Thinking of Oneself as an Aging Computer/Thinking of (an Aging) Oneself as a Computer

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At the second ISEA in 1990 I gave a paper, "Thinking Of Oneself as a Computer", that went on to be widely published and translated (Pryor 1991: 585). The paper pointed out that people were starting to talk about themselves as if they were computers; that is, the computer was emerging as a new metaphor for the self.

Today, almost twenty years later, this observation is hardly new. It is now commonplace to hear references to, for example, "hardwired" brains and "programmed" cells, although these casual allusions always make me flinch. It is as if the computer metaphor has been thoroughly and unquestioningly assimilated into our sense of ourselves. There is at least one PhD involved in analyzing the contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon (should I say this "meme"?). However, that is not my intention here. Instead I want to very briefly update my original analysis by subjectively examining it in the light of an activity that in today's climate dare not speak its name, that is, of *aging*.

My first paper pointed out that

> [t]hroughout history there has been an intimate relationship between the latest technological advances and the metaphor of the self. This is somewhat of a 'chicken-and-egg' relationship — it is hard to say which comes first, the technology or the view of ourselves.

> The Greeks lived in a technology based on craft and they likened the person to a clay vessel. In the seventeenth century the advent of clocks enabled René Descartes to compare a sick man with a badly made clock. Since then machinery has continued as a metaphor of the self in a way that is largely subconscious: people speak of being rusty or sharp, broken down, running on empty, etc. Today, as the boundary blurs between technology and the body, people seem to be shifting almost unconsciously from this mechanical model of themselves to a model based on computer technology. I have noticed this trend amongst scientific and technical people in particular (Pryor 1991).

In 1990 my conception of the computer was the combination of software and hardware. In order to understand a person being like a computer, that is, composed of software and hardware, I started with the idea that this seemed to reflect the (apparently) dualist mind/body pair. Analyzing this from first principles and with only a minimal knowledge of philosophy and linguistics, I linked software/hardware with mind/body and self/other in order to derive the concept of self as software. In this view, one's subjectivity or sense of self could be reduced to an algorithm, to a set of instructions that could operate independently of the body. This view was certainly echoed in contemporary publications from art and technology. Correlating with other dualist pairs such as reason/emotion, conscious/unconscious and masculine/feminine (in the sense of gender roles rather than of biology), I linked the first items together. Thus, mind and software correlated with self, reason, the conscious and, I'm afraid, the masculine. Body and hardware correlated with other, emotion, the unconscious and the feminine.

At first this all seemed quite appealing. I was keen to ignore my own body as the source of my vulnerabilities. I was also keen to distance myself from otherness, femaleness and emotion, which had been associated with career problems that are now happily outdated.

However, I analyzed this idea of algorithmic subjectivity through the philosophy of scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and Alan Watts while also being forced to re-evaluate my attitude to the body through developing RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury). It became quite clear that an algorithmic subjectivity not only reflected very questionable assumptions but also denied the importance of very important aspects of being human.

If you neglect your body it will revenge itself by making you lose your mind (Isnard, quoted in Pryor 1991)

Nineteen years later, oneself is committing the apparent crime of aging. In contrast, the computer is forever fresh and new (although not, of course, the university computer used to write the original paper). What can I conclude from the passage of time? Firstly, my thinking is now strongly influenced by the groundbreaking (to use an almost exhausted metaphor) theory of human language and communication called Integrationism (Harris 1996). I no longer consider that verbal signs, such as a word 'mind', are dualist pairs composed of form (the word) and content (the thing referred to). Roy Harris makes it clear that even though one may well have communicated successfully with a friend when one says something like, "I can't make up my mind", this does not imply that there is such a *thing* as a 'mind' at all (Harris, 2008). There is a great deal more that can be said about all this, fortunately not here. But I would no longer spend any time teasing out the so-called mind-body dualism, or even variants such as the mind-body-body problem (Hanna and Thompson, 2003) and so on. I would also extend my definition of the computer beyond hardware and software and give equally strong emphasis to networks and interconnectivity.

Secondly, I now understand that it is truly impossible to separate myself from my body at all. I am more aware of its watery vulnerabilities as well as its miracles; of what Cranial Osteopath Claire Thompson calls the "stretchy bag of salty water" (Thompson, 2009). The consequences of bad health habits no longer seem so distant and I know that I have to prepare for fragility, however far away. I am also engaged by Eckhart Tolle's exhortation to free ourselves from identification with the past and the future; from identification with the thinking mind. Tolle asks

> Do you treat *this moment* as if it were an obstacle to be overcome? Do you feel you
> have a future moment to get to that is more important? (Tolle 2003: 42).

And when the future moment finally arrives, will it be treated as just another present moment also on the way to somewhere else? Tolle makes a good point here, one that is also made by Buddhism and other spiritual disciplines. I am groping my way to living in what he and others call the Now.

That university computer and I have aged very differently, thus offering another rupture of the computer-human metaphor. That computer may still work today, although it is more likely to have had hardware failure. In any case, whether functional or not, it is much more likely to have been thrown into a rubbish tip somewhere. Moore's law means that it would have become out of date in a couple of years and increasingly incompatible with the modern world. So we have to consider whether when we use a 'computer' metaphor we are referring to something idealized, something that is forever the current model, forever up-to-date. We need to be much more specific.

As for me, a living being, I still function very well and moreover, am still above ground. I have found it much easier to remain compatible with the modern world. As for my aging process, although nothing entirely explains it, the consequences of damage to DNA and hence to cell replication are certainly involved. It is ironic that, as Sue McCauley once said to me, the free radicals sound like so much more fun than the anti-oxidants! And does anyone actually die just from old age itself? Cell biologist Lewis Wolpert claims that this question remains unanswered but that death is almost always accompanied by the abnormal behavior of cells (Wolpert 2009: 154).

What can I conclude from many years of involvement in the rhetoric of, quest for and invention of a "better" future with computer technology? Over the last thirty years I've heard many claims for the empowerments and transformations that will be made possible by new technologies of computer graphics, interactivity, virtual reality, the internet, and so on. A sense of *deja vu* is inevitable. Did the "better future" ever happen or has it constantly receded into the distance? I cannot answer that here. At the same time as I am more interested than ever in the invention of assistive technologies (both communicational and biological), I find it quite important to recall Tolle's advice to return through the body to living in the *present moment* (rather than in the past or the future) and to detach from the idea that something in *the future* will save us or make us happy. And I want to reiterate that the unquestioning adoption of a computational way of understanding ourselves is not only limiting but also potentially dangerous. If Posthumanism does indeed draw attention to convergent spaces of biology and artifice as well as rupturing polarized bioconservative/technoprogressive positions, as the ISEA symposium theme proposes, I would argue that it needs to develop within a clear understanding of the limitations of our presuppositions about ourselves.

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