

Solitude of the Self and Virtual Beings

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Introduction

When Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed the United States Congressional Judiciary Committee on January 18, 1892, she made the following remarks in support of voting rights for women: "To appreciate the importance of fitting every human soul for independent action, think for a moment of the immeasurable solitude of self. We come into the world alone, unlike all who have gone before us; we leave it alone under circumstances peculiar to ourselves." She continues: "Nature never repeats herself, and the possibilities of one human soul will never be found in another. No one has ever found two blades of ribbon grass alike, and no one will ever find two human beings alike." [1]

In contrast to Stanton's eloquent and nostalgic celebration of the self, Ray Kurzweil, techno-visionary, inventor of the reading machine for the blind, prophet of singularity, famous for cross-dressing as the post-pubescent Virtual Rock star Ramona envisions a different kind of self: "The technology now allows the creation of three-dimensional characters, with personality and even some history, that are almost as realistic as real characters. If you think about it, even a real human performer is a creation that has creative inputs from multiple people." [2]

Our children now spend endless hours commanding ever increasing, realistic multiple selves as they are immersed in games such as *The Matrix* or the lawless intersections of *Grand Theft Auto*. Donna Haraway was right. [3] So was Baudrillard. [4] Cyborgs and synthesians have "breached" the "boundaries." We prefer the simulacrum. Today, computer screens are colonized by virtual beings. Endowed with "artificial intelligence," they converse with us by synthesized speech, woo us with their affective emotions, beckon to us with on-demand promiscuity, seduce us with their verisimilitude, captivate us with their impossible perfection, dazzle us with superhuman feats and thrill us with the promise of immortality.

They're here!

Donna Haraway was right. Cyborgs have "breached" the "boundaries." She warned us that "Cyborgs do not stay still. Already in the few decades that they have existed, they have mutated, in fact and fiction, into second-order entities like genomic and electronic databases and the other denizens of the zone called cyber space." [5]

They walk among us.

Kevin Warwick sports a 100-pin digital port implant that provides a direct connection to his central nervous system. [6] More than a mere fashion statement, it is a silicon badge of courage. This evangelist of our cyborgian future argues that the back-story of the *Matrix Trilogy* will come true. There will be sentient robots whose intelligence outstrips that of their human crafters. The future will be one of machine dominance where humans will be enslaved and pacified by a steady stream of computer-generated digital dreams fed directly through ports into our brains. The life of a mind becomes a node in the network.

Warwick upbraids us with:

We are in reality heading towards a world run by machines with an intelligence far superior to that of an individual human. But by linking into the network and becoming a Cyborg, life can be even better than it is now. We really need to clamp down on the party-pooper Neos of this world and get into the future as soon as we can -- a future in which we can be part of a Matrix system, which is morally far superior to our Neolithic morals of today. [7]

This is a future where we can all look forward to jacking-in to the mutual consensual hallucination, endowed with black belts and the ability to take on a plethora of duplicating agent Smiths. Are we now witnessing the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jaron Lanier: "being able to be who we are without limitation, for our imagination to become objective and shared with other people?" [8]

Of particular interest is one species of Cyborg, for Virtual Humans have indeed breached the barricades and they now are taking home the Oscar. Live flesh and blood actors not only lose jobs to Synthesians, but CPU parvenus at film ceremonies now upstage members of actor's equity. At the MTV Movie awards in 2003, Gollum from *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* won in the best virtual performance category and virtual character Yoda of *Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones* won for the Best Fight scene. [9]

Ray Kurzweil, techno-visionary, inventor of the reading machine for the blind, prophet of the singularity, famous for cross-dressing as the Postpubescent Virtual Rock Star Ramona has commented: "The technology now allows the creation of three-dimensional

characters, with personality and even some history, that are almost as realistic as real characters. If you think about it, even a real human performer is a creation that has creative inputs from multiple people." [10] One can visit Ray Kurzweil's site at <http://www.kurzweilai.net/index.html> and interact with his digital doppelganger Ramona.

Of course we attribute no mental life to these characters, no matter how realistic their performance. While watching a feature film, we are lulled into a willing suspension of disbelief. As the behavior of these virtual beings becomes increasingly convincing, we give in to the temptation to project a subjectivity and agency at the service of narrative, as we would with a live actor.

For now, Ramona and her online cousins remain unconvincing. Yet with each upgrade, these virtual personalities are getting closer to passing the Turing Test. Joseph Weizenbaum's account of the reception of Eliza is a cautionary tale. [11] Even computer scientists, who understood this Pygmalion artifice behind the screen, fell into conversations with Eliza, sharing personal secrets, hopes, fears and desires. Today, low-bandwidth, text-based instant messaging could be the beachhead for digital denizens -- fooling some, for some of the time.

In "The Concept of Mind," Gilbert Ryle re-examines the legacy of Cartesian dualism. Ryle talks about the ghost in the machine and implications of following the premises of Descartes skepticism: "Even if he prefers to believe that to other human bodies there are harnessed minds not unlike his own, he cannot claim to be able to discover their individual characteristics, or the particular things they undergo and do. Absolute solitude is on this, showing the ineluctable destiny of the soul. Only bodies can meet." [12]

We arrive at the holy of holies, the inner sanctum that we hold most dear, that we are certain we alone occupy. The sign on the door reads, "Virtual Beings need not apply." In her famous "Solitude of Self" address, delivered on January 18, 1892, to the Congressional Judiciary Committee, Elizabeth Cady Stanton made a most memorable and eloquent defense of the sanctity of the self:

And yet, there is a solitude, which each and every one of us has always carried with him, more inaccessible than the ice-cold mountains, more profound than the midnight sea; the solitude of self. Our inner being, which we call our self, no eye nor touch of man or angel, has ever pierced. It is more hidden than the caves of the gnome; the sacred adytum of the oracle; the hidden chamber of Eleusinian mystery, for to it only omniscience is permitted to enter. Such is individual life. Who, I ask you, can take, dare take, on himself the rights, the duties, the responsibilities of another human soul?

Ryle suggests that by watching behavior, we do find that others have minds: "To find that most people have minds (thought idiots and infants in arms do not) is simply to find that they are able and prone to do certain sorts of things, and this we do by witnessing the sorts of things they do." [13] Well, we do watch synthesians and witness the sorts of things they do. But by common agreement, we remained convinced that they are essentially as Daniel Dennett proposes, a zombie "who exhibits perfectly natural, alert, loquacious, vivacious behavior but is in fact not conscious at all, but rather some sort of automaton." [14] Anticipating Warwick's future, Dennett later rolls out the Zimbo -- that is, a zombie who is "behaviorally complex, thanks to a control system that permits recursive self-representation. That is, it can monitor its own internal states. It can respond appropriately to its own assertions to you." [15] Dennett continues:

We can readily see that at the very least the Zimbo would (unconsciously) believe that it was in various mental states -- precisely the mental states it is in position to report about should we ask it questions. It would think it was conscious, even if it wasn't! Any entity that could pass the Turing test would operate under the (mis?)apprehension that it was conscious. In other words, it would be a victim of an illusion. What kind of an illusion? A User illusion, of course. It would be the "victim" of the benign user illusion of its own virtual machine. [16]

We would probably resist the impulse to characterize the intensity of Stanton's "Solitude of Self" as mere user illusion. It is a political argument for universal suffrage and also asserts the primacy of individual subjective experience. The self, indeed self-awareness, is privileged against those historical constraints of society that denied full personhood for reasons of biology. Most empathize with Stanton's words.

The illusion created by theater or film or even the novel hinges upon this capacity to mentally put us in someone else's place and even experience those emotions vicariously. For example, the intent of Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" was not to evoke in the audience physical or psychological punishment. Rather, by means of an uncomfortable experience of emotional extremes and desires endemic to human subjectivity, he sought to challenge and subvert the presumptions of the audiences of his day and effect a change. Susan Sontag writes that Artaud's notion of theater recapitulates the Gnostic heresy:

The cosmos is itself a battlefield, and each human life exhibits the conflict between the repressive, persecuting forces from without and the feverish, afflicted individual spirit seeking redemption. The demonic forces of the

cosmos exist as physical matter. They also exist as 'law,' taboos, prohibitions. Thus, in the Gnostic metaphors the spirit is abandoned, fallen, trapped in a body, and the individual is repressed, trapped by being in 'the world' -- what we would call 'society.' [17]

Artaud was tortured and tormented by his own personal demons. He felt acute alienation from the bourgeois world, and suffered from a variety of physical ailments aggravated by drug abuse. No doubt, the following lamentation would have had special resonance for him. "As Adam heard this, he lamented and wept over himself. He spoke to Uthra of Life: 'If you know that this is so, why have you carried me away from my place into captivity and cast me into this stinking body?'" [18]

For the Gnostics, the world is a false creation of the demiurge (the term used by Plato in *Timaeus* as the crafter of the cosmos). The Gnostics are trapped in a fate ruled by hostile angels, known as the Archons. Although orderly, the cosmos is an oppressive force that separates, distances and alienates the knower from the unity or fullness. Gnosticism takes a deeply negative view of the cosmos and man's place in it.

Yet Gnosticism has eschatology of salvation -- a saving power through Gnosis. "He who attains to this gnosis and gathers himself from the cosmos...is no longer detained here but rises above the Archons." [19] Compare the exhortation of the Delphic Oracle -- "Know thyself!" -- to the Gnostic formulation, "I have come to know myself and have gathered myself from everywhere..." [20] For the Gnostic, only the 'spark' or original self can be known, whether in oneself or in others. From the Gospel of Thomas, the Gnostic learns that if you do not know yourself, then you dwell in poverty.

For Gnostics, this self-knowledge is similar to the Greek concept of the Monad or unity. Hans Jonas, the eminent scholar of Gnosticism, cites the following: "It is by means of Unity that each one shall receive himself back again." In contrast to the Gnostic sense of alienation, the classical mind had a much more optimistic view of the man's place in the cosmos. Cicero wrote: "Man himself, however, was born to contemplate the cosmos and to imitate it; he is far from being perfect, but he is a little part of the perfect." [21] Initiation into the mysteries is part of the philosophic task of contemplation and insight -- the personal and subjective experience with gnosis. Plotinus describes the essential neo-Platonist experience:

All the need is met by a contact purely intellectual. At the moment of touch there is no power whatever to make any affirmation; there is no leisure; reasoning upon the vision is for afterwards. We may know we have had the vision when the Soul has suddenly taken light. This light is from the Supreme and is the Supreme... [22]

Leibniz's Monadology recapitulates this classical optimism:

It is also through the knowledge of necessary truths and through their abstraction that we are raised to Reflexive Acts, which enable us to think of what is called I and to consider that this or that lies within ourselves. And, it is thus that in thinking of ourselves we think of being, of substance, of the simple and the compound, of the immaterial, and of God himself, by conceiving that what is limited in us is unlimited in him. [23]

Is this not the same claim as what was also once meant by Gnosis? With *The Matrix Reloaded*, Gnosticism (actually a syncretic religious mélange of Christian, Gnostic and Buddhist thought) has secured a new place in pop culture and the popular imagination. The official web site for *The Matrix* features a section on philosophy where one can read essays written by legitimate and "credentialed" philosophers such as Hubert Dreyfus, Julia Driver, David Chalmers, and the above quoted Kevin Warwick.

In "Wake Up! Gnosticism & Buddhism in the Matrix," [24] Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner show how the basic Gnostic myth parallels the plot of the Matrix. Morpheus describes AI as "a singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines," a fitting parallel for the Gnostic Creator God of the archons (angels) and the illusory material world. AI creates the Matrix, a computer simulation that is "a prison for your mind." Harold Bloom reminds us that the Gnostics were cautious of angels who "are not our guardians but our prison wardens." [25]

Flannery-Dailey and Wagner paraphrase the following from the Apocryphon of John of the Nag Hammadi Library, which is a vast compendium of Gnostic literature:

And the power of the mother [Sophia, in our analogy, humankind] went out of Yaldabaoth [AI] into the natural body which they had fashioned [the humans grown on farms by AI]... And in that moment the rest of the powers [archons / Agents] became jealous, because he had come into being through all of them and they had given their power to the man, and his intelligence [mind] was greater than that of those who had made him, and greater than that of the chief archon [agent Smith?]. And when they recognized that he was luminous, and that he could think better than they...they took him and threw him into the lowest region of all matter [simulated by the Matrix]. [26]

In this account, the writers emphasize that "the concept of 'mind' in the film appears to point to a uniquely human capacity for imagination, for intuition, or, as the phrase goes, for thinking outside the box." The Gnostic "spark" of consciousness fosters a gnosis greater than that of the chief Archon / Agent Smith.

In "Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought," authors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson announce the overthrow of the edifice of western Anglo-American analytic and postmodernist philosophy. In its place, they call for a new philosophy constructed upon the empirical discoveries about the nature of mind.

They announce three major findings of cognitive science:

The mind is inherently embodied;
Thought is mostly unconscious;
Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.
[27]

They further claim that the ways in which we conceptualize our inner experience and reason and visualize in our subjective mental life are rooted in other domains of experience, primarily sensorimotor experience. For example, the physical logic of grasping is applied to reasoning about understanding. "...we may form an image of something going by us or over our heads (sensorimotor experience) when we fail to understand (subjective experience)." This work analyzes and presents an impressive array of metaphors that undergird our common-sense reasoning, logic, scientific abstraction and the self.

Our conceptualization of the self draws upon what they term "source domains" as part of cognitive mapping: space, possession, force, and social relationships. The Essential Self is a metaphor where everything has an essence that makes it what it is and is the cause of its behavior. An example is "Finding your true self" -- not unlike the injunction of the Delphic Oracle, "Know Thyself." We are reminded of how the Gnostics addressed the question of the nature of being and that of human nature, in particular. For the Gnostic consciousness is the essential part of human nature. "The Testimony of Truth" says that the Gnostic "becomes a disciple of his [own] mind." [28] Discovering that his own mind "is the father of the truth".

The Essential Self or Subject easily leads to the notion of a disembodied mind that is a consequence, "as it was for Descartes, of the knowing is Seeing metaphor." [29] The authors argue that seeing encourages us to ignore our eyes and visual system and that "what we perceive gives the illusion that mental acts occur independent of the unnoticed body. ... The universal embodied experiences that give rise to the
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metaphors of Subject and Self produce in our cognitive unconsciousness a concept of a Subject as an independent entity in no way dependent for its existence on the body." [30] For Lakoff and Johnson, the concept of soul or spirit arises naturally, and an ineffable god is imagined and is explicable by metaphor. The Gnostic sense of alienation from "this stinking body" can be reappraised as a construct due to this inherent metaphorization of the mind / body duality.

Lakoff and Johnson propose that the basic human capacity to empathize and imagine ourselves in the shoes of someone else is the basis of spiritual experience. "Imaginative empathic projection is a major part of what has always been called spiritual experience." [31]

Realized in software, virtual beings are metaphors built upon symbolic notation of bits and bytes. "The vehicle by which we are moved in passionate spirituality is metaphor. The mechanism of such metaphor is bodily. It is a neural mechanism that recruits our abilities to perceive, to move, to feel, and to envision in the service not only of theoretical and philosophical thought, but of spiritual experience." [32] Can binary bodies be a source for a new spirituality?

Visions of gods, visitations by angels, and temptations of the devil were once largely a private, personal affair. Today, computer screens are colonized by virtual beings. Endowed with artificial intelligence, they converse with us by synthesized speech, woo us with their affective emotions, beckon to us with on-demand promiscuity, seduce us with their verisimilitude, captivate us with their impossible perfection, dazzle us with superhuman feats and thrill us with the promise of immortality. Yet we feel ill at ease in their presence. Will they acknowledge our gaze? Will they recognize in us "the simple awareness of being"?

How do we negotiate our identities with our synthesized surrogates? We resist the deflation of our cherished subjectivity, yet embrace what the iconoclasts most feared: the simulation. Will the cyborg and synthespian heed the warning from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas: "if you do not know yourself, then you dwell in poverty?" As our bodies suffer the insults of age and the hazards of the real, we long to be embodied virtually. The Gnostic lament "Why hath thou cast me into this stinking body?" spurs us, as Arthur Kroker says, to seek escape velocity.

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