On Human Nature in the Digital Age
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The digital age introduces some perplexing issues for understanding human nature in the 21st century. It introduces a radical shift in how human beings experience and understand the world in which they dwell. It also brings with it a radical shift in how humans understand themselves and each other. This essay examines some of these issues concerning human nature in the digital age. In particular, it examines some issues concerning human nature in the digital age through the lens of Jose Ortega's existential phenomenology and ideas from current thinkers Matthew Crawford and Arthur Kroker.

The position and tone will be somewhat pessimistic. The reason for this position is because it often gets subsumed under the naïve and oppressive optimism that is advanced by the ideologies of the digerati and platform capitalism that dominate contemporary culture. Under these conditions an alternative voice ought to be heard.

This essay also argues that there are many changes and dangers that the digital age presents to how human beings develop their natures, or essences. These changes and dangers partly explain why many of us actually dislike the digital age, even when we are unaware that we do. Therefore, this essay sets out to disclose some of the reasons why we might dislike certain characteristics of the digital age.

The general questions that will be addressed here are: "What kinds of human natures—or human *essences*, rather—are being made in the digital age?" and "What are we becoming as a result, and is it something we want to become?" To answer these questions, I'll begin by discussing human nature and the nature of our digital world that underpins what we call the digital age.

Human Nature as Essence

From the perspective of existential phenomenology, there is no human nature *as such*. When we talk about the nature of something, we are usually talking about what that something *essentially* is. So, questions about human nature are questions about the *essence* of being a human.

Spanish philosopher José Ortega is most famous for reflecting this idea in his proposition "I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself."[1] What this means is that what I am is a purely subjective consciousness intimately linked to my existentially objective world circumstances which, in synthesis, makes me who I *essentially* am. What "it" means is both myself (my subjectivity) and the existentially objective world circumstances in which I dwell (the world). Without either of them, there is no essential "me" or essence of being. Therefore, my essence is a product of myself *in* my existentially objective world circumstances and it serves as the existential core of who and what I am.

Understanding of Being

In addition, out of this essential existential core is produced my *understanding of being* as a whole. Ortega's "Vital Reason" is the idea that a human life is a fundamental 'happening' from which each individual understands his or her being in the world on the whole.[2] Every life and the knowledge contained therein is a point of view directed toward, or upon, the universe.[3] Our understanding of being, therefore, arises from our own perspectival, attentive awareness of our essences in relation to the contextual world of circumstance we are in.[4] Consequently, our understanding of being is a conscious self-reflexive understanding grounded in the *essential* linkage between pure subjective consciousness and existentially objective world-circumstances. It is a linkage that can be modified but never severed.

What's important here is that our understanding of being informs our heuristics of becoming. How we understand ourselves in the world will influence and determine the heuristics of becoming; i.e. the way or practice of *how* and *what* we choose to become. The "who" and "what" we are, are byproducts of this heuristic and procedural interplay of one's self and the existentially objective world circumstances in which we dwell. For example, Ortega states, "Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are."[5] What this means is that what we pay attention to becomes a part of our essence through this heuristic interplay of self and world. It is what constitutes our essence, which is not fixed in time and space, but is malleable according to the changes in our attention and in our circumstances. Therefore, whatever nature we may think a human has, we ought to acknowledge that such a nature is not as intrinsic to humans as we might think it is.

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In sum, what Ortega is getting at here is that natures, or essences rather, are *made* out of certain conditional circumstances that a human subjective consciousness attentively encounters, finds itself in, and then adapts itself to. There is a finite set of possibilities to what humans can become, but no possibility is ontologically fixed to every human and none are immune from modification. And our understanding of being in the world arises from our own perspectival self-reflexive awareness of ourselves and the world we are in. Therefore, we are a product of ourselves *in* our existentially objective world circumstances, and our understanding of

being in the world is derived from our unique, subjective perspectival attention on the world and our place in it. This, then, self-reflexively constitutes what we consider the essence of our being.

Existentially Objective World Circumstances:

What's critically important to note here is what Ortega means by "circumstances." They are existentially objective world circumstances; the circumstantial conditions and situations of existence that a person is in at all times. It is what is normally referred to as "being in reality".

What's also important to emphasize—a fact that we often forget—is that *we can never not be in it*. In other words, existentially objective world circumstances constitute the reality that "when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."[6] If we are to continue being (the verb) at all, as Ortega noted above, we are always necessarily situated in existentially objective world circumstances. These circumstances can be changed, but they can never be removed.[7]

Digital World as Existentially Objective World Circumstances:

But, what happens when the digital world increasingly constitutes our existential circumstances in the 21st century? To what are we paying attention, and what kinds of human essences are being made in such a world? What are we becoming and is it something we want to become? There are no distinctively clear answers to these questions, and there are some reasons for why clear answers are unavailable. The first is noted by Martin Heidegger when he states that, "it is not that the world is becoming entirely technical which is really uncanny. Far

more uncanny is our being unprepared for this transformation, our inability to confront meditatively what is really dawning in this age."[8]

One of the other reasons for why we are unprepared or unable to have clear answers to these questions is that the development of the digital world and the digital age is proceeding with such speed and power that we can't cognitively get a grip on it. It's much like the inability to solve an equation because the variables of the equation constantly change before the solution is found. Therefore, we have a hard time knowing where we are going and what we are becoming.

Another reason for why we are unprepared or unable to have clear answers to these questions is noted by Andrew Feenberg.[9] We are already so embedded in the digital world and the digital age that we cannot "see" it in its totality. We are like a fish in water that does not "know" water itself, let alone know that it is in water. In other words, we have fallen victim to the law of proximity, wherein the closer we are to something, the less we are able to see it for what it truly is in its entirety. The fish is ontologically influenced and determined by the water in which it swims, and it doesn't know it because the nature of water is beyond or outside of the fish's ability to fully comprehend it. Our digital world and age is much like this water and were are like the fish. In short, many of us are unaware and are unable to fully grasp what it happening in the digital age because we are so immersed in it that we have a difficult time getting an objective, proximal understanding of it.

However, this is changing, and there are some things that we can know about the nature of the digital age we are in.

What we do know is that the digital world is one that we are increasingly becoming accustomed to and willfully living in. We

know that the digital world is a calculative and artificial representation of the world, removed from the harsh contingencies of the actual world of existentially objective world circumstances. We know that it brings with it a new set of existential circumstances in which humans have never before been subjected to in our long history as adaptive biological organisms. We also know that it influences and changes the world, along with how we relate to the world and each other. These facts present some possible and actual dangers to how we make essences. Those primary dangers are two-fold.

The Dangers

The first danger is that the digital world presents the delusion that it is possible to not be in the real world. In other words, being in the world is a necessary condition of existence, but we think that we can escape it through the use

of digital technologies. *The danger here is that one is always and already in the world and one can never not be in it, yet the digital age allows us to think we can escape it.* In other words, the real world of actual existential circumstance is a reality that doesn't go away, but we want it to. To think this way—that we can escape our circumstances through immersion in the digital world—results in drastic existential crises that can harm how we make essences.

Crawford

On this point, Matthew Crawford, in his book *The World Beyond Your Head* states that:

> …when the choosing will is hermetically sealed off from the fuzzy, hard-to-master contingencies of the empirical world, it becomes more 'free' in a sense: free for the kind of

neurotic disassociations from reality that opens the door for others to leap in on our behalf, and present options that are available to us without the world-disclosing effort of skillful management.[10]

If you increase will and decrease ability, then you have a perfect believer and a perfect consumer, both of which serve the political and economic machinations of platform capitalism and mass culture. You have a totally dependent human, whom on one hand, wants the will to be satisfied, but on the other hand, does not know anything about how to satisfy it or is not entirely able, through the employment of actual skill, to satisfy it. Under these conditions, Crawford states, "choosing replaces doing, and it follows that such a person should be more pliable to the choice architectures presented to us in mass culture."[11] This makes the person weak and more susceptible to control

manipulation. In the case of social media, for example, choosing to post a status update or a tweet replaces embodied doing. It allows us opportunity to *feel* like we are doing something without the demands of *actually* having to do it. In other words, "the absence of the real…[is] an ideal vehicle for psychological adjustment; for constructing and managing the kind of selves that society requires, without meddling interference from the nature of things.[12]

But, why do we willingly do this and what's happening when we do? Crawford suggests that we do this because, "when dumb nature is understood as threatening to our freedom as rational beings, it becomes attractive to construct a virtual reality that will be less so."[13] The freedom of the will needs to be secured from 'dumb nature', but it can only be done "by removing the will into a separate realm, from which it can have no causal effect in this world."[14] What is happening when we do this is that the cost of the fantasy of an

unconditioned autonomy is impotence, the inability to affect change in the world through skill or action.[15] In other words, what follows is a:

> …fragility – a kind of self [or essence] that can't tolerate conflict and frustration. And this fragility, in turn, makes us more pliable to whoever can present the most enthralling representations that save us from direct confrontation with the world…. These representations allow us to remain comfortable in a little 'me-world' of manufactured experience. If these representations make use of hyper-palatable mental stimuli, the world of regular old experience may come to seem not only frustrating but unbearably drab by comparison.[16]

As a result, and I think Crawford would agree here, humanity begins to resemble what Nietzsche calls "the last man," wherein happiness is manufactured or "contrived" rather than discovered through the confrontations of direct experience, and humans are consequently rendered incapable of doing anything other than to blink.[17]

We now think that the digital world is a necessary condition of existence. But, herein lies the second danger. *Being in the digital world is not a necessary condition for existence, yet we treat it as if it were.* Consequently, we no longer see digital technologies as the mere tools that they are, but we see them as extensions of the world and of our very being. *The danger presented here is that the more we treat the digital world as a necessary condition of existence, the more we lose sight of the actual necessary conditions of existence; the real world of actual circumstances.*

Rather, the digital world is a desire, and not a necessity. It's a reality that can go away, but we think it can't. Yet, we treat it as a necessity, and it is thereby integrated into existence as an extension of it. As a result, we mistakenly refashion the unnecessary as necessary. But, I argue, along with Arthur Kroker, that in doing so, it becomes the very thing that endangers what we necessarily need in our essence, which is a sense of living a genuine life.

Kroker

Arthur Kroker, in his work *The Will to Technology & the Culture of Nihilism* mirrors Crawford's sentiments and warnings. Kroker argues, along Heideggerian lines, that one of the effects of living in a digital age of soft representations—a world where the will is free to will itself from the unwanted detritus

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that is the external world—brings about a kind of boredom.[18] It is a profound and cynical boredom that marks the fundamental attunement of contemporary techno-culture.[19] It is a boredom that accompanies the lack of the essential oppressiveness that the natural, objective world (of which Crawford discusses) existentially imparts on us.

Kroker states that, "the twenty first century will be the metaphysical century without limits."[20] This century is marked by a will to existence that no longer wills to self-overcome the natural limitations that oppresses it, but is a *willing for the sake of willing*. It is "no longer the will *to* anything, but now only the will ordering every dimension of life in

order to sustain its own existence."[21] In other words, willing is not for, or towards, something outside of itself, but only to will itself into existence. Thus, the will gets bored. It gets bored because it lacks the sense of overcoming limitations since what actually limits it is no longer confronted. Therefore, "the will to will itself" as Kroker notes, "is a virtual will because it has no necessary goal."[22]

Kroker asks some profound and frightening questions. "What happens when man becomes bored with himself" as a result of not having to willfully overcome anything outside himself?[23] What happens when time becomes a 'drag' on life?[24] What happens when our being suddenly opens up to emptiness?[25] What happens when the oppressiveness of natural limitations no longer oppresses us?[26] Kroker, through Heidegger, answers his own questions by noting that "Heidegger saw immediately that the abyss awaiting technical consciousness was a sense of boredom so profound, an abandonment of being so generalized, a culture of distraction so pervasive that 'what oppresses us… is the very absence of any oppressiveness in our [being] as a whole'."[27] To unpack this seemingly paradoxical claim, Kroker explains that:

> …the absence of an essential oppressiveness in [being] is the emptiness as a whole, so that no one stands with anyone else and no community stands with any other in the rooted unity of essential action. Each and every one of us is a servant of slogans, an adherent to a program, but none is the custodian of inner greatness of [being] and its necessities. This 'being left empty' ultimately resonates in our [being], its emptiness is the absence of any essential oppressiveness.

> The mystery is lacking in our [being], and thereby the inner terror that every mystery carries with it and that gives [being] its greatness remains absent. The absence of oppressiveness is what fundamentally oppresses and leaves us most empty, i.e., the fundamental emptiness that bores us.[28]

It is a cynical emptiness that bores us because we have been made weak in the ground of our essence by the digital age.[29] And "out of this 'profound boredom' with oneself will also emerge new forms of what Nietzsche described as 'monstrous consciousness,'" a nihilistic consciousness unable to overcome itself.[30] Kroker concludes that "in its essence profound boredom anticipates the virtualization of the human will with such intensity that 'being left empty' is the fundamental condition […] of digital culture. That the emptying out of being is accompanied by a culture of 'smug contentment' is, in the contemporary situation, undeniable."[31]

Kroker paints a stark picture here, but the undeniability of his claim, I argue, holds true. We see this 'smug contentment' in ourselves and in our students. It's a kind of self-righteous indignation toward anything hard or difficult in the real world, which is met with being contented with weak half-measures because that world itself is no longer considered real or valuable. It's a smug contentment that accompanies the rising "fake it until you make it" ethos in the face of what is hard or difficult in the real world of actual experience because that world itself is no longer considered real or valuable in itself. It is the exaggerated overconfidence of skill and ability, and being comfortably contented with it, because those abilities and skills are no longer tested in any real or genuine context in the digital

world. Finally, it's the smug contentment that accompanies the delusion that we've finally mastered and transcended the natural world when we actually haven't. All of this leaves the "emptied out being" intact. However, we don't like it, which might explain why some people whole-heartedly believe that there will be a zombie apocalypse, or why some people

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wanted Donald Trump to win the presidential election; both cases represent a *secret wish* for an existential oppression that people actually crave in order to counteract the fundamental nihilistic emptiness of being that is truly boring them in the digital age.[32]

This "emptied being" may also be why digital creatives invent their own problems— and notions of happiness for that matter—that don't truly exist, a phenomena that is often lampooned in the television show *Silicon Valley*. It is done to fulfill a virtual and illusory sense of overcoming something hard since what is actually hard is no longer confronted. Many digital technologies are solutions for problems that don't genuinely exist. These problems are *invented*, rather than existentially encountered, just so they can be overcome with endless, self-justifying solutions. This in turn, makes us *feel* that a digital life is *meaningful*—that something is actually being accomplished, that progress is happening, and that the world is becoming a better place—when it actually might not be.

Kroker notes that this same idea can be found in the corporate "mission statements"

within digital economies. He states that "the will to will invents here the talk about 'mission'. Understood metaphysically, the 'mission statement' of businesses in the new [digital] economy are always second-order alibis, providing the illusion of a necessary purpose to what is essentially aimless and directionless."[33] This is why the mission statement is always flowered by pseudo-spiritual or quasi-humanistic significance; to give the illusion of human profundity to what is essentially empty. It is an attempt to make human what is essentially inhuman; an attempt at applying genuine existential human truth to conceal the fact that it can't deliver or offer it. And we unquestionably accept it *as if* it did deliver or offer such a truth. We accept it because it *feels* like it offers such a truth—in a "power of positive thinking" kind of way—rather than cognitively *knowing and understanding* that it doesn't and can't. What results, then, is that 'thoughtlessness' and 'unreflective experience' become celebrated trademarks of the new digital economy.[34]

The Changes

It is impossible to deny that placing a biological organism in a world of pure calculation and artificial representation – which is the heart of digital existence – drastically changes the organism by modifying the essence of the organism. As a consequence, we become particular kinds of people with particular kinds of understandings of being.

The primary change that the digital age introduces is a new understanding of being unmoored from the limitations of the real world. In the digital world, humans are free-floating subjectivities in a contextual world

of ungrounded digital representation. Many people favor this mode of being because it offers a sense of freedom of will and choice. But, there are dark sides to this condition. They are ones that I argue, along with Matthew Crawford and Arthur Kroker, we do not actually like even when we think we do.

Thus, the digital age puts human essences and what it means to be human in a precarious position. On one hand, Crawford explains the first danger explained above by noting that the world of ordinary experience is rendered drab in comparison to the exciting world offered up by the digital world.[35] On the other hand, Kroker explains the second danger, noting that the digital world is rendered drab because it contains the absence of existential oppressiveness inherent in life, which itself oppresses and leaves us most empty; a fundamental emptiness that bores us.[36] In other words, the digital age presents a two-fold issue for the development of human essences. *The digital age renders life itself drab and the digital age is drab because it lacks any existentially true sense of life.* Both cases indicate the profound effect that the digital age has on human life and the development of our essences.

What unites both Crawford and Kroker is the idea that the digital age provides a kind of unbound freedom of will—a freedom of will that is not limited or bound by the oppression of the external world—which produces negative consequences for our understanding of being and the development of our essences. Moreover, I think both Crawford and Kroker would agree with Ortega in that what we essentially are is, in large part, a result of our direct relation to our existentially objective world circumstances, which provide contextual contrasts, limitations, and distinctions that inform our understanding of being and, thereby, give our lives genuine meaning. And these are the same contextual circumstances that the digital world seeks to modify or annihilate altogether.

Conclusion

Winston Churchill once said that "we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us."[37] Churchill's statement reflects Ortega's view that what we essential are, or rather "become," is a result of ourselves *in* our existentially objective world circumstance; that the world as it is (i.e. our buildings), along with the world that we construct (i.e. our future buildings), co-reflexively makes us in return. It means that we make the world and, in turn, the world makes us. This relates to the overall theme of this essay; that the digital world and

its age constitute a world that we make which, in turn, makes us; that we design and structure our digital world and, in turn, it designs and structures us. Yet, we neglect a critical, attentive sensitivity to the latter part of this proposition.

I argue that we should not ignore the downsides that the digital world presents to us as biological organisms in a genuinely biological world and its circumstances. In the biological world, human essences are not fixed, but made. What we essentially are is a consciousness in a given world, the synthesis of which is our essence. And out of this essence comes our understanding of being in the world. Human nature is, therefore, an *essence* that is a fluid heuristic (i.e. way or practice) of becoming formed out of a more primordial understanding of being.

But, the digital world is increasingly becoming a radical new set of existential circumstances that contains within it two dangers. The first danger is that we can never not be in the actual world of existentially objective world circumstances, yet the digital world allows us to think we can escape it. The second danger is that it is a world that we think is a necessary condition of existence when it is not. In either case, thinking this way is done at the expense of the genuine world of actual experience. As a result, living in the digital world modifies our essences, and thus, modifies our understanding of being. In others words, it modifies our heuristics of becoming; the ways or practices of *how and what* we become. The issue here is that our understanding of being is becoming modified unwittingly, and we are increasingly becoming ignorant, apathetic, or confused by this process. And this makes us unhappy while we may not consciously know that it does.

Crawford notes that, in the digital world, we have become too weak to handle the objective world, so we hide from the objective hard-to-handle world *in* the very world that makes us too weak to handle reality. We are becoming "last men," much like the humans in the movie *Wall-E*. Kroker argues that technology frees us from the existential circumstances that oppress us. But, we are, in turn, oppressed by this lack of oppression. This oppression is manifested as boredom, which then turns us into unhappy nihilistic little monsters. Therefore, the concern here is that this modification of essences and our understanding of being in the digital age may not be a positive thing for the future of humanity, as noted by Crawford and Kroker.

Human nature is, therefore, an essence that is a fluid heuristic (i.e. way or practice) of becoming formed out of a more primordial understanding of being.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I am not an anarchist, nor am I a neo-luddite. I believe that the digital world offers tremendous gifts that shouldn't be overlooked. But, as we've seen, there are some actual and potential dangers to humanity and its development in the digital age. However, all of this can change if we pay attention to it properly by not get entranced by the positive thinking and the false notions of progress advanced by the digital age. The problem is that we may not know how to do that. I suggest we begin by being provisionally pessimistic and skeptical, and begin to ask very important questions about our place in the digital age.

Endnotes

[1] Jose Ortega, *Meditations on Quixote* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963), 45.

[2] Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 450.

[3] Marias, *History of Philosophy*, 450.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Jose Ortega, *Man and Crisis*, (New York: W.W. Norton& Company, 1962), 94.

[6] Philip K. Dick, "I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon," in *Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 452.

[7] That is, until death occurs.

[8] Arthur Kroker, *The Will to Technology & the Culture of Nihilism* 39-40. See also Martin Heidegger *Discourse on Thinking*, 45.

[9] Andrew Feenberg, "Ten Paradoxes of Technology" in *Techne* (Vol 14, Issue 1, 2010), 6.

[10] Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head* (NewYork: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 76.

[11] Crawford, 76.

[12] Ibid., 77.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke* Zarathustra, (Oxford: Oxford *University* Press, 2005), 16.

[18] Arthur Kroker, 39.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 55.

[21] Ibid. Italics mine.

[22] Ibid., 58.

[23] Ibid., 60.

[24] Ibid., 59.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 60.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Kroker, 61.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Marc Maron and Rosanne Barr, *WTF with Marc Maron Podcast Episode 729*, Podcast audio, WTF with Marc Maron: Rosanne Barr, web, accessed Aug 5, 2016, http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episode-729-roseanne-barr

[33] Kroker, 58.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Crawford, 77.

[36] Kroker, 60.

[37] Winston Churchill, "House of Commons Rebuilding," *UK Parliament.* Nov, 5. 2016. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/oct/28/house-of-commons-rebuilding

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