

Technology and Its Promise of Freedom from the Physical Body

Communication technologies, cyberspace in particular, allow us to engage our fantasies about what it means to be pure consciousness, free of a physical body and its defining and confining characteristics. However, enacting pure consciousness would require that we display ways of being that is not tied to body. Since body is all we know, we can only concoct dubious scenarios about what it means not to have a physical dimension. In the early years of the Internet, such scenarios were the promise of communication technologies. But freedom from the body has eluded us in cyberspace, thus revealing that communication technology, like all of our other inventions, cannot be considered as a savior of humanity. Despite noble intentions, we continue to exhibit in our use of communication technologies the full effect of our sense of self as influenced by both the mind and the body.

Even in the early days of electronic communication, there were indications that the promises of a digital utopia might not be fulfilled. Such an indication may be seen in the case of Sandford Lewin. In 1982, Lewin was a psychiatrist who had a CompuServe Online account with the user name of "doctor." (Stone 69-70) In the course of his online conversations, and owing to his gender nonspecific user name, Lewin discovered that women converse differently when among themselves than they do when in the known presence of men. It occurred to Lewin that he could genuinely help women online if he represented himself to them as a woman. He opened a second CompuServe account under the name Julie Graham, and made it known that Graham was a physically disabled neuropsychiatrist. (Stone 71)

In their online conversations with Lewin, women were candid and forthright in discussing their lives and their problems, and in return Lewin offered helpful advice. (Stone 72) However, when the women discovered that Lewin is male, the women generally felt betrayed and violated. Even women who admitted that they were helped by Lewin's advice said that they felt anger and hurt. (Stone 78) Stone says that in the way in which the women chose "to ground themselves in the expectation of a "true identity" against which other "quasi-identities" may be judged [...], they evinced what may have been the last manifestation of such a sensibility in the virtual world." (Stone 171) However, in online communications today, not only are adolescents manipulated by adults posing as peers, but also in the world of online dating, hopes and dreams are aligned with expectations in online users who desire that the virtual identity of their contacts match the physical description.

If Lewin had been a non-handicapped and non-credentialed female posing as a doctor, not only would the substance of the women's betrayal have been significantly different, but also very likely, some women would not have felt betrayal or hurt at all. Perhaps the main reason for the bad feeling on the part of the women is not simply

Lewin's gender, but all the associated culturally and socially derived meanings of gender, and by extension, most aspects of the physical body that permeate human interaction, particularly how and what we communicate to each other.

The human body shares the center of attention with the mind, as well as the soul, in our quest to understand the self. Descartes is considered by many to have begun the modern dialog on the duality of the mind and the body, a dialog which serves as fertile ground for philosophers and scientists, and reached a turning point in the work of William James. Descartes' formulation of mind/body dualism produced a stream of responsive theoretical posits that continues today. Many of these theories attempt to defeat Descartes' separatist explanation to prove a more seamless interconnection and interdependence of the mind and the body that manifests in how we define self.

Descartes made a distinction between the substance of thought and the substance of physicality, the substances of which for him were mutually exclusive. According to Descartes, a thinking substance is nonphysical or spiritual in nature, and an extended substance is physical, but not capable of consciousness or thought. Descartes asserted that the mind and body were clearly distinct because for him they had separate functions; material substance has the defining attribute 'extension' while mental substance has the defining attribute 'thought'. (Burnham) The pineal gland was the point of contact in the brain where the "rational soul" made contact with the body and the result of this contact was conscious sensation, and the mind thusly affected the body. However, for Descartes, "separability did not mean separate [...] The mind and body are 'separable' in principle, but are in fact in a 'close and intimate union'." (Wozniak)

Regardless of the degree of closeness and intimacy in the union of the mind and the body, for Descartes they were still separate functions. This separation, which became known as Cartesian dualism, was an impasse that many philosophers and scientists felt needed to be overcome. "If the natural world is radically divided into the mental and the physical such that the physical is extended in space and the mental is not, and if the nature of causality is such that causes and effects must have a necessary connection and be of a similar type, then mind/body interactionism of the Cartesian sort is obviously untenable." (Wozniak)

The first attempts at Cartesian refutation were metaphysical in context, followed by scientific responses that centered on the brain as the center of the mind. But it was William James, through scientific psychology, who developed a philosophical epistemology to address the mind/body duality that he believed could stand on its own against scientific materialism. (Wozniak) In conjunction with his belief that consciousness is a driving force in our evolutionary process, James linked instincts with the psychological development of emotion and habit by using empirical evidence to support his claims. Most notably, James asserted that "consciousness did not exist as an

independent entity, but as a function of particular experiences. Consciousness and object had to be considered in the same functional complex. One could not be defined without the other." (Wozniak) This assertion, however, was not a definitive answer to the mind/body duality question for James, but rather it outlined a way to pursue the answers to the question. According to James, "in the subliminal extension of the horizons of awareness, we find alterations that point to the very core of life and identity. But we will not understand these alterations either in this generation or the next." (Wozniak)

The body affects outcomes in all environments where consciousness exists. We have a body that has a physical presence, which is a body that we come to know through interaction with the "environment or enviroing world." (Ihde 69) Additionally, we have a culturally and socially derived concept of body that produces embodiment. "It is the body that can [...] have a cultural perspective as the embodied and enculturated particular being we are." (Ihde 70) Embodiment is different from the concept of body in that "the body is always normative relative to some set of criteria." (Hayles, *How We Became* 196) The set of criteria that contributes to normalization for the body are the "specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture." (Hayles, *How We Became* 196) In all instances of consciousness, both aspects of body are always present. The body combined with embodiment creates enactment. The experience of having a physical body that is shaped by culture and society defines the self and informs all perceptions. "I am conscious of my body via the world....I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body." (Ihde 74)

When William Gibson began his *Neuromancer* novel series, in the world that he created there was an interdependence of the existence and the workings of the physical body and virtual consciousness in that virtual consciousness depended on physical existence. "The geometry of cyberspace as Gibson described it was Cartesian." (Stone 34). However, as the series evolved, the physical body became unnecessary in that consciousness in cyberspace did not have to be grounded in the physical body. Gibson's ultimate supremacy of disembodied consciousness over the physical body can be seen on a continuum that goes from displaying the interdependence of mind/body with respect to existence, to the ability for consciousness to exist solely as information patterns. In Gibson's first *Neuromancer* novel, the mind/body interdependence is exemplified by "Case, the computer cowboy, who sees his body as so much "meat" that exists primarily to sustain his consciousness until the next time he can enter cyberspace." (Hayles, *How We Became* 36) At the other end of the spectrum is Dixie Flatline, whose physical body dies but he continues to live as a personality construct in the computer. (Hayles, *How We Became* 36)

In the incipient years of the Internet, when we attempted to define the self in the context of communication technologies, there seemed to be a pattern of removing the physical body from the equation. In the environment of

most communication technologies, the physical body is hidden. The desire of many is to keep the body hidden in hopes that the self is not defined in cultural and societal terms. The promise of the Internet was the experience that guaranteed freedom from the constraints that society uses to define the physical body. John Perry Barlow, one of the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a non-profit group that works to protect digital rights, first applied Gibson's term "cyberspace" to digital media, which had been nameless until then. (Barlow) In response to the proposed restraints on Internet freedoms in the Telecommunications Reform Act of 1996, Barlow wrote his manifesto titled *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Barlow's manifesto states that cyberspace "is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live." (Barlow) Barlow's cyberspace has no barriers to entry such as those that can be imposed on occasion by the physical world; it is "a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth." (Barlow) Largely owing to the fact that there are no physical bodies in cyberspace, Barlow promises that cyberspace will become a place where a government will emerge "from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal." (Barlow) Barlow strove to support the reevaluation of human worth as based on thoughts and ideas, untainted by the definitions that culture and society assign to physical attributes. In cyberspace we would define ourselves, as opposed to being defined by others, and the nonmaterial aspect of cyberspace would encourage us and offer a safe place to do so.

In using Gibson's fantasy as the basis for his vision of cyberspace, Barlow tapped into certain depictions that painted the physical world as flawed and imperfect, and the digital realm as inhabiting ideals that not only approached utopian values but also suggested the possibility of immortality. These themes were embraced by those whose cultural conditions "make physicality seem a better state to be from than to inhabit." (Hayles, *How We Became* 36) Some people found solace in the idea of being able to escape the deleterious aspects of the physical world, to go to a place "immune to blight and corruption." (Hayles, *How We Became* 36)

Gibson's and Barlow's promises of digital utopia that are based on the separation of mind and body remain largely unfulfilled and daily challenged. "It becomes hard to imagine how the Cartesian paradigm could survive in a [sic] era of networked communication." (Bolter 202) The reasons why a digital utopia has not been achieved may be seen in how the self is defined. In cyberspace, the body is invisible but embodiment remains present. "Whereas the body can disappear into information with scarcely a murmur of protest, embodiment cannot, for it is tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person." (Hayles, *How We Became* 198) While we clearly do not take our physical bodies into cyberspace, what we do take into the electronic space encompasses all the cultural and social ideas associated with being and having a body.

"The body produces culture the same time that culture produces the body." (Hayles, *How We Became* 200) One of the results of this reciprocal process may be seen in the way that the body influences discourse to the extent that the language of the body becomes part of the vernacular. It is the physical body's orientation in time and space that create experiences that become part of descriptive language. Descriptive phrases such as 'down on their luck' or morally 'upright' "have a basis in bodily experiences that reinforces and reinscribes their social and linguistic implications." (Hayles, *How We Became* 205) Bodily derived expressions of cultural practices become ingrained and therefore become habit, and habits tend to be subconscious and as such are resistant to change. The implication of our body's relationship to self that applies to all environments in which we interact is that the self is a reflection of our embodiment. It is this deeply ingrained culturally and socially derived embodiment that we transport into cyberspace.

The ephemeral nature of communication cannot help humanity to overcome the problems of existence that the body symbolically can represent. We assign messianic potential to each new technology, only to be disappointed when the problems of the world remain unsolved and we as a species are not somehow transformed for the better. The hope that communication technologies can rescue us is a continuation of this practice. Communication technologies, just like other technologies we create, have no inherent capabilities to affect societal change. As with any product, it is how it is used that determines its ability to be a positive force in the lives of those with specific needs. "But as the knights who searched for the Grail found out the hard way, if it's salvation that you simply must have, you will never find it in a physical object." (Stone 169)

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