Harris: You could point to a number of things that make technology either transformative, or not. You could say, "Well, if it's just modifying their behavior in 1% of a way, that's not really a transformational experience." But as Jaron Lanier says in the film, *The Social Dilemma*, "If I can change the world by 1%." By just 1% of its beliefs to just tilt the world a little bit, that's the whole world. You can transform the entire world by 1%, that's actually a big change. Think about climate change. You're only changing the temperature by one and a half, two degrees, and you end up devastating ecosystems, getting a sixth mass-extinction event and you have these massive changes.

L.A. Paul: But also, just by what we're talking about before where each time the world evolves forward, you make one change. Well, then that changes the probabilities for change later on. So, just saying, "Well, I'm just making a small change," is actually meaningless because what matters is how much of a change you make over a stretch of time?

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Aza Raskin: It reminds me of, the most powerful force in the universe is compound interest. I think Benjamin Franklin had that quote of, "Money makes money. And the money that makes money makes money." And this is true of change. Change makes change. And the change that makes change makes change and it compounds.

L.A. Paul: And again, I think this is especially problematic when we're talking about new kinds of experience or new kinds of technology or new kinds of techniques, because, the new stuff is the hardest stuff, because you just don't know how the change is going to iterate out. You might think, "I can engage in what's called pre-commitment." What's pre-commitment? Pre-commitment is kind of like the thing you do when you realize, "Oh God, give me some New York Super Fudge Chunk, and I'm just helpless in the face of it." Right? So, when I go to the store, I don't even go to the ice cream section because if I buy it and take it home, it doesn't even make it into the freezer. I really need to keep myself under control. So, I pre-commit. I don't go to the freezer section. With some of this technology, I might think, Oh yeah, we could just do that.

L.A. Paul: If I know enough, I can just set up some kind of things so I'm not influenced by these bad sorts of technologies, or if now that I know about it, I won't be influenced that way. The problem is, is that just doesn't work that way. It's more like a situation where you find it incredibly appealing. You think you have control over what's going on, but that's actually part of what the insanity involves, right? Part of the picture is that this beautiful experience is both corrupting you mentally, in some sense, like it's changing what you prefer and how you think, and also you're not able to recognize that that's what's happening. So, you can't self-bind or pre-commit in the way that we ordinarily can like by avoiding ice cream. The, seductive nature of this experience because of these implicit effects, it's not as obvious as feeling yourself go insane. And so you're in a kind of intellectual bind.

Tristan Harris: Now, there's this urgent thing that has to happen, which is we have to take all of these philosophical kind of terms and we actually have to implement whatever best philosophy we have, at least as tools of thinking to, as you said, sort of at least be incorporating that model versus not even recognizing the situation that we're in. What should we be paying attention to when we are transforming the basis of who we are as individuals and as societies?

L.A. Paul: I mean, the first thing is to, right, acknowledge responsibility and acknowledge the complexity of these different kinds of actions, and also how they're related. It's not a bad thing to have responsibility. I can see how people might not want to think about that when they're building companies or working for a company. It's understandable, and people have to make a living and there's great financial gain to be had, but that doesn't mean that there shouldn't be some kind of clear-eyed assessment, and at least a commitment to exploring the philosophical questions

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involved. That I think would be a minimum rather than denying that these questions arise.

L.A. Paul:

And then, the next question is, which actions are good versus bad? But then there's this further question about who decides that? And so, I would really like to see tech companies first, honestly just really identify all of these different structural facts about action, both collective and individual, all these relationships and how they matter, how we're making choices, both at individual levels and high levels. And also how our preferences can be influenced and changed. And also how this can be implicit. And we can do this without even knowing that we're doing it. But then also, once that is identified, then there's this question of, well, if you really think that people should have control over how they're being influenced, there should be I think some process where actually, people get to decide, or at least the process is transparent. There's a kind of transparency question here as well. And transparency comes not just from telling people what you're doing, but also from being very clear about what these structures are, and what's really going on.

L.A. Paul:

When you talk about persuasive technology, it's one thing to persuade somebody by laying out your reasons and arguing with them or having a full-blown open discussion. And it's another thing to persuade them through deceit, which is a kind of nefarious thing. And there's another kind of persuasion involving nudges and stuff like that. And there are really interesting questions here about like when is nudging okay and when it isn't? And I think nudging can be okay as long as it's done in a transparent fashion where there's open discussion, but when nudging is not done transparently, when it's implicit or you're exploiting certain kinds of facts about the way that our brain physically works, as opposed to when we're consciously reflecting on possibilities, that's when I think we start to get into problematic moral territory.

L.A. Paul:

When you go to have some procedure done and your doctor says, "This procedure is controversial, or it has terrible side effects. I'm going to suggest it, but I need to have your informed consent." Well, what's necessary for truly informed consent? That's the first problem. Let's say it's possible to give truly informed consent, that's great. And there's an obligation to provide that, but let's say it's actually not really possible. I don't really understand the statistics well enough to know what's going on. Well, then there's the question of like, do I just rely on the expert, on the doctor to tell me what to do? And so, am I in some sense, consenting in an informed way, because I say, "Okay, you, as the expert, I trust you to make the best decision for me." That's another way you could get informed consent. It requires trust for that to happen.

L.A. Paul:

A further problem though, is when there's this fake informed consent where someone says, "Well, I know this is going to be right for you. There's all this testimony..." They're going to go back to transformation. "And there's all this testimony from people who've undergone this procedure that they're super happy that they become vampires." So,

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Dracula, I'm going to give my informed consent for you to turn me into a vampire, because I'm relying on all this testimony and you as the expert, obviously can tell me all about what it's like to be a vampire. So, I put myself in the hands of Dracula, but I'm not actually consenting in an informed way because that testimony is corrupt. Why is it corrupt? Because becoming a vampire, makes me happy to be a vampire.

L.A. Paul: And so, all these vampires that are testifying to how satisfied they are with that procedure, well, their testimony isn't reliable. Because there's a kind of endogenous change that's involved, and that's not real informed consent. So, I guess there has to be some kind of informed consent involved, but I don't know how simple it would be to implement that kind of informed consent, or if it's even possible.

Aza Raskin: In academia, if you want to run a psych study asking questionnaires of 20 undergraduates, you have to go through a pretty rigorous process in IRB review board. But if you want to, as a Facebook engineer or a Twitter engineer or TikTok engineer, completely change the kinds of people we interact with — which posts from which friends, what emotional valence, which news we read, there is no process that you have to go through. And it's sort of mind-boggling that we don't have a kind of FDA process. We have environmental impact reports. We don't have social impact reports. And the scale of the changes that an individual engineer or designer can now make, are in fact much bigger than the equivalent of the civil engineer or the psychologist running an experiment at a university. And so, we need a proportional scale amount of responsibility sort of in your terms, Laurie, the upfront commitments to understanding and demonstrating understanding of the complexity and scale of impact.

L.A. Paul: I agree because even if one could argue that everyone who's using Facebook has given informed consent when they agree to whatever waiver it is you agree to in order to participate in the platform. There's a sense in which we're being used as experimental subjects, and there are two ways. One is, there's no way you give informed consent if you don't know what experiments are going to be performed on you ahead of time. That is not informed consent. And I don't think it's right to ask people to consent to be manipulated, which is the only way I could interpret this. And then the other thing is that, when we're being manipulated, there isn't a clear sense of how it's going to impact us, which is part of what you're saying as well.

L.A. Paul: So, it relates to questions about eugenics, and the ways that people were treated by doctors and other kinds of researchers in the 20th century and before where the thought was, "Well, the experts have the best interest of all the subjects in mind or all the patients in mine. So, they should be allowed to do what they want to do," or, "They're doing it in the name of science or in the name of medicine." That is an unacceptable argument, there's no justification for using people as subjects. Even if you can't get their explicit consent for whatever particular change you want to make, somebody else needs to be vetting it, even if there were principled

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reasons. And I think there's an obligation to do that kind of vetting, to do that kind of modeling, before using people in this way.

Tristan Harris:

One of the problems we have here, as Yuval Harari said earlier on our podcast is a philosophical crisis on multiple counts, more than one because people actually already conceive of themselves as not being influenced or manipulated or transformed. And so, how can you actually have informed consent when people don't believe that the software they're about to use will come to dominate and change the basis of their preferences?

Aza Raskin:

This is making me think about, Tristan, Yuval's prompt us in a previous episode where he was asking, "Okay, it's very easy to look at technology and the future and see dystopia. There's a much harder task of trying to imagine what a utopia would look like in a world where technology knows us better than we know ourselves." We've collected enough data, such that your refrigerator is like, "Actually, I know the perfect life partner for you." And your refrigerator is not wrong. And your toaster is like, "I know what profession you should go into because I've analyzed the way you slather your toast." And it's not wrong. Something still feels very unsettling about that, although it's very hard to pinpoint why.

Aza Raskin:

And in the world where technology sort of can figure out the best next steps for us and it's optimizing us for something. What is that something that it should optimize us for, and what basis do you choose it on? Tristan, I think had a really interesting answer to that which is, well, it's hard to know what exactly is good and what exactly is bad, but we know what's better and what's worse. Perhaps we should be optimized for a sense of lifelong development. Just like there are childhood developmental stages, some of which are higher than others. Imagine we extended that for the rest of life, and each person becomes more authentic, more aware of what they're unaware of, more aware of the externalities of their actions, of how other people act. And that certainly, seems like it would be a better world than the one we're in now. I'm really curious how you'd react to that. Like how do we think about what is the basis upon which decisions would get made for us at that scale, when technology could in fact know us better than we know ourselves?

L.A. Paul:

So, I mean, the first question is, does it really know us better than ourselves? So, I'm just going to go back to another example, which is, again, you don't want to become a parent, but your mother tells you, she knows you better than you know yourself, and you'd be so happy and she's right. You have kid and you're so happy. But is that because she knew you better than you know yourself, or because the process of having a kid transforms you into someone who loves having a kid? Those are two different kinds of processes. So, one issue with some of these products and some of these ideas is that, they're changing us in virtue of the interactions that we're having with them. And there's a way in which there's a kind of endogenous change involved so that maybe it's no

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surprise that I'm super happy with the person I ended up with my refrigerator chose.

L.A. Paul:

My refrigerator designs my Tinder profile in some way, so as to exploit the algorithm in the right way so that I meet the perfect match. But what's the perfect match? Maybe what happens is I meet somebody who interacts with me in such a way that I change my preferences in ways that I hadn't expected. This person has interests that I didn't have or whatever. I'm super satisfied with who I end up with, but there could have been a different algorithm implemented and the same thing would have happened. It's just that then I would have had different preferences to match that different person. I'm not sure what I think about that in the following way. If you don't have anybody in your life, then I'd rather have my fridge successfully choose somebody and have my preferences morph so then I had this kind of satisfying outcome.

L.A. Paul:

There's an argument there. But don't fool yourself that somehow, there's just this simple thing where the fridge is like God in some sense, able to step back and have a God's eye point of view on the universe and know what's best. Machines and the technology that we're using are not like that. It's not a simple process where we're just making the world better and maximizing our utility given our current set of preferences. It's a completely continuous interaction with constant change on both sides. And as we were talking about before, it would be really easy to go in a bad direction if we're not aware that this is the structure that's happening, and we're not able to assess the outcomes that we're driving ourselves towards.

Tristan Harris:

There's a famous Zen story. It's called "Maybe." The story is of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. And one day his horse runs away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came for a visit and they tell him, "Such bad luck," they say empathetically. And the farmer replies, "Maybe." The next morning, the horse returned bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful!" the neighbors exclaimed. The old man replied, "Maybe." The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses and was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on this horrible misfortune, and the farmer replied, "Maybe." The day after, the military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army, and seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out, and he replied, "Maybe."

Tristan Harris: And the point of, the truth of the statement is always ongoing and reinterpreted based on the next phase, the next 1% change, the next set of things that unfolds from the last change, and the unknowability of complex systems and chaos is kind of what we're circling around here. Another one of your examples that I think is related, which is the kind of transformation that diminishes people's capacities for self-awareness, dementia, or cognitive decline. I actually had a family member who went through that process, and it's a very challenging thing. Because there's actually a part of that person who

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is enjoying their life, maybe in a more ignorance is bliss kind of way. And yet they're not really aware of the erosion of their own capacities as it's happening. And I actually think there's a very close parallel to what's happening with technology where there is a derangement, there is a diminishment of our capacities, but one way, we're not fully aware of those consequences, even in that TikTok case of the ten-year-old who doesn't know what they're signing up for over the next four years, five years of how they're going to be transformed.

L.A. Paul: Yeah. Yeah. So, there's one way in which it's obviously bad, this cognitive decline or change. But then I think there's an open question. It's not necessarily bad and we have to have a way of, carefully assessing that and making a determination. So, here's something that seems obviously bad. I say, "Well, I could have a frontal lobotomy. I've got a lot of stress going on right now. COVID is terrible. I've got a lot of work going on." If I just had a frontal lobotomy, life would be beautiful, and I could just make sure that I had enough money in the bank to make sure I had New York Super Fudge Chunk every single day, I'd be pleased as punch, and a beautiful view look out on. And why wouldn't I do that? Now, I wouldn't be able to do philosophy anymore, I assume.

Tristan Harris: But then you wouldn't want to do philosophy because you'd be perfectly happy in your bubble.

L.A. Paul: I would have no desire at all to do philosophy. And why would I want to worry about those intractable questions? And it's very stressful to have to think about these things that don't have clear answers, right? No, have some ice cream and look out the window. So, this goes back to the question about informed consent and corrupted testimony, right? Like, I would testify to you enthusiastically, I'm sure, with great commitment about how happy I was in my new state. Is it a good idea for me to do that? Well, right now, I certainly think no, it's not a good idea. But there are other more complicated cases where maybe it's not obvious, so. Becoming a parent. I think becoming a parent often really just creates a certain kind of impairment. I love my children in a fundamental way more than I love myself. That means I make lots of destructive choices.

L.A. Paul: I spend money, way more money than I would on all kinds of things. I don't get enough sleep. I don't do as much work as I would otherwise do. I don't spend as much time with my friends. Yes, I get lots of joy out of being with my children, although there's quite a bit of suffering as well, as anyone who's a parent knows. There's a sense in which, taking the mommy drug reduces me. I'm just going to be frank. I think it does. And that's something that I'm glad of. I now willingly trade that. But there's a real reason why I have a lot of respect for any woman who doesn't want to become a mother, because I think you give up a huge amount and it's not clear why it's rational to give that up. Honestly.

L.A. Paul: So, with the frontal lobotomy case, I think I can step back and say, "Well, it's just worse to have a frontal lobotomy." But that's me talking now

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without the frontal lobotomy. Why do I prioritize the self that has the cognitive capacities I have over this intellectually reduced self who might be incredibly happy and satisfied with their life? I don't think there's a principled distinction that we can make. There's just no straightforward way to determine which way is better.

Tristan Harris:

I think one of the big pivots that has to happen in the ethical discussion here, so far, we've been trying to adjudicate this is, is the transformed agent happier better off or well, or not, from their perspective? And how can we locate an authoritative position to stand from that can look at all these factors and say, "Well, this is actually genuinely good?" Well, one way is, if you do the cognitive decline example or the dementia example, is if we inadvertently reduce the capacity of civilization so that it couldn't keep going anymore. If we took away the capacity for the game to continue to be played in the James Carse, Finite and Infinite game sense, if the game can no longer continue, we know that we're making transformative changes that are unsustainable.

Tristan Harris:

Back in the early 2000s, I would go to some climate change debates and you would hear these conversations about, "Well, the earth is going to get warmer and maybe there's going to be some good things coming with that, because some people like the warmer weather," and you can always talk about the Faustian bargain. There's many positive things that are going to come from climate change. There's going to be all sorts of unintended consequences. But if you actually change the entire thing so that life itself can't continue because you just eradicated a huge chunk of the web of life, and now the pollinators don't exist. We need to look at it as nature as a system or human society or civilization if we care about that, as a system and say, What are the conditions that would allow that continue? Because otherwise, we get trapped in the kind of Zen, Maybe story.

Aza Raskin:

I think there's something really interesting here, which is what is responsibility? In some sense of responsibility is being aware of the externalities of your actions and then seeking or being beholden to reduce the negative externalities. And, if you reduce the capacity to seek out or see those negative externalities, we can say at sort of the global scale, that that is demonstrably worse. That is a poor transformation because it limits the sustainability of the system as a whole.

L.A. Paul:

Maybe you can't know what outcome you're getting to, but you can know that you're doing something that's transformative. And you can know, for example, that certain types of transformations lead to good results, whatever they are, and other types lead to bad results. And so, your obligation is to choose the right type of transformation, even if you don't know the details. But even if you don't know the details, then there's a principle reason for you to not strike that match and drop it into the pool of oil or whatever. If you know is going to create a huge fire, that's just the wrong thing to do. Even if you don't know how bad the fire's going to be or what it's going to burn or anything like that, you have enough information to not do it.

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- Tristan Harris: One of our mentors in our community talks about omni-considerate choices that to have theory of mind is to be able to consider, if I make a recommendation, you trust it more. If the person says, "Well, I recommend this for you, but not for this person and that person. And here's why." And the more distinction that they make, the more omni-considerate demonstrating, they have the capacity to be, meaning they're considering more balance sheets, more people who are impacted, short and long-term versus just short term. The more demonstrations of consideration, the more trust you might have in that system. That doesn't mean though, that that system can be godlike and see everything, because in a chaotic and complex world, you can't know all things. But certainly, one in which someone is considering more than someone who's considering less and would probably opt for the agent who's considering more in the transformative relationships they have.
- L.A. Paul: But again, I want to say like, sometimes there's just no answer. You ask somebody, "Would you rather be a pianist or a top engineer for Google or a politician?" And let's just say, each of those careers would be satisfying in different ways. There's a sense in which you just can't compare them.
- Tristan Harris: One thing I'm just taking away so far right now is an incredible humility for what we might be doing as we interact in the world at all, to be self-aware of [inaudible 00:33:35] when we're making decisions, and we can be scorching parts of earth with every little micro-step and change and attention shift that we make.
- L.A. Paul: There is a problem I think when there's a kind of persuasive tech where it's clear that the motivation for the persuasion is not in the best interest of the individual, but rather for profit. That's a problem. But when there's a different argument, which I think can be made that these changes in individuals, in society, in some sense, there's something really interesting about them, right? Like, I love my iPhone. I love using the apps. I love texting. Facebook, and Twitter, all these things, they're used for good in lots of cases. So, if we just focus on that, then how do we compare the life pre-technology to post-technology? One of the reasons why I think there is a kind of philosophical crisis here is that it's not like there's an easy answer even here. I want to emphasize again, I think the real failure on the Google bus is not necessarily that they went ahead and did what they were doing, but rather that there was a kind of refusal to really think about this in full brutality.
- Tristan Harris: L.A. Paul is a Professor of philosophy and cognitive science at Yale University. Her research explores questions about, among other things, the nature of the self, decision-making, and essence. She's the author of the 2014 book, Transformative Experience. And L.A. will be joining our Podcast Club for a discussion and Q&A on Friday, August 20th. You can find details at humanetech.com. Another exciting thing you can find at humanetech.com is that we're hiring. The Center for Humane Technology is hiring for two full-time roles, Director of Mobilization and a Digital

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Manager. And we're really especially excited about candidates who are truly aligned with our mission, which is why we wanted to share them here with you.

Tristan Harris: For the Director of Mobilization, we're looking for experienced community builders who can help us support the responsible and humane technology ecosystem. And for the Digital Manager, we're looking for a skilled communicator who can lead the execution of all of our digital strategy in a way that respects our audience's attention. And if that's you or someone you know, please visit humanetech.com/careers.

Tristan Harris: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit organization, working to catalyze a humane future. Our Executive Producer is Stephanie Lepp. Our Senior Producer is Natalie Jones and our Associate Producer is Noor Al-Samarrai. Dan Kedmey is our Editor-at-Large. Provisional music and sound designed by Ryan and Hays Holladay. And a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible. You can find show notes, transcripts, and more at humanetech.com. And a very special thanks goes to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Evolve Foundation, among many others. I'm Tristan Harris. And if you made it all the way here, let me just give one more thank you to you for giving us your undivided attention.