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The Lens and the Mirror: On Technology, Media, and “True Human Nature”

(Essay)

I will here contend that technology does not remove us further from true human nature; in fact, the opposite is more true. Technology evinces human nature. Technology is, after all, our invention. Like a lens or a mirror, which we created after observing them in nature (before we understood the physics of light that make them work), technologies show us ourselves. We don't always like what we see, and yes, distortions are part of the vision we receive. The technology, however, is not to blame for our faults, and the distortions it can be blamed for are of our own making. Our relationship with ourselves is such that we would find fault and note flaws in even the most perfect reflection or magnification of “true human nature” viewed in the finest mirror or most perfect lens. Confronted with such a vision, some of us would blame ourselves for our shortcomings and others would fault the lens and mirror; both responses are to some extent correct. Perfection, if such a thing exists, is beyond us. We can represent a perfect lens or mirror using mathematics, but not create a truly flawless one. We can imagine a perfect person, but our definitions of perfection prohibit us from becoming one. We can define a perfect society, but creating one is another matter; even if it could be done, the grandest utopia is likely to be dystopian for some with no choice but to live there. Modern society and media are our creations, and they are flawed, as we are. They document and embody our simultaneous hubris and self loathing and all points in between. Like it or not, the study of technology, modern society, and media brings us closer to an understanding of true human nature on the micro, meso, and macro level.

Inconsistencies are extremely human, though they're not something we usually revere in ourselves or in our societies or those of others. When a politician changes his or her mind, whatever the reasons, whatever the issue, it's seldom reported in a positive light. The same conventions appear in our entertainments, and we laugh or cry when a protagonist falls in love first with one person and then immediately with another, or when he or she can't make up his or her mind about what to wear or how to behave. We are most drawn to representations we can relate to, that seem to embody reality as we know it, or, in another example of our dichotomous nature, to those that fulfill our wishes, show us our fantasies. Changing our opinions, dislodging prejudices when empirical evidence supports alternative conclusions, and dealing with conflict are key to learning, growth, and progress and yet we seldom think in positive terms about these. Freud theorized that, on the individual level, our individualities are the result of a struggle between forces – the Id, the Ego, and the Superego (these are translations from German, in which Freud wrote 'the It', 'the I', and 'the Super-I' or 'Over-Self' / "das Es," "das Ich," and "das Über-Ich") – with differing priorities and values, further noting (in "Civilization and the Individual") that our societies are in some measure analogous, contain disparate and warring elements, also having a "a superego ("Über-Ich") under whose influence cultural development proceeds" (145-146). When too many demands are made by the Over-I on the It, the animal 'beneath', neurosis and discomfort arise. This hierarchy of abstract forces in conflict may have a neurological basis that we can study today using new techniques in Magnetic Resonance Imaging or yesterday in cases of traumatic injury to isolated areas of the brain such as in the famous example of Phineas Gage (Neuropsychology and Behavioral Neurology, Goldenberg & Miller). More contemporary theories such as Leon Festinger's explain the discomfort on the microlevel as cognitive dissonance, maintaining that distress is caused by "inconsistency between a person's two beliefs or a belief and an action"<sup>1</sup>. Marx and Engels explain the conflicts on the meso and macrolevels as one strictly between social classes and based in economics.

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<sup>1</sup> Griffin, E. M. (2009). *A First Look at Communication Theory*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. McGraw-Hill. P. 205

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Whatever the cause, it is truly human to struggle, to ponder conflicts between ideas or values, and to act inconsistently, and to have mixed emotions about this aspect of our nature. Burke expressed it in terms of drama: life is dramatic, and we are Hamlet Agonistes, treading the boards of a world that is a stage. It is the human experience. Though we cannot know for certain that a mouse does not sleep uneasily when it hoards food while others go hungry, that a leaf does not mourn for the tree it came from, that a stone does not wish it rested on the opposite side of the mountain, we have no evidence of any of these things.

As Locke<sup>2</sup> notes, the imperfection of words complicates our analysis. I'd contend, though, that we need said complication to keep us moving, that imperfection is not negative. Words like conflict, dissonance, stress, and struggle have negative connotations, yet the concepts they represent are the stuff of life. Take them away, and what's left is unengaging, just as, to accept Burke's tacit invitation to see life as though it were a play, drama would be empty without conflict. Aristotle, noting that art must be mimetic, an imitation of life, pointed out that the arc of the plot begins when the conflict is introduced. The imperfection, the dissonance, is the very stuff of which true human nature is made. Theorists like cognitive psychologists Richard Lazarus and Hans Selye work with this by making distinctions and finer gradations, in his case between types of stress, with distress being negative and "eustress" being positive. The physical effects of these two are similar if not the same, yet we vastly prefer one over the other. This distinction-making too is very human, as is value judgment. We are free to study the mouse, the leaf, the stone, or ourselves, and to prefer one among these above the others - it's likely we will! Technology, from the Greek *techne*, is the result of a systematic application of tools, craft, or skill. To improve or succeed requires pattern and persistence. Our contradictory natures mean we seldom make accidental, consistent progress towards a goal. We need to believe, to feel, to prefer, to be engaged to persist. Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that we become aware of these needs only after other, more basic drives are satisfied. A mouse, too, would die if he ceased to move, to eat, and to seek shelter;

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<sup>2</sup> Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. III: IX.

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the distinction between us arises, in my opinion, not from inherent superiority but in our ability to consistently meet and graduate from these basic needs.

Durkheim explains it this way:

Up to the present, thinkers were placed before this double alternative: either explain the superior and specific faculties of men by connecting them to the inferior forms of his being, the reason to the senses, or the mind to matter, which is equivalent to denying their uniqueness; or else attach them to some super-experimental reality which was postulated, but whose existence could be established by no observation. What put them in this difficulty was the fact that the individual passed as being the *finis natur*—the ultimate creation of nature; it seemed that there was nothing beyond him, or at least nothing that science could touch. ("The Cultural Logic of Collective Representations", 99)

Note that he doesn't ask here whether humankind's faith in its own superiority is misguided, only point out the limits of such thinking prior to scientific advances and the advent of sociology. He does shift to the word 'uniqueness', which is a more accurate descriptor, but then back to the medieval logic of man as *finis natur*. As the Oxford English Dictionary confirms (entry for "nature", item 7), " in the Middle Ages, and subsequently in some theological use, ... [the uniquenesses of human nature were] seen as given by God and arising out of his creation. Later interpretation treats them as either innate or shaped by experience, but with no reference to divine origin or purpose." Our theories shift to reflect our changing values and philosophies, including new possible alternative causes without necessarily or entirely leaving behind established thinking. Durkheim, writing about sociology and social logic, does not need to dismiss the notion of man as *finis natur* to praise scientific reflection on his subject -- he can sustain them both, view one through the lens of the other. Indeed, it is impossible to entirely isolate a given logic from what has come before, in part due to the imperfection of language pointed to by Locke and in part due to our social nature. Even if we represent everything mathematically, our thinking is informed by cultural context or adjusted for it (as explained in, for example, Giles' accommodation theory). Our social nature is explained in Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics, which hold

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that, as Griffin summarizes, "social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contradictory and opposing tendencies such as integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-nonexpression" (A-2).

Constructivist theories hold that we make meaning and value much as we make tools, creating mental models, defining patterns, choosing or allowing choices to be made for us. It's work. It's stressful. It's a part of human nature, as is complaining. In my view, we are like the mouse, always moving, always seeking, except when our biology requires us to pause, but unlike him we have a vast and accessible tradition of reflection and self-expression, an added complication we interpret individually or collectively as a blessing or a curse or something in between based on values, interactions (as in Sherif's social judgment theory), experience, and so on.

At this point, I'd like to treat the limits of any given theory. In mathematical logic, Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems suggest that "any effectively generated theory ... cannot be both consistent and complete." Though the logic of social theorists is not exclusively formal and mathematical, and many words, like true, valid, or infinite, have different and more particular meanings in math, it is likely that some variation of the incompleteness theorem is true, if unprovable, for social theories. To paraphrase the thesis of Gödel's 1931 paper, for any consistent, effectively generated formal theory there is a statement that is true, but not provable within that theory. In other words, if we look to a single theory to explain everything, we are likely to overlook something. As we've seen so far, human nature is defined by its ability to hold mutual, even contradictory theories, axioms, beliefs, and ideas on both the individual and societal levels. The fact that a given theory is likely to be incomplete should be inspirational rather than troubling, as it means there is always more to consider and discover. But, we are commonly like Freud, who pointed out, again in "Civilization and the Individual", that we tend to be influenced by the "impression left behind by the personalities of great leaders -- men of overwhelming

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force of mind or men in whom one of the human impulses has found its strongest and purest, and therefore often its most one-sided, expression" (146). When we discover, for example, that Thomas Jefferson did not free his slaves and had children who were born into slavery, the common response is to invalidate or reconsider his other thinking, as his public persona was that of a liberator and liberal philosopher, all because we expect consistency, prefer it, and prefer to think of ourselves as superior. We are hypocritical too, if in different ways, and we today routinely do many things that may be justly demonized someday. I do not suggest this is as it should be, only that it is as it is. True human nature is about holding these things we perceive as disparate together in one's psyche and in society.

Some who use the phrase "true human nature" prefer an opposite meaning from that implied in the doctrine of *finis natur*, believing that humans are a disproportionately violent and destructive force by comparison to other life. This view is particularly common among those who believe that our technology and media -- among the most obvious pinnacles of our accomplishments over thousands of years of recorded history -- are evils. We once gave our gods and our devils our own faces and our own traits, so, though such thinking is characteristic of the post-modern, post-atomic age, it is not really new thinking. It is the myth of the noble savage reborn, a myth preferable in many ways to that of the ascended man, but one that again superimposes a hierarchy of values, privileging one group over another without consideration, something humans always do, without consideration of the ambiguity of the specifics. This value system too places humanity at the center, as the greatest evil, where a purely rational one might see us as one part, sometimes very influential, often less so, of a much larger system. The notion that a more primitive culture, one without the solutions technology represents, would be somehow more perfect is no more valid than the worship of technological progress as infallible. All systems have their limits and flaws. Primitive human life was painful, rigorous, and, like the mouse's, more about meeting basic needs than is ours; satisfying and wonderful in some regards, maybe, but

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unsustainable on our planet given our current human population. In my opinion, the best operating assumptions are somewhere in between the extremes. We must use technology, and we must also be mindful and more aware of the consequences of our actions at every level.

One of the common complaints about technology and media is that we feel overwhelmed by it. It's true that the media is not a purely corrective lens or accurate mirror – we simultaneously desire truth and fantasy and end up with something that is neither and both – but any contention that we would be more in touch with “true human nature” if we had less information about ourselves available is highly questionable. The adoption of regressive ideologies does not guarantee a particular result. We may find enlightenment in manual labor, or we may come to feel as oppressed by it as we do by the constant flow of information. Education is key. The history of media-related technology, from the advent of symbols for sounds to the printing press, the radio, the television, the internet, is a history of education. We do the same thing over and over again with whatever tools are available. I'd go further than Santayana's famous quotation, would say that we are condemned to repeat history whether we study it or not. The value of study lies not exclusively in the ability to avoid our natures, which we cannot, but in its potential to grant us enhanced perspectives on them. The "human of tomorrow" will still eat, excrete (and stink, by the way), have sex, experience jealousy, rage, compassion, empathy. The potential for violence is always with us too. Complete transcendence of these is not a logical goal. We can improve, we can moderate consequences, we can teach mindfulness, we can choose not to do violence, but the attempt to eliminate things we perceive as negative in society is a very perilous road. Expecting our technology or our media to transcend these is likewise illogical. Of course, the media will transmit what some consider obscenity. Of course, the internet or the television will deliver pornography. Yes, there will be military applications, and these will often precede other possibilities. These are things that speak to our basic drives, come right after adequate food and shelter. Though there is value in the study of a

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theory like Gerbner's, shutting down or censoring the media or other technologies will not address root causes, would represent a commitment to denial and ignorance with at least as many potentially negative consequences as there are potentially positive outcomes. The contemporary internet is ripe with the same proclivities and depravities that characterized the ancient world - so what? Wallace's 1999 *The Psychology of the Internet*<sup>3</sup> is one source that points out the disinhibiting aspects of these technologies, comparing the effect to that of alcohol, which, incidentally, is known to have been with us at least since the Neolithic period. True human nature includes what we are when we are drunk.

Rather than take individual responsibility for all of our own actions, some prefer to blame society, feeling that because it is a larger system not under our exclusive control that we are less responsible for it. Durkheim writes "... it is recognized that above the individual there is society, and that this is not a nominal being created by reason, but a system of active forces" (to which Freud or Gurdjieff might reply that the individual is also a system of active forces, but no matter). Ecological models of society begin to explain the complex interconnectedness of our being. All models are metaphorical, and, as we've said, all theories incomplete, but these caveats should not be used to dismiss ideas with enormous potential value. The idea that humans are more violent than storms or cornered badgers is too simplistic, as is the idea that, as a higher order of being, we can simply do as we will. Actions have consequences, in moderation. Ideas inform actions to some extent. As individuals, we may be like single raindrops, may feel powerless to stop a storm, but we are granted far more choices than raindrops. When we dislike the media or the messages (if these can be distinguished -- McLuhan convincingly collapses them into one), we have all sorts of wonderful options we wouldn't have without these stimuli. Media literacy is far better, in my view, than media deprivation.

C. Wright Mills Social Imagination theory grounds individual "fruitful ... self consciousness" in awareness of the circumstances of the age in which we live and of those of a similar station in life.

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Wallace. Cambridge University Press.

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Technology and media offer greater opportunities for the advancement of awareness of others. It is true that if we lived in a small village and only knew a few people, our connections with those people could be deeper -- leaving aside the fact that these circumstances lead to, for example, witchcraft trials, we can see the appeal of an idealized past. But even in this case, awareness of others in villages beyond would be almost entirely non-existent, and the relationships and contacts we form in writing, on the phone, or via another means of electronic transmission offer much more. Further, one implication of Walther's social information processing theory is that we are capable of forming relationships that are just as close using these means that seem more removed, if with more effort and over more time.

The word human, the word nature, and the phrase that combines the two into one ('human nature'), bear the weight of our entire history, philosophies, and cultures. Each implies vast and interconnected mythologies. We are storytellers (Fisher's narrative paradigm is one theory that says so). When we have limited information, we magnify what we do perceive in predictable ways (as in, for example, online relationships, or when we ascribe positive traits to an attractive person or height to a powerful one). The word technology accesses another set of myths, though the incredible proliferation of applications and associations for this word are arguably a more recent development, characterize the modern, postmodern, and new millennial age. That there are two words, human and nature, itself suggests dichotomy and distinction, that these two things are not the same. That a phrase that uses true, human, and nature in combination exists suggests a) that the rhetor believes there are untrue human natures, b) that he believes there are natures other than human and c) that the word human is not itself enough to describe the concept this phrase is intended to represent. This is the myth: that there are untrue humans, and beasts whose natures are so alien to our own that they are due no empathy, lying in wait for the true, those whose characters are evident but who are endangered not only by these horrible creatures but by their own weaknesses, by the temptations of knowledge, by solutions that come in a box

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as opposed to those they make with their own hands and fully understand, by progress, by messages from people they cannot see and have not known for their entire lives. This myth is salted with truth -- life is dangerous, we can be hurt, we cannot simply will ourselves to follow a single path and not have to work at staying on it -- but, by and large, it is designed to concentrate authority in the hands of those who already have it, to divide us from other life and from people who are different in some way, to suggest there is one absolute truth, and none of these things must be so.

For myself, I do not believe this myth. I have my own. I believe that all life is connected, that empathy for all life is always appropriate, that all humans are true and due respect and consideration until distinguished by their actions, that knowledge is better than ignorance, and that wisdom comes from the consideration of multiple, disparate perspectives, that diversity is a source of strength. Further, I believe that the greatest power is entirely non-violent and without form, manifests great cause from small effect and, as a corollary, that the more obviously intrusive something is the less powerful it actually is, as we may devise means to deal with it effectively. An odorless gas is dangerous. A neverending stream of media is far less so, as, though it is daunting to contemplate at first, we may find a strategy to engage with it, live apart from it, or dwell anywhere on the continuum between these extremes, and it puts us more in touch with human nature to do so than we could be without the stimulus. An unspoken obsession is dangerous. An obvious, externalized one can be studied, considered, treated, and addressed in the most constructive possible way. Technology is simply a set of tools, and media simply a particular set of expressions enabled by technologies and sourced in individual makers and in the social systems they inhabit. Both speak to our needs, embody great sets of problems we have solved and those we have yet to address, and confront us with ourselves. Each documents human nature and, though no document is entirely without biases and completeness is not part of the equation, technology and media represent opportunities to witness true human nature rather than a divorce from it.

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When we become unaware of technology or media, when they become invisible to us and we no longer consider the source or we entirely ignore the message, that is dangerous, as we cede more power to these things than they are due, and risk being dragged along by them -- note that, at their worst, they will only drag us where human nature might anyway. Like a mirror or a lens, technology and media reflect us, can concentrate us, distort us, are imperfect, might set us on fire ... but do not create what we see through them or reflected in them.