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 that went on to be widely published (Pryor 1991: 585). Entitled 'Thinking Of Oneself as a Computer', the paper pointed out that people were starting to talk about themselves as if they were computers; the computer seemed to be becoming a new metaphor for the self.

Today this observation is hardly new; in fact, it is commonplace to hear references to, for example, 'hardwired' brains and 'programmed' cells, as if the metaphor has been thoroughly and unquestioningly assimilated. There is at least one PhD involved in analyzing the contemporary manifestations of this idea (should I say this 'meme'?). However, that is not my intention here. Instead I want to very briefly update my own analysis by subjectively examining it in the light of an activity that 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 likened the person to a clay vessel. In the seventeenth century the advent of clocks enabled Rene 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 (Pryor 1991).

Metaphors can be useful. In 1990 my understanding of the computer was of a fusion of hardware and software (today I would give equally strong emphasis to networks and interconnectivity). Applying the hardware/software pair to oneself seemed to correlate with other apparently dualist constructions: mind/body, reason/emotion, self/other and male/female. Analyzing this from first principles, with only a minimal knowledge of philosophy (or linguistics), I linked the first items in all these pairs. The concept of the self as software emerged, the idea that one's subjectivity or sense of self could be reduced to software, to an algorithm, to a set of instructions that could operate independently of the body. At first this seemed quite reasonable, even attractive. I was quite keen to ignore my own body as I felt that it was the source of my own vulnerabilities. However, as I thought it through, I saw the inadequacy of an algorithmic sense of self, one that denied the body's role in subjectivity; this could also only include the parts of ourselves of which we are aware (for example, just the conscious part of the mind).

	If you neglect your body it will revenge itself by making you lose your mind (Isnard)

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 one used to write the first paper). What can I conclude from the passage of this time? Firstly, I am now influenced, to use an exhausted metaphor, by the groundbreaking theory of language and communication, Integrationism. I would no longer expect word categories, such as mind vs. body, to be useful containers of information or even clarification. Secondly, I now understand that it is 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 must prepare for fragility, however far away. Paradoxically 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, so I am groping my way to living in what he and others call the Now.

The computer and I have aged very differently, thus presenting another rupture of a computer-human metaphor. The computer I used back then may still function 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 in a rubbish tip somewhere. It became 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 function very well and moreover, am still above ground. I have of course found it much more easy to be compatible with the modern world. As for the 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 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 behaviour of cells (Wolpert 2009: 154).

What can I conclude from many years of involvement in the rhetoric of a quest for, and invention of, a 'better' future with computer technology? Did it 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: return through the body to living in the *present moment* (rather than in the past or the future) and detach from the idea that something in *the future* will save me or make me 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 the concept of posthumanism does indeed draw attention to convergent spaces of biology and artifice as well as rupturing polarized bioconservative/technoprogressive positions, I would argue that it needs to develop within a clear understanding of the limitations of our presuppositions about ourselves.

References

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