ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑ

Philosophical Anthropology

Human Nature and the Digital Culture: The Case for Philosophical Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: Within contemporary Western philosophy, the issues of human nature and our place in the cosmos have largely been ignored. In the resulting vacuum, the various subcultures that have grown up around the digital computer (the so-called "digital culture") have been actively defining and shaping popular conceptions of what it means to be human and the place of humanity in the digital era. Here one finds an implicit view of human nature that includes recurrent themes such as: an emphasis on mind as information independent of the physical body, the obsolescence of the human body, the elimination of human particularity, the malleability of human nature, and the logic and orderliness of the computer as a metaphor for the cosmos. This view of human nature shares important characteristics with Cartesian and Christian views of human nature long rejected by philosophers. A renewal of the philosophical anthropology movement — devoted to the issues of human nature and humanity's place in the cosmos — permits us to see the inadequacy of the conception of human nature implicit in the digital culture.

What am I that I am a human being? What is my place in the nature of things? At the close of the twentieth century, facing the dawn of a new millennium, the goal of *paidea* or philosophy educating humanity might best be achieved by philosophy recovering and reaffirming its interest in these two anthropological questions. In this essay I defend this claim through an analysis of the view of human nature implicit in the digital culture. For the past several decades, while philosophers have largely ignored anthropological issues, the sub-cultures swirling around computers and other digital technologies have been busy shaping and defining the way in which human nature will be conceived in the next millennium. More often than not, however, these views of human nature are produced in a philosophical and critical vacuum with little thought given to what we as human beings are and what we might become. Philosophers must address this vacuum by renewing their responsibility to speak to these issues, once again taking up the work of articulating a philosophical anthropology and providing the guidance on these issues that they once did.

Reflection on our nature as human beings and our place in the cosmos has a long tradition in philosophy throughout the world and has surely been a central concern in the history of Western philosophy. It is not, I think, overstatement to say that since the time of Socrates the question of human nature has been a central preoccupation of philosophers. Theories of human nature can be found in the works of Plato and Aristotle, were a concern of Descartes, Locke, and Hume, and Kant himself produced a work on anthropology.

Within recent Western philosophy, these issues were addressed most explicitly by philosophical anthropologists. The movement of philosophical anthropology has been most closely associated with a series of German philosophers writing between the two world wars. It is generally thought to have begun with Max Scheler's *Man's Place in Nature*. In that book, published in 1928, Scheler begins by recognizing the human being's problematic nature. Writes Scheler, "Man is more of a problem to himself at the present time than ever before in all recorded history" (4). It is the precariousness revealed by the human being's self-reflection that leads Scheler to address the twin questions, "What is man?" and "What is man's place in the nature of things?" These two questions set the tone for the development of philosophical anthropology over the next several decades, in works by such leading figures as Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, Michael Landmann, and Ernst Cassirer. A rather diverse lot, these thinkers were in agreement that one of the fundamental questions facing human beings was the matter of their nature and place in the cosmos. Though largely forgotten today, they produced some of the most perceptive analyses of human nature in the history of philosophy.

Today the philosophical anthropologist's commitment to these issues must seem rather quaint and anachronistic as much contemporary philosophy either actively disdains the issues of human nature and the human condition or simply ignores them. As Charles Taylor notes, we've become very nervous and squeamish about "human nature." "The very words ring bells. We fear that we may be setting up some reified image, in face of the changing forms of human life in history, that we may be prisoners of some insidious ethnocentrism" (vii). How we have arrived at this state of affairs is a complex narrative that includes many different threads both within philosophy and in wider cultural and social trends as well. Regardless of the reasons, we have now been long assured that man is dead and philosophical anthropology is best confined to the dustbins of philosophical history.

And yet, while philosophers no longer concern themselves with these issues, the need to address them hasn't disappeared. For more than simply a philosophical problem, the issues addressed by the philosophical anthropologist are also human problems, definitive of the human condition. Both historically and cross-culturally, people have been motivated to wonder about the human condition and their place in the cosmos. Sherry Ortner argues that there are certain basic existential questions or structures which are apparent in all cultures and while the individual answers posed to these questions admit of great variability, the questions themselves have a certain constancy and regularity. The anthropological questions are just such basic existential issues. And they are the questions that motivate individuals to turn to philosophy in search of answers.

Indeed, it is perhaps the case today that the need for a philosophical anthropology is more acute than ever before. The crisis in our self-reflection noted by Scheler in 1928 and the impetus of much philosophical anthropology has only deepened in the second half of the century. Technologies from genetic engineering to artificial intelligence have wrought fundamental changes in our understanding of human nature. Indeed, technological developments have challenged much of our taken-for-granted knowledge about human nature and the future of the human species. At the close of the twentieth century, there is, as Scott Bukatman notes, "an uneasy but consistent sense of human obsolescence, and at stake is the very definition of the human... .[O]ur ontology is adrift" (20).

In "What is Man?" Martin Buber argues that it is as times such as these, when our ontology is adrift, that anthropological reflection becomes most insistent. "The strict anthropological question...becomes insistent in times when, as it were, the original contact between the universe and man is dissolved and man finds himself a stranger and solitary in the world" (132). Throughout the history of humanity, Buber argues, we have constructed images or maps of the universe that transform it from a cold and barren wasteland into a secure home.

Today such images or maps of the universe have become difficult to construct. Our world and the cosmos are complex, culturally, technologically, and scientifically, and we are no longer able to form an image that makes them comprehendable and livable, that transforms them into a home. We seek an image or map of the universe which accounts for our place and our significance. But the universe frustrates us, is too unruly and chaotic to fit into any imaginable frame. Philosophers further frustrate this need by refusing to speak of human nature and our place in the cosmos.

But where philosophers fear to tread, technology reigns supreme. As Wendy Brown warns, "When we can no longer declare what is True in the registers of morality, cosmology, or politics, the spaces evacuated by such Truths do not remain empty but, to the contrary, grow crowded with technical truths—instrumentalist discourse dangerously cut loose from regulating values and substantive, accountable aims" (66). The truth of Brown's claim is borne out in an analysis of the view of human nature implicit in the digital culture.

By the term "digital culture" I mean to include the vast array of sub-cultures that have grown up around the modern digital computer. This includes researchers in the traditional fields of computing such as artificial intelligence, but also hackers and phreakers and techno-pagans and extropians. Included are theorists of the computer culture such as Sherry Turkle and Mark Poster, but also advertisers who sell technological dreams and utopias, science fiction writers such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, futurists such as Alvin Toffler and Kevin Kelly, magazines such as *Wired* and *Mondo 2000*, and visions of the digital culture emanating from Hollywood, in movies such as *TRON*, *Bladerunner*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. An analysis of the view of human nature implicit in these sub-cultures is warranted both because of the ways in which computers are today deeply implicated in and intertwined with our thinking about human nature and because of the equally deeply suspicious view of human nature to which proponents of the digital culture subscribe.

That computers are today deeply implicated in our thinking about human nature is clear. From thinking of the mind as the software running on the brain to future visions of the symbiotic merger of human and machine, computers play a defining role in contemporary conceptions of human nature. David Bolter argues that the computer is a defining technology, a paradigm for understanding and redefining culture, including our views of human nature. "A defining technology defines or redefines man's role in relation to nature. By promising (or threatening) to replace man, the computer is giving us a new definition of man, as an 'information processor,' and of nature as 'information to be processed'" (40). Sherry Turkle, too, argues that the computer has become an object with which to think about human nature. As a mechanical device that is seemingly able to think, the computer challenges basic assumptions about what it means to be human. "The computer raises questions about where we stand in nature and where we stand in the world of artifact. We search for a link between who we are and what we have made, between who we are and what we might create, between who we are and what, through our intimacy with our own creations, we might become" (12). Langdon Winner argues that choices we make about computer technology intimately involve questions about "who to be." "The future of computer and the future of human relations—indeed, of human being itself—are now thoroughly intertwined."

Beyond influencing how we should think about human nature, the very line separating human beings from computers has become blurred. We are increasingly surrounded by computers and microprocessors taking care of many aspects of life's daily rituals. Young kids today grow up surrounded by computers from Play School's Speak and Spell, to Nintendos, Sega-Genesis, and PCs surfing the Web. Studies have shown that many people who own computers give them personal names and refer to them as persons. In *The Media*

Equation, Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass report on a series of experiments they undertook which show how people treat computers with politeness, perceive personalities in their computers, and often interact with their computers much in the same way they would interact with a real person. In popular discourse we have grown accustomed to referring to the manner in which we need to reprogram ourselves, the necessity of debugging our personality, the fact of our hardwiring, or the need to get wired. The increasing integration of computers in our lives has led many to argue that the once clear boundaries separating human beings from machines are disappearing. In *The Mode of Information*, Mark Poster suggests that "[a] symbiotic merger between human and machine might literally be occurring, one that threatens the stability of our sense of the boundary of the human body in the world. What may be happening is that human beings create computers and then computers create a new species of humans" (4).

It is clear, then, that the computer is deeply implicated in our thinking about human nature. That we should be suspicious of the view of human nature implicit in much of the computer culture can be made clear through a description and analysis of that view. It is to that task that I now turn.

While the digital culture is large and diverse, several themes recur widely throughout it. These themes suggest that the implicit view of human nature in the digital culture is essentially a traditional Cartesian and Christian view long rejected by philosophers and critiqued by philosophical anthropologists. In the digital culture, our essential characteristic is mind. Our body, gender, race, age, and ethnicity are inessential to who we really are. Who we are can be changed as easily as rewriting a line of programming code. Allow me to discuss these themes in greater detail.

(1) We are our mind. In cyberspace, it is often remarked, we exist in a purely disembodied state; we are information, patterns of words and ideas. As John Perry Barlow notes, in the silent world of cyberspace, "all conversation is typed. To enter it, one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone" (460). Barlow describes cyberspace as the new home of mind, a place where the weary flesh is not welcomed. "As a result of the opening of Cyberspace, humanity is now undergoing the most profound transformation of its history. Coming into the Virtual World, we inhabit information. Indeed, we become information. Thought is embodied and the flesh is made word" (481). Elizabeth Reid claims that in the world of computer-mediated conversation (cmc) the body becomes an entity of pure meaning; freed of the physical, it completely enters the realm of the symbol, unbounded by physical measures (328). Howard Rheingold argues that in cyberspace people are treated as thinkers and transmitters of ideas, "not carnal vessels with a certain appearance and way of walking and talking" (*Virtual Community* 26).

The apotheosis of this claim is the belief, widely replicated in Hollywood movies, cyberpunk science fiction, and even theories of robotics and artificial intelligence, that in the future human beings will be able to download their mind into cyberspace, freeing themselves from their bodies and living out a virtual existence. This digital future of humanity is the central vision of Hans Moravec's *Mind Children*. Moravec imagines a future in which it would be possible to liberate the *mind* from its biological substratum, transplanting it, layer by layer, into a computer. Moravec suggests that a person's identity would be preserved in such a process because the essence of a person, their self-identity, is the pattern and the process going on in one's head and not the machinery supporting that process. The final stage of this process comes when we move the mind into cyberspace itself, completely freed from any body-image, achieving the ideal of a "truly bodiless mind", nothing but pure ego.

(2) The body is obsolete. In the digital culture, the body is obsolete, limiting, and must be transcended. The body is mere noise, repulsive, needing to be repressed. Turkle's *The*

Second Self touches frequently on the loathing of the body that is common to hackers and AI researchers. In Grant Fjermedal's *The Tomorrow Makers: A Brave New World of Living Brain Machines*, this theme is regularly returned to. The body is thought to be a source of failure, disgust, limitation that must be overcome in order to become pure mind. Programmer and hacker Charles Lect puts it this way: "You're stuck in the mire of pig shit. All of us are. You've got to be free of that. You've got to become pure mind" (199). In Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the elite cyberspace cowboys live for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace. Here too the body is thought to be mere meat. It is held in contempt; it interferes with one's ability to stay jacked into cyberspace for long periods of time. It is a prison that can only be escaped while one's disembodied consciousness roams the ethereal regions of cyberspace. Human perfection can only be found in gaining freedom from the body. As performance artist Stelarc puts it, "It's time to question whether a bipedal, breathing body with binocular vision and a 1,400 cc brain is an adequate biological form. It cannot cope with the quantity, complexity, and quality of information it has accumulated" (qtd. in Dery 160). Stelarc envisions a future in which technology "invades" the body, giving us the freedom to transcend the limitations of our DNA.

(3) Difference is eliminated. In this future world of cyberspace, where life is digital and we are all just information, gender, race, and ethnicity are inessential. Information is gender free, has no race, and doesn't come with an accent. Discussions of the Internet regularly reinforce the belief that all that matters is mind, the ideas, words, not the person to whom they belong. John Coates puts it this way: "The great equalizing factor is that nobody can see each other online so ideas are what really matter. You can't discern age, race, complexion, hair color, body shape, vocal tone, or any of the other attributes that we all incorporate into our impressions of people." In cyberspace, age, race, gender, sex are the noise which disrupts the flow of pure information, the difference which disrupts our seamless communities. To enter cyberspace is to forsake one's specificity in search of a communion of pure mind. The technology of the Internet is a technology that permits us to ignore differences and concentrate on one similarity, we can all type.

(4) Human nature is fundamentally malleable. The inherent malleability of human nature and the human self can be seen in the popular New Age philosophy of the Extropians. "No ambition, however extravagant, no fantasy, however outlandish, can any longer be dismissed as crazy or impossible. This is the age when you can finally do it all. Suddenly technology has given us powers with which we can manipulate not only external reality—the physical world—but also, and much more portentously, ourselves. You can become whatever you want to be" (Regis 104). Within the computer culture, the human being becomes a plug and play entity, composed of various parts that can be updated with the simple flip of a switch or the insertion of a new line of code. Eric Gullichsen, a virtual reality researcher, sees this as the ultimate promise of virtual reality. He writes, "As you conduct more of your life and affairs in cyberspace your conditioned notion of a unique and immutable body will give way to a far more liberated notion of 'body' as something quite disposable and, generally, limiting. You will find that some bodies work best in some situations while others work best in others. The ability to radically and compellingly change one's body-image is bound to have a deep psychological effect, calling into question just what you consider yourself to be" (qtd. in Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* 191). Gullichsen imagines a future in which trying on new identities becomes an integral part of our lives.

The malleability of the self and the ease with which we might change our nature is nowhere more evident than in discussions of the phenomenon of mudding. MUDs are networked, multiparticipant, text-based virtual reality systems found on the Internet. Howard Rheingold characterizes muds as places where identity is fluid. "The grammar of CMC media," he writes, "involves a syntax of identity play: new identities, false identities,

multiple identities, exploratory identities, are available in different manifestations of the medium" (*Virtual Community* 147). Elizabeth Reid makes a similar point in her discussion of IRC, "The boundaries delineated by cultural constructs of beauty, ugliness, fashionableness, etc. can be bypassed on IRC. It is possible to appear to be, quite literally, whoever you wish" (329).

(5) We are at home in the circuit board. The digital culture creates for the human being a sense of home, a cosmos in which to experience and perhaps control the increasingly fragmented lives so many people live. The computer offers us a world of order and logic. Cosmology comes from the Greek words *kosmos*, or world, and *logos*, or reason concerning. The computer constructs for us a world concerned only with reason or logos. The computer is a formal mechanism that works according to the principles of logic and creates a world for us the building blocks of which are the logical algorithms of programs. Turkle argues that at the heart of the computer culture is the idea of constructed, rule-governed worlds, micro-worlds that are completely decipherable in terms of their programs (174). Where this world is chaotic and difficult to comprehend, the computer offers us the image of a world of order, logic, reason, and transparency. While we may have lost our cosmological map in this world, the computer offers us a ready replacement: the pristine, orderly lines of the flowchart, which becomes the new image of an orderly and computable nature. Flowchart, program, and microchip become part of the new cosmology. To the homeless and the rootless of this fragile world, images of the web spanning the globe, of the Internet encircling the world, of Netscape providing us with connections to the world are comforting on a metaphysical level. They assure us that we too may once again master the world and hold it in our hands. Our own lives gain a sense of order and stability when reflected back to us in our Web pages. While we may have little control over the world around us, we can define the world and our links to it via our own home page.

These recurring themes in the computer culture reveal that the dominant image of human nature in the 21st century is an image of human nature from the 17th century. In its valorization of mind over body, its yearnings for a transcendent state of pure mind freed from the prison of the flesh, its denigration of gender, race, and ethnicity as accidental properties, and its desire for an orderly, pristine, almost mathematical universe, this view of human nature bears a striking resemblance to human nature in traditional Cartesian and Christian thought. Ironically, while most of the philosophical movements of this century have been devoted to rooting out the vestiges of Cartesian thought, what we find at the heart of the computer culture is a contemporary form of Cartesianism. The limitations of this view of human nature can be brought out through a brief consideration of an alternative framework in which to think about human nature.

An alternative framework might begin by drawing on a distinction Clifford Geertz makes between thick and thin descriptions. Too often, our accounts of human nature are couched in terms of thin descriptions that are ultimately not very revealing. Our goal in thinking about human nature ought to a be a thick description of human beings that reveals the complexities of what it is to be human. The task of philosophical anthropology is to work toward such a thick description of human nature. Geertz's own cultural view of the human animal is another, more contemporary view as is the work of socialist feminists who espouse an historical and dialectical view of human nature. Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* as well as the work of Susan Bordo and Iris Marion Young are especially noteworthy.

While there are important differences in these approaches, all of them are in agreement on a number of significant points which establishes a basic framework, what might be referred to as a "bio-cultural framework," in which to address the issue of human nature. Central to each of these approaches to human nature is a rejection of dualism and the belief that we

must begin by reflecting on the whole human being with the ultimate goal being a comprehensive account of human nature. As Douglas Browning explains in regard to philosophical anthropology, "It is the ultimate task of philosophical anthropology to provide a metaphysical explanation of man which is adequate to his full being" (85). An account of human nature should not narrow the human being down to mere consciousness, rationality, or mind but should deal with the whole human being. Socialist feminists such as Jaggar have also criticized conceptions of human nature in which our biological or natural component is perceived to be at odds with the cultural and social aspect of human nature. Common to these attempts to exorcise the demon of dualism is an approach to human nature which emphasizes the complex, interdependent nature of biology, culture, and our environment.

One cannot simply isolate some pure biological substratum independent of mind or culture. Indeed, our very nature as cultural beings is enabled by our biological constitution. Nor is biology a source of limitation to human life, for it is our biological constitution, developed in unison with our cultural evolution that enables the development of culture and civilization. In philosophical anthropology this point is most often made by pointing to the correlative nature of biology and culture in human beings. Michael Landmann, for instance, refers to the simultaneity of mutual interdependence that exists between biology and culture (261). One can understand the human being as a whole only by coming to see these two mutually interrelated sides. The interdependence of the cultural and biological development of the human being has long been noted in both archaeological and anthropological research. Geertz argues, for instance, that cultural and biological development go hand in hand. "Between the cultural pattern, the body, and the brain, a positive feedback system was created in which each shaped the progress of the other..." (48).

This bio-cultural framework leads to a greater awareness of the ways in which abstract theories of human nature can obscure the concrete differences among actual human beings. Because human beings require culture as part of their constitution, to understand human beings is to understand their particular cultural, social, and historical backgrounds, all centrally ingredient to our constitution as human beings. Both Geertz and Jaggar in particular have been led by their work to focus on the particular, concrete, and local forms that human nature takes rather than merely on the universal, abstract, and general. Understanding human nature means understanding human beings in their particularity. Geertz has criticized Enlightenment views of human nature for emphasizing the constant, general, and universal in human nature at the expense of the vast variety of differences among human beings, both over time and from place to place (35). Similarly, Jaggar notes that any view of human nature must take into consideration the influence on an individual of that individual's age, sex, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. All are constitutive of our nature as human beings.

This reflection on philosophical anthropology, physical and cultural anthropology, and socialist feminism discloses a richly textured, thickly described framework for the study of human nature which seeks to overcome dualism by emphasizing the bio-cultural development of human life. I would suggest that an adequate understanding of the human being must begin from a standpoint that incorporates in a dialectical fashion both our biological and our cultural heritage, central ingredients in the production of the human being. I don't believe that the view of human nature one finds in the computer culture does this. The view of human nature one finds implicit in the theory, literature, movies, and advertising of the computer culture suggests that our bodies, our gender, our race and ethnicity, and countless other factors are irrelevant. It conceives of the body as our prisoner, a limitation, given over to sickness and failure. It emphasizes our rational nature while ignoring so much more of what we as human beings are. The significance of our biological

constitution, the important place given to our social and cultural environment, the role that being embodied in a particular body has on human life, are aspects of human nature obscured in the computer culture. As we reflect on the theme of philosophy educating humanity, I believe that philosophers have a responsibility to focus their attention and critical skills on the issue of human nature. In the void left by their refusal to consider this issue, technology has spun a weak and philosophically discredited view of human nature widely popular throughout the digital culture. A renewal of philosophical anthropology and the anthropological questions, "What am I that I am a human being?" and "What is my place in the nature of things?", is today, at the close of the twentieth century and the opening of a new, assuredly digital millennium, more necessary then ever.

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