

Trumpeter (1997)

ISSN: 0832-6193

The Mechanical and the Organic: Virtual Reality and
Nature

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Introduction

Writers of fiction looking to the past have imagined our ancestors as hairy cave wo/men: strong in body but of little wit. Others, looking ahead, have projected a race strong in mind but virtually disembodied: big brains on push-button fingers. Such is rationality's prestige that the latter vision beats the former, hands down. Who covets the healthy outdoor life of our nearest relatives, the care-free chimpanzees mindless of tomorrow? How much better the angst of cultural evolution-by-technology whereby brains are enlarged and enhanced via the computer's microchips, while bodies pale and soften in the glow of the cathode tube!

Choice between chimps or chips, between body or mind, is no option. We humans are body/mind, a necessary melding of the material and immaterial. Yet often we speak as if one is detachable from the other, with the implication that the more valuable *mind* can be disconnected from the less valuable *body*. Hope for such a separation springs eternal in the human breast, particularly when the ego confronts death. But, at least in *this* existence, the aspiration to divorce mind from body is perilous insofar as it depreciates the source of health: the body and, by extension, the world that generated body/mind and sustains it for a lifetime.

My thesis is that the theorists of both Modernism and Postmodernism sacrifice body to mind, the real to the ideal. They put their faith in artifacts and abstractions of intellect while devaluing their source and support: planet Earth. The mechanical supplants the organic. Thus, Virtual Reality - faking Nature symbolically "on-line" - puts the future of Nature on the line.

Mind versus Body

A philosophic tradition with roots beyond Plato supports the notion that ideas - the tissues of mind - are the ultimate realities, compared to which phenomenal bodies are but shadows. "You must forgive me, dear friend," said Socrates to Phaedrus, "I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country (read "the world of nature") won't teach me anything."

The implications of this Platonic theme for the culture of a terminal high-tech society were essayed in 1928 by E.M.Forster. In "The Machine Stops," people are housed or "hived" in air-conditioned comfort below the surface of an Earth that has mostly been devastated. Anticipating the TV screen and the Internet, Forster described the coming age of Virtual Reality where everyone converses electronically, never face to face, mostly about *ideas*. Vashti, a music specialist, observes that visiting Earth's surface is vulgar and faintly improper for spiritually minded people; it is contrary to the spirit of the age, because air and stars and mountains "give no ideas." A popular slogan is "Beware of first-hand ideas!" Those who want to know what Earth is like can listen to lectures on it, compiled from lectures formerly given on the basis of even earlier lectures.

Vashti's rebellious son, Kuno, discovers his long-disused muscles and infers that his body is the measure for all that is lovable, desirable and strong. He climbs a shaft to the earth's surface but is soon discovered and dragged back below. He says to Vashti:

Cannot you see that we are dying and the only thing that really lives down here is the Machine? It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralyzed our bodies and our wills, and it compels us to worship it. We exist only as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries ... I have only one remedy, to tell men again and again that I have seen the hills of Wessex ... the dear ferns and the living hills.

Seventy years after it was written, the story has a prophetic ring. An anti-naturalistic preoccupation with ideas and ideals, fed by a technology of symbols, lies at the root of the West's denigration of body as compared to mind, along with its negligent treatment of Earth. Perhaps a chief function of today's ecofeminism is to remind all genders that bodies exist as expressions of natural rhythms - living, breathing, reproducing, dying - tuned to Sun, Moon and Earth, rather than to masculine philosophies. Perhaps the function of art and aesthetics is to teach again the importance of the sensory component of perception, "to bring us to our senses," exposing idealism's bloodless logic that dismisses as secondary the intuited, richly sensuous, organic world.

The World of Spontaneous Experience

David Hume, the Scot sceptic, demolished both mind and matter. All we know of either, he said, are insubstantial "impressions." Most of us ignore the sceptic's

logic and accept as fact that we live our daily lives in a world of material things, even though, in Hume's words, "this universal and primary concern of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy." Rationality may suggest that a chair is nothing but an impression, a mind-image, or a constellation of sub-atomic particles whirling in mostly empty space, but still we perceive a chair as a back attached to a seat and use it as a four-legged support when sitting down to an apparently material dinner. Hume was fully aware of this disparity between philosophic "reality" and the reality that Naess (1993/94) has called "spontaneous experience." It seems evident, wrote Hume, that "men are carried, by a natural instinct or pre-possession, to repose faith in their senses: and that, without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe" (Hume cited in Hargrove 1989). In short, the "natural instinct" that supports belief in a physical existence, with its spontaneous experience of valued material objects, is a body-wisdom that makes more sense than the philosopher's logic.

How strange that arguments have to be made for the tangibility of an experienced world of water and clouds, forests and flowers, humus and humans, while the "real" is attributed to intangibles: eternal forms, spirits, souls, symbols, words, language. Some today believe that "discourse" (literally, mental running to and fro) *makes* reality: an academic concept that floats on a body of science/technology whose material artifacts and manipulations provide the substantial matrix of urban living. Hargrove (1989) has added two additional thoughts in support of the experienced common-sense world. Ordinary language is based most fundamentally on belief in physical objects, reference to which is largely what holds a language together and provides the basis of translation between languages. Further, aesthetics as a field of philosophy began with discussion of the qualities of natural objects, their beauty and sublimity. It would be a poor aesthetics that excluded the World of Nature and dealt only with the elegance of theories, the beauty of ideas and the charm of texts.

Scepticism about the existence of a natural world of inherent value, in which we are enveloped, seems less a sophisticated than a head-in-the-sand stance. But technology, ideology, and a preoccupation with our own species blind us to ecological perceptions.

Technology/Philosophy and Humanism

The technologies that people adopt influence their philosophic views. A classic example is invention of clockwork machines in the early Middle Ages, soon followed by the invention of a clockwork universe - which has served science well but Earth poorly. Ferguson (1966) championed the thesis that *concept follows conduct*: in adopting any appealing technology, men act and then they think. Ideas and sentiments arise out of repetitive physical acts. Men sailed

before they made a cult of the sea; they killed with guns before they made a cult of the gun. Both cults are perpetuated in manly ego-boosting rituals played out again and again in sagas of the sea and in Western movies (where women are inconspicuous and never interfere). The gun *makes* the Western myth; hence it would be ridiculous to negotiate a peaceful ending rather than shooting it out!

Further to this line of thought, Ferguson optimistically suggested that technologies having to do with non-combative interactions such as trade and commerce, with exchanges of information and communication between individuals and nations, should result in a cult of cooperation. Will free trade make for peace? Let us all hope.

An even more benign effect is sometimes postulated. The very way a technology is *assembled*, let alone the way it is *used*, may change society for the better. The present generation of children growing up with computers will think ecologically *because* the computer is the technologic analogue of an ecosystem! Somehow, the dramatic changes effected in the whole configuration of a spreadsheet by one keystroke on the PC will impress on youngsters the fact that the extirpation of a single keystone species can precipitate cascading reverberations throughout a biotic community. Thus new technologies will inspire in society the same integrated "system-ideas" they embody. Dream on!

Less optimistic than the techno-philosophers are teachers reporting a "dumbing down" of children brought up by TV *in loco parentis*. Without daily experience of the lively interplay of language between real people, a child's foundation for intellectual development is weakened. Some suspect that technologies may even change bodies at the cellular level, "rearranging the brain's neurons to suit a TV-driven seven-second attention span, say, or an escalating desire for cinematic explosions" (Kroker 1996a). This is a version of the yet-to-be-discredited proposition that given sufficient exposure, TV can turn brains into porridge.

Doubtless technologies mould attitudes, the medium generating its inherent message as Marshall McLuhan foresaw and as Kirkpatrick Sale (1995) and Jerry Mander (1991) forcefully argue today. Automobiles will not conduce to compact cities nor will weapons encourage peaceful thoughts. Machines made to serve efficiency will not foster a high valuation of leisure in the workers they displace. The Net will not inspire close flesh-and-blood communities.

But attitudes also affect technology and the two co-evolve, the configuration at any given time expressing deep historical-cultural forces. One major change-generating dynamic is the ancient belief-system combining faith in progress with faith that the human species is God's special pet. This guiding paradigm creates the climate in which rationality discovers its human-centered goals, dresses them in supportive ideas and sentiments, and pursues them with an evolving science/technology.

The deep dynamic that today drives the twinned technology-attitudes has been

called "Speciesism" or "Humanism," defined as the ideological fixation on *Homo sapiens* to the exclusion of all else. This definition of humanism is meant to be pejorative, used in the sense of "selfishly homocentric" rather than in the more flattering senses of dictionary definitions. The claims of the latter have their place, but the importance and exclusivity attached to them, even by such a humane thinker as John Ralston Saul (1995), reveal the purblind perspective from which humanity has viewed the universe, especially in the last three or four centuries of modernistic thought.

Criticizing narrow humanism, Claude Levi-Strauss championed the humility of tribal people for whom "a well-ordered harmony does not begin with the self, but rather places *the world* before *life*, *life* before *man*, the respect for *other beings* before the love of *self*." (Emphasis added to Levi-Strauss's order of importance: world, life, man, other beings, self). This, he insisted, is not misanthropy but rather a critique of the strutting and shameless arrogance that makes man the lord and master of creation. The rights that one can and should recognize for mankind are only a special case of those rights that must be granted to the creative force of life. Care about mankind without simultaneous solidarity-like caring for all other forms of life, he said, leads mankind to self-oppression and self-exploitation (cited by Zimmerman 1994).

Those firmly wedded to the *status quo* frequently express fear, genuine or feigned, that placing high value on Nature will necessarily devalue people, leading straight to fascism. Levi-Strauss's argument is the direct opposite. A sole obsession with humanity is the road to disaster. Grounding ethics within the segregated ghetto of Humanism will not protect against such evils as racism and fascism. No matter what virtues humanity ascribes to itself, some group will assert its superiority by claiming to possess more of "the goods" than others. The anchor-point for a "principled humility" must be found in a greater-than-human reality, one that transcends every culture and every ingrown morality.

Along the same lines, Berman (1984) agreed with Wilhelm Reich that industrial democracy is dry tinder for fascism and the irrational, precisely because - as disembodied consciousness at war with nature - it is so sterile, so "out of this world," so rootless. Rootedness must spring from ecological awareness of what it means to live-in-place, "where nature is the model for culture because the mind has been nourished and weaned on nature." "It is my guess," said Berman, "that preservation of this planet may be the best guideline for *all* our politics ... The health of the planet, if it can be successfully defended against the continuing momentum of industrial socialism and capitalism, may thus be the ultimate safety valve in the emergence of a new consciousness." Here is the call for a post-humanist faith that corrects an ancient error, acknowledging the supra-human value of the Earthly context formerly ignored or slighted (Gray 1995).

An Ecological Perspective: Post-Humanism

The criteria of a "good" theory are its explanatory power, its capacity to integrate disparate observations, and its heuristic abilities that open new perspectives. These are the characteristics that, for example, confer superiority on the theory of evolution over the theory of creation. By the same criteria, the best myth-theory of our time tells the story of Earth's star-dust beginning and subsequent elaboration mirrored in its interactive parts: improbable atmosphere, sea water, continents, soils and sediments, all evolving along with a spectacular complex of organic forms including *Homo sapiens*: one of today's 30 million vivacious species.

Scientists use the terms "life" and "organism" as if they are one and the same, reflecting the reductionist idea that the source of the energizing life-spark of things-like-us is strictly internal. The question, "When did life begin?" is assumed to be the same as, "When did identifiable organisms appear?" But from an ecological viewpoint - i.e. granting importance to context - the question becomes, "At what stage in the history of Earth's increasing complexity did it engender identifiable organisms?" This throws the spotlight on planet Earth as the central marvel, the source and support of "life" - whatever that mystery may be. Bereft of Earth's permanent vitality, organisms lose their transient vitality. Neglect of Earth's health is a threat to all its constituents, organic and inorganic, now and in the future.

Note that the ecological perspective magnifies the value of what has traditionally been portrayed as a mostly dead environment. Liveliness exists in all things: in air, water, soil, as well as in organisms. All parts of the living Earth or Ecosphere are important, the inorganic equally with the organic. Earth itself is not an organism in the biologist's sense, nor is it a super-organism. The Ecosphere is *supra*-organismic: a higher level of organization than the inorganic and organic parts it comprises. Here is the logical basis for a drastic move in philosophic position from homocentrism and biocentrism to ecocentrism.

The foregoing text is an expression of *Post-Humanism*, akin to Deep Ecological Philosophy or Deep Ecology. It is radically ecological, favoring a broadened focus that includes humanity's enveloping matrix. It acknowledges, with a celebratory sense of awe and wonder, the source of creativity in undomesticated Earth. Although it affirms that the protection of Earth-life requires a global scaling down of the human enterprise, it is not anti-human. It recognizes the importance, within the human community, of an "emancipatory agenda" that furthers and supports democracy, equity, justice, and freedom of the individual from oppression. It believes, however, that these values cannot be fully achieved nor long preserved in an inturned, homocentric culture.

Modernism, Postmodernism and Virtual Reality

The enthronement of reason is the chief achievement of post-Enlightenment "Modernism" in its rebellion against centuries of religious dogma and uncritical acceptance of authority. Science is acclaimed as Modernism's finest fruit, carrying in its train ideas of perpetual progress: greater and greater material well-being through economic growth fuelled by technology. Congruent with science's search for unifying theories has been Modernism's "discourse of universals," meaning belief in over-arching social truths, belief in all-encompassing ideologies, in single "best" political systems, in understanding human groups (e.g. the class, "women") by reference to biological or social "essences" (Ross 1988). Modernity's "emancipatory agenda" of democracy and human rights is an important "universal" rooted in Greek thought and in the Judaeo-Christian theme of the importance of the individual before God, energized most recently by the American and French Revolutions that promoted the political and economic importance of the individual's freedom.

Postmodern theory arose as a challenge to Modernism's theses - excepting only the axiomatic thesis of homocentrism. Disillusioned with the claims to hegemony of both capitalism and Marxist socialism, it rejects the "discourse of universals." It also rejects belief in essentialist categories, the search for "totalizing" grand theories, the demonology of single causes (corporations are to blame, technology is to blame, people on welfare are to blame). It subscribes to some parts of Modernity's "emancipatory agenda," aiming to promote social justice among all social and cultural groups (Zimmerman 1994).

Much of the reaction against Modernism's "truths" is defensible and praiseworthy, but the French deconstructionists carried their rebellion much further. For them, symbols and language are the framers and carriers of reality. All explanatory narratives, all texts, are power-motivated and must be so interpreted. A statement such as "Scientists claim that over-population is a cause of deterioration in Earth's environment" is interpreted as a ploy by white middle-class men to elevate their prestige, while guiltning the world's poor. No language of disinterest exists. All categories are cultural constructs and "truth," for example, cannot be objective; in the final analysis it can only reflect multicultural consensus.

Postmodernism's radical, subjective relativism marks the contemporary rebirth of idealism as *linguistic idealism*. In a world of signs and symbols, the physical - the material, the body, the Earth - is devalued and pushed into the background (Sessions 1995a). If, as earlier suggested, technologies invent or "find" their appropriate philosophies under the guiding hand of Humanism, then homocentric postmodernism was surely conjured into being by Virtual Reality. Both replace an objective world with subjective tokens and facsimiles. Reality is up for grabs.

When faith that Nature can be discovered is replaced by faith that Nature is

socially constructed, as many "Natures" exist as ethnic groups and languages. Nature (Earth, Ecosphere) becomes just another "off-line" fabrication, a cultural projection that can be reinvented "on-line" in any way people want. Many academics explicitly accept this dangerous idea (for example, Berleant 1992 and Schama 1995) which makes the West Edmonton Mall as "wild" as Jasper National Park, Disneyland as charming as the Florida Everglades, and the dream-world of Virtual Reality better, cleaner and easier to access than any Earthly reality - given only that the choices between better and worse reflect multicultural consensus. Further, the evolutionary biological-ecological basis of a specific *human nature* disappears into thin air. Human nature is whatever people want to make it by hooking themselves into the appropriate technology.

Kroker (1992) suggested that contemporary people are "possessed" by Virtual Reality, dominated by the technotopian dream and its assumed inevitability ("You can't stop progress, so upgrade or die"), ruled more and more by the "Will to Virtuality". Their wish, he said, is to upload themselves into the great Net in the sky, to shed the weak fleshly bodies for the hard perfection of wiring and machinery. Dreaming of disembodied existence they want to become pure data. In the same vein, another "McLuhanite" foresees the wiring of human and artificial minds into one planetary soul, the realization of Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere - "sufficiently interesting to provide company for God." According to Barlow (1996): "When the yearning for human flesh has come to an end, what will remain? Mind may continue, uploaded into the Net, suspended in an ecology of voltage as ambitiously capable of self-sustenance as was that of its carbon-based forebears." Thus the ultimate promise of the Internet is immortal mind, released from corpo-reality. Perhaps this is the last and most appealing option for a thoroughly postmodern, industrialized, technologized and urbanized species.

The Human Predicament is Fundamentally Ecological

In Forster's tale an electronic technology, separating person from person and isolating society from external world, promoted the elevation of *mind and ideas* over *body and earth*. All facets of existence were wrapped in artifacts. Each individual was incarcerated in the prison house of technology, living in solitary electronic confinement. People communicated by a kind of Internet; they shrank from ecological contact with other persons, with other organisms, with Earth itself. Virtual Reality replaced the biological-ecological realities of seas and continents, sun-warmed air, clean water, fertile soils, mountains and green forests. The fount of creativity and beauty, of physical and mental health, had been completely rejected in favor of a comfort-machine whose only food for the human mind consisted of human artifacts, images and ideas - a fair description

of inner-city living today?

Ahead of his time, Forster identified the fundamental human problem as *ecological* rather than sociological. His solution: Be prepared to lay aside the technologic garments that stand between the bonding of mind to vigorous body, and the bonding of body to life-giving planet. The first priority is establishment of a healthy relationship between mind, body and Earth, which are one. In a context of ecological well-being (and here we should add, "within ecoregions") the way is prepared for solution of psychological and social problems. By accenting the importance of Earth-as-context, Forster implied that full human development necessitates connections with our organic evolutionary roots in Earth. Any technology that interferes, injuring body and mind, must be resisted. He speaks to us today as an ecologist, a Neo-Luddite, a Post-Humanist.

Forster's contemporary dystopians (Zamiatin 1921, Huxley 1932, Orwell 1949) placed little importance on the Earth-body/mind relationship. Although Zamiatin came the closest, the three did not identify the fundamental human problem as ecological but as sociological: i.e. as oppression by a fascist elite leading to loss of liberty, the control of the individual by "soft" technologies and, in the extreme, control by brute force. Their rallying cry was: "Citizens, don't trade your individual liberty for bread and circuses!" In this they expressed the freedom-seeking goals of Modernism, as do the many contemporary varieties of "social ecologists" who claim to be radically ecological though their agendas betray them. They are not post-humanist, not ecocentric (Sessions 1995b). Their primary goal - estimable to be sure but too narrowly conceived - is *social justice* for one disadvantaged group or another. They co-opt ecological arguments as clubs to belabor the opposition, but their philosophy is thoroughly homocentric.

Postmodernism stands ready to carry Humanism to its ultimate limit. By rejecting the reality of a Nature inside and outside the human, by rejecting the evolved biological-ecological organic Earth, postmodern theorists assert that an objective world possessing intrinsic value is meaningless. For them, human nature defines itself. The human body is a failed project. Thenceforth "evolution" will mean a closer and closer linking of mind to machine, marrying the carbon-based brain to the silicon-based computer. The trend is clear and in the spirit of "Join 'em if you can't lick 'em," women are called to be Cyborgs, postmodern creatures melding animal, human and mechanical components (Haraway 1991). Symbol of the 21st Century: the pregnant robot.

Faith that the universe is person-centered, faith that personal comfort and convenience are the aims of existence, will continue to call up a spectrum of solacing technological garments, prosthetic cocoons of which the most extreme obviate the need for an external world by projecting artifacts of it "on-line." An ersatz universe effaces all notions of its own unreality. Once embedded in it, surrounded by it, any thoughts of escape evaporate. By blanking out every intimation of deprivation, Virtual Reality places the fate of body and Nature squarely on the line.

As the remaining fragments of the human "wild-within" and of nature's "wild-without" are invaded, caged or whittled away, postmodern's Virtual Reality moves in to take their places. Forster's closing lines from "The Machine Stops," phrased in the gender un-neutral language of his day, sound a vivid warning:

Ere silence was completed their hearts were opened and they knew what had been important on earth. Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, who had once made god in his image, was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven. Truly the garment had seemed heavenly at first, shot with the colours of culture, sewn with the threads of self-denial. And heavenly it had been so long as it was a garment and no more, so long as man could shed it at will and live by the essence that is his soul and the essence, equally divine, that is his body. The sin against the body - it was for that they wept in chief; the centuries of wrong against the muscles and nerves, and those five portals by which we can alone apprehend - glossing it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap, the home of ideas as colorless, last sloshy stirrings of a spirit that had grasped the stars.

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Citation Format

Rowe, J. Stan (1997) The Mechanical and the Organic: Virtual Reality and Nature
Trumpeter: 14, 3. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.14.3.12>

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