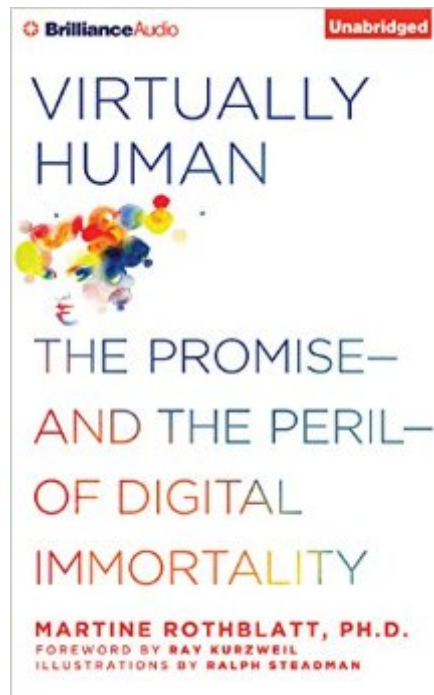


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Virtually Human: The Promise_and The Peril_of Digital Immortality



Synopsis

Virtually Human explores what the not-too-distant future will look like when cyberconsciousness—simulation of the human brain via software and computer technology—becomes part of our daily lives. Meet Bina48, the world's most sentient robot, commissioned by Martine Rothblatt and created by Hanson Robotics. Bina48 is a nascent Mindclone of Martine's wife that can engage in conversation, answer questions, and even have spontaneous thoughts that are derived from multimedia data in a Mindfile created by the real Bina. If you're active on Twitter or Facebook, share photos through Instagram, or blogging regularly, you're already on your way to creating a Mindfile—a digital database of your thoughts, memories, feelings, and opinions that is essentially a back-up copy of your mind. Soon, this Mindfile can be made conscious with special software—Mindware—that mimics the way human brains organize information, create emotions and achieve self-awareness. This may sound like science-fiction, but the nascent technology already exists. Thousands of software engineers across the globe are working to create cyberconsciousness based on human consciousness and the Obama administration recently announced plans to invest in a decade-long Brain Activity Map project. Virtually Human is the only audiobook to examine the ethical issues relating to cyberconsciousness and Rothblatt, with a Ph.D. in medical ethics, is uniquely qualified to lead the dialogue.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rothblatt is a believer- if that's not too strong a word- in Ray Kurzweill's notion of the "Singularity"-

the point at which machine intelligence will surpass that of humans, and evolution and the destiny of mankind will be forever changed. Before we reach that point, Rothblatt believes we will reach a point in the very near future in which human minds can be embodied in artificial machines, creating "mind clones." This is a very clever notion, as it sidesteps one of the biggest problems in AI: How do you go from representing propositions in a machine (trivially easy) to embodying an actual conscious mind? Simple, says Rothblatt. You start with an already-existing mind and just transplant it into the machine! This is of course not a trivial thing, but Rothblatt believes that (1) it is possible to create a machine with consciousness (2) we are very close to being able to do that and (3) such a "mind clone" would have far reaching societal and legal implications. "Virtually Human" is therefore divided in to three sections, roughly speaking, each of which addresses one of Rothblatt's contentions. Rothblatt's initial task is to argue that It is possible to embody a conscious intelligence in a machine. I am myself predisposed to the idea that AI is possible, but I am also critical of many of the arguments that have been made for AI in the past. Rothblatt tries to address some of the more well-known criticisms of AI, but I don't think she does a particularly convincing job. A major problem with the way she addresses the question is that she never actually defines consciousness, or sets a benchmark for what level of complexity and awareness would be necessary to call an entity conscious.

I'm dubious that humanity will achieve anything near to virtual immortality via artificial intelligence this century, let alone over the next decade or three. I'm not sure that being persuaded of its inevitability is really necessary, however, to be entertained and even a little informed by this book. The brief bio on the back of my advance copy was intriguing. This is the founder and CEO of Sirius Radio. She founded a pharmaceutical company to buy and produce a "shelved" medication for her daughter, potentially extending the lives also of other sufferers of a rare disease. She's either an undiscovered movie-of-the-week candidate, or a bit of a tall tale-teller. Hmm. Let's check her out on the internet! When I did some digging, the author's story resolved as even more impressive-slash-unlikely. I won't go into all of it, but this is a woman with multiple degrees and successes in several fields, and distinctions including being the highest paid female CEO in the U.S. Born genetically male, she married, had children, and then had gender reassignment surgery in the early 1990s. Her marriage and relationship with her children has survived and evidently thrived where many post-op transsexuals report very much the opposite experience. Did I mention the part where she became a pilot so that she could help expedite emergency medical deliveries? Rothblatt's story shares much with the bios of Sir Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, and Carl

Sagen....with maybe a little L. Ron Hubbard on the side. The parallels there are also a bit eerie. She's got a passionate interest in speculative science, and has actually started a "transhumanist" religion.

I'd like to give six stars for the first half of this book, and four stars for the second, hence five stars. In general the book is quite incredible--it's like having a conversation with an off-the-charts smart friend, and watching in fascination as they tell you not only where technology is going, but also what the ramifications will be. And the ramifications of the ramifications. And it's not a pie-in-the-sky forecast, but "the first elements are already here" forecast, by someone who created Sirius radio and now works in robotics (with a forward written by the Google director of engineering--someone else who's ALL OVER current technological trends). Wow. The basic premise is that within 20 years, we'll have the technical capacity to copy your brain into a computer (and back), sort of like we do with artificial hearts today (e.g., something else pumping your blood while you get a heart transplant). And that once *that* technology is there (e.g., for people with Alzheimer's), it will be easy enough for other people to copy their brains and keep them around, for fun, for Alzheimer's protection, for "immortality" or contacts with friends and family after you die, etc. And the artificial brain will even be able to think and use logic and have judgement calls on ambiguous input, and ethics, all of which are also in their early (or less early) stages in software today--though they'll need the boost that hardware and software are on track to give them.

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