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Of knowing, finitude, care and binding

There is school of Western thought that argues we can know the world through Reason. Rationalists like Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza hold this view. Against that claim, we have the school of empiricism in Berkeley, Locke and Hume that argues we only come to know the world through experiencing the world. Kant, in trying to reconcile reason and experience, came to realize a further problem. That problem is a quintessential one, found within limitations. As mortal beings, we cannot but be limited in terms of categories through which we construct and comprehend the world. Constrained and bracketed in space and time, between a here and there, and a now and a then, we are in essence, historical beings, and by extension storied beings.

Another way of understanding the limitation on being is to accept there are things that limited beings cannot fathom. For instance, although we are able to intuit infinity, we cannot comprehend infinity because at root, we are finite beings. As human beings, we cannot claim we know how an animal feels since we do not and cannot experience the world through animal being. When we then include experiences for which there are no words or transcend words, we come to the realization that language is itself a limitation. Put differently, we are existential, storied, linguistic, social beings.

Even more, humans are beings who care and who want to believe in something greater than them: we want to know why we are here, what happens to us when we die, what was here before us, whether we are alone, whether the Divine created us in their own likeness and care for us an unique individuals. Merging ideas together, we are meaningful beings: we seek reason for the phenomenal which lies before and beyond us (Abram, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), we seek meaning for our stories, for our very existence, fearful that we have lost meaning, faded our moral horizons and eclipsed of our ends through instrumental reason (Taylor, 1991). This is the human condition that binds us all within the same fate (Arendt, 1958).

Technological implications of being

But how did we get here? Why is it that we are posing these questions? Why do our questions have this tone in the coming to age of the Age of Reason? And in particular, where are the connections to technology and religion? Are we then not speaking of generalities? While we are talking about generalities: if we pause to reflect that we are discussing the foundation upon which we have divided the world into nature, culture and technology, claimed autonomy and attempted to create the world anew, in the process becoming demigods ourselves, we quickly see blurred outlines of the not-so-visible links to technology.

In brief, we got here through the domination of the West that defined the self, world, time and space. We got here through scientific revolutions that nearly displaced an ancient worldview (Cajete, 1994). We got here through patriarchal institutions that convinced us the way through knowledge is through force, dominating nature, where knowledge is equivalent to power (Merchant, 1980). We got here through believing the cosmos is a giant self-winding clock where no clockmaker need be present. We got here through the Western faith in Reason and centralized control through the nation state. We got here when we found the earth was more ancient than we thought and we might be related to simians. We got here in the naive belief we can commercialize the commons and hold claim to earth as private property. We got here because we divided a world (Willinsky, 1998) and forgotten Being (Heidegger, 1962).

Religion, technology and the descent into nihilism
While we have seen how technology is implicated, where is the religious thread? We find it in part, in religious interpretation for human beings to be masters of the world and in the conception of the Great Chain of Being. We find it in claims of a reversal of the Fall from Grace and original sin through Enlightenment. We find it within the Protestant ethic that animates capitalistic gain as work and value (Weber et al., 2002). We find it also in shades of Armageddon when whole populations perish within the blink of a nuclear eye. We find it in vain hopes of creating a new Eden on Earth. We find it in loss of nature from our discourse (Feng, 2001). We find it in social construction that equates wealth with success and the Good Life. We find it in the notion of the Earth as an Ark. We find it in notions of transcending our mortal coil through downloading our consciousness into machines. We find it in hints of the Tower of Babel when we translate the world into common language. We find it with the loss of innocence in eating of the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As expression of the Age, technology is deeply implicated within Western religious consciousness and symbolism.

But we have not as yet addressed the hesitancy in tone. Why for instance, is it important to dwell on existence and limitation? In part, because dwelling on our mutual limitation might be a collective corrective to the hubris associated with the domination of being. Why are we no longer certain and need to remind ourselves that human knowledge is always limited? That there can be *no* framework through which mere mortal beings can comprehend the ineffable and Divine? This stance was/is necessary to mitigate claims to supremacy. The tone associated with hesitancy is a legacy of nineteenth century nihilism, of questioning reason with reason. When we speak of nihilism, we also need to address the fear. The fear that we are merely existing and we can never live. The fear that we are little, finite beings, alone on a cold pebble, driven by blind planetary forces within the vastness of cosmos that does not care, nor is even aware of our being. The fear that this is all there is. The fear that there is no story (Fulford, 1999). If so, perhaps we need to take Noble seriously in his claim that Technology functions as religion, although we appear to be warring parties, all parties subscribe to the sign of technology in mutual warfare. It can be argued that this must be the end logic of reason, where reason turned on its head, leads us to self-doubt and extreme skepticism, of self, world, cosmos and God. It is perhaps no

accident when Heidegger wonders aloud in his existentially-based critique of technology, if the Gods are hiding or abandoned us in our human folly (Poggeler, 1966).

Of Virtue, Being, Knowing and Doing

In short, as limited beings, divinity is implicit in technology, since technology as process is about making, of creator and creation. As human beings, we are midway between animal and machine, Divinity and Nothingness, Hope and Despair. Existentialism, in the final analysis, is also about responsibility, for we cannot be aware of the consequence of our in/actions and shut our eyes. Thus, it might be perhaps by dint of our very mortality that we can aspire to virtue. Ethics and technology are at root, co-implicated.

With respect to intervention, other questions also need to be asked. Are we not able to undo the problems related to technology through technological fixes? In some ways we are already doing that when we mandate automobile inspection for carbon monoxide levels, when we have machines inspect for contamination in tap water, when we place technological restrictions on nuclear reactors. That is not enough. Can we also include cultural changes, as we refrain from habits that pollute, as we put moratoriums on human behavior, as we learn not to waste, as we place wellness on the social agenda, as we come to the aid of endangered animals? Although we are doing that with a measure of success, again, that is not enough. Given the depth and pervasiveness of the problem, arguably, we need to get at the philosophical roots of the problem. While danger of nihilism, despair and skepticism is all too real, we argue philosophical critique that begins with our human condition, fragility, mutuality and caring offers an existential way out of what appears as an impasse, through questioning being and existence. Since this approach also speaks in the language of the everyday, it is promising as a pedagogical approach that opens a framework for teachers to connect with students' deep concerns around living in a world that they did not make, but which borrows from their future.

In closing, to be sure there are many shades of existentialism (Friedman, 1973; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Sartre, 1957). This contribution does not and cannot, subscribe to all of these threads but to the central tenet of existence itself while borrowing aspects. In this contribution, I attempted to sketch more of nascent ideas that began a call for pedagogical return to existentialism (Feng, 2004). As an interpretive piece this paper is an exercise in hermeneutics through a method referred to in the literature as quotidian deconstruction; in the philosophical deconstruction of lived everyday existence.

Critique of technology from the existentialist standpoint offers promise of re-posing fundamental questions of concern to inheritors of the doctrine of modernity even as it deconstructs grand-narratives. In the process, we have opportunity for interdisciplinarity to bring together that which has been fragmented. Nature has not been petrified into raw standing resource (Heidegger, 1977). Through an existential pass, we write of hints of something bigger than us, of traces of the Divine in Nature (Kohak, 1984). Enchantment was never lost (Doll et al., 2001). Poetics and narratives lives within immediacy (Feng, 2003) to infuse and shape our lifeworld (Leggo, 1997; Jardine, 1998)). The quotidian reformulation of technology casts the problem of technology within the quintessential

relationship between being, knowing and doing (Feng, 2003). How we conceive of ourselves in relation to Other and lifeworld of which we are an integral part, how we understand that relationship profoundly affects how we act. Fundamental unity binds being, knowing and doing within the web of life (Capra, 1996); herein perhaps lies a humble path to hope and promise of renewal.

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