

HUMAN NATURE AND THE DIGITAL CULTURE: THE CASE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Abstract

Human nature and issues that relate directly or even indirectly to it form the basic preoccupation of philosophical anthropology. The human person is both a product of culture and equally a creator of culture, which connects with or without mediation to the formation of newer communities with its antecedent challenges, gains and demands. The reality of the modern digital technologies especially in the media world has inevitably and concretely inaugurated a new culture that has both profound gains as well as immense challenges. This is indeed a case for philosophical anthropology. Things that have been considered ordinary in the past have today assumed extraordinary nature and cannot easily be ignored without terrible consequences. This paper insists that even with the new trend of digital technology, a proper utilisation of the new media, far from being inimical to the constitutive embodiment of the human nature will rather ennoble it and give it a more dignified meaning and value.

Keywords: Human nature, philosophical anthropology, digital culture, new media, individualization, community, democratization, decentralization.

Introduction

The question of the human nature which is central to philosophical anthropology can never be considered as outdated despite the contemporary emergence of the digital culture. As long as human beings remain both the inventors of, and users of digital technologies, it is inevitable that human characteristics would be imprinted on these technologies. This essay examines human nature and the digital culture from the perspective of philosophical anthropology. It critically interrogates human nature, digital culture as well as the relationship between both. This task is executed in two main steps with the relevant sub-divisions, namely, (a) an examination of philosophical anthropology within the context of the anthropology discipline itself, and (b) an exploration of digital culture together with its relationship to philosophical anthropology. The essay establishes that the question of human nature remains relevant today, in a world that seems to be taken over by the digital culture, because the digital culture is itself created and sustained by that which is typically human. I shall begin the first step by providing a general overview of the concept of anthropology.

Anthropology and Philosophical Anthropology: An Overview of Anthropology

Anthropology is derived from the Greek two words '*anthropos*' (meaning 'human') and '*logos*' (meaning 'science' or 'study'). Hence, it is primarily defined as a discourse about humans. Basically, anthropology is the study of humanity and the culture of humans. Culture in this instance should be understood broadly since it includes different elements including the digital phenomenon. Anthropology is concerned with the attempt to understand the entirety of what it means to be a human being, and this would include the past and present existence of this entirety called 'human'. Thus, every aspect of humanity falls into the scope of anthropological studies, from the physical, biological, historical, and religious to the cultural. The focus of anthropologists, not only on the present but also on the past of human existence brings them into intellectual conversation with other disciplines such as history, sociology, archaeology and linguistics.

In one of the earlier studies in anthropology of religion, Annemarie De Waal Maletijt of the Department of Anthropology, Hunter College City University of New York, argues that anthropologists “try to discover the origins, developments, changes, interrelationships, functions, and meanings of every human phenomenon.” Anthropology, she continues “is thus nothing less than an effort to understand humanity through the study of man's biological character as well as his whole social existence.”¹ In the context of this paper, the digital culture of contemporary society affects not only the physical dimensions of humanity but also its social reality. However, analyzing the digital culture from the perspective of philosophical anthropology would mean placing much emphasis on the questions of meaning than on the physical and biological concerns. This is notwithstanding the fact that the physical and biological concerns of anthropology on digital culture provides the facts with which philosophical anthropology works. But before delving into such analysis, it is important to situate philosophical anthropology within the known typologies of anthropology and to determine its central questions, methodologies and dimensions.

Philosophical Anthropology within the Anthropological Disciplines

There are different aspects of anthropology. These would include: cultural anthropology, psychological anthropology, social anthropology, ethnological anthropology, religious anthropology, philosophical anthropology, etc. Other forms of anthropology can also be developed but we shall briefly comment on these forms for the sake of brevity in this essay.

Cultural anthropology investigates the customs and traditions of human societies, and how these cultural elements are used and structured over time. The specific focus of cultural anthropology must account for the specific relationships within cultural settings, among human agents, between different communities and between human communities and the environment. Psychological anthropology examines human behaviour, studying thereby the evolution and constitution of identity, personality traits and disorders as well as behavioural patterns. Social anthropology is somehow related to cultural anthropology but it distinguishes itself in its analysis of the dynamics of the relationship between individuals and groups in a bid to determine the elements that are common to the various forms of human society. Ethnological anthropology equally studies human group. However, this study of human group links the common traits of groups to the historical, geographical and ecological conditions of their existential contexts. Religious anthropology studies religious institutions, beliefs, practices and objects in comparison to social institutions. Its focus is different from theological anthropology which focuses on the questions of meaning, values and ethical norms of religious practices and beliefs.² In this sense, theological anthropology is closely related to philosophical anthropology since their study of humanity is not focused on merely exploring sociological facts³ but rather involves interrogation at the level of meanings.

Philosophical anthropology is fundamentally concerned with the question of 'what is human'. According to Joseph Agassi, it could be described as the “metaphysics of the study of man.”⁴ The term which was first introduced by German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1706-1757) in his work *Metaphysica* (1739) asks the question of why of human being. It investigates the ultimate principles of human existence and activities. Philosophical anthropology is less interested in the knowing of how human person acts or evolves or even interacts with others, but

¹Annemarie De Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture : An Introduction of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 2.

²Walter Randolph Adams, „Introducing this Volume,” 1-13 in Walter Randolph Adams and Frank A. Salamone, eds., *Anthropology and Theology: God, Icons, and God-talk* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), 3.

³E. E. Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 17.

⁴Joseph Agassi, *Towards a Rational Philosophical Anthropology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 35.

is more concerned with the question of: Who is a human person? The concept of 'philosophical anthropology' would later be taken up by Immanuel Kant and popularized by other German philosophers like Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.⁵

Methodology of Philosophical Anthropology

Human beings are not simply the objects of study in exactly the same way as other creatures, thus method in the study of humans ought to be different as well. Even where one deploys the standard methodologies such as analytical and synthetical, which could be combined with the classical inductive and deductive methods respectively, the fact remains that method in philosophical anthropology must incorporate a degree of pre-comprehension. Pre-comprehension emerges from a prior knowledge of oneself as a human being. This is because it is humans who are involved in the study of human beings. Hence, the object of study is not an extraneous object, rather it involves a level of self-comprehension, that is self-understanding. This background must always be put into consideration and may reflect some subjectivity in philosophical judgment, particularly in an investigation that involves digital culture.

Digital Culture and Philosophical Anthropology

If philosophical anthropology is concerned with the fundamental questions of what consists of human nature, it therefore should be concerned with the various manifestations of culture as long as culture is about the human community, behaviour and interaction. As a cultural form, digital culture represents one of the intersections of philosophical anthropology and cultural anthropology. Before delving into this intersection, it is pertinent to define digital culture.

Digital culture is a cultural form that is shaped and determined by human relationship to digital technology. It primarily refers to changes “brought about by the emergence of digital, networked and personalized media in our society and the passing from communication phases centred on print and broadcast media, to more personalized and networked media, that use digital compressing and processing capacities at their core.”⁶ Consequently, contemporary media or digital technologies has inevitably transformed the various forms of interaction and representation within the society. I shall return to this point when I discuss the concept of interactivity vis-à-vis digital culture and philosophical anthropology. Meanwhile, Lev Manovich has in his 2001 book, *The Language of New Media* argued about how the computer screen in its various forms (desktop, laptop, phones and so on) has emerged as the essential means of experiencing mediated culture in the technological world of today.⁷ Reaffirming this position, Vincent Miller argues that the consequence of this new form of mediated culture is that “the computer has moved from being merely a tool, such as a calculator or processor, to being a filter for all culture, and has started to replace the cinema screen, the television, the gallery wall and the book as our primary interface with mediated culture, with the internet itself becoming a repositor for all culture and culture forms.”⁸ Historically, the beginning of this shift in the functionality of technology is traced to the Second World War.⁹

⁵Cf. Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Darmstadt: Reichl, 1928) later translated by H. Meyerhoff and published as *Man's Place in Nature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); Helmut Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter 1928/1975); Arnold Gehlen, „Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt“ in K. S. Rehberg, ed., *Arnold Gehlen – Gesamtausgabe, Testkritische Edition unter Einbeziehung des gesamten Textes der 1. Auflage von 1940*, as, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Joachim Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen,” *Iris* 1, no. 1 (2009): 153-170.

⁶Wikiversity, „Digital Culture,” https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Digital_culture#Course_-_Digital_Culture (accessed 23 March 2020).

⁷Len Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).

⁸Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, 2nd edition (London: SAGE, 2020), 18.

⁹Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd), 47.

As aforementioned, at the centre of the relationship between digital culture and philosophical anthropology is the idea of interactivity, a new mode of human representation and relationality determined by the digital technologies. In fact, interactivity could be seen as the entry point of philosophical anthropology into the area of digital culture. The reason is that given the fact that digital culture creates and thrives on interactivity, a fundamental interrogation of digital culture, which philosophical anthropology deals with, can only begin from that point where technology is linked with human actions, behaviour and culture. From the perspective of the new media, there are different opinions concerning the concept of interactivity. Manovich, for instance, considers the term as tautological while dismissing the idea of media interactivity as a 'myth'. According to him, the new media is by definition interactive and as such to define as 'interactive' is completely “meaningless – it simply means stating the most basic fact about computers.”¹⁰ While acknowledging the trajectory of the Manovich argument, yet it is limited to the function of new media without considering how it eventually shapes the construction and reconstruction of human behaviour and conduct.

Miller offers three understandings of 'interactivity' in relation to digital media that can help in advancing the argument here. Miller's categorization is based on a generation understanding of interactivity as a form of “responsiveness” – as in the responsiveness of a media object or piece of information to the preferences, needs or activities of the user.”¹¹ The first understanding of interactivity is based on the “technological potential for a user to modify their mediated environment”¹² in the course of using technology as a result of its deterministic structure, it is based not simply on the basic nature of technology as Manovich argues but, on its structure that can be manipulated by a user. The second understanding related to the social context in which technological communication happens, such as the “context in which messages are exchanged.” In other words, “it can be seen as the way people adapt their actions to a particular social situation.”¹³ The third understanding always forms the background of the desire to offer a more interactive experience to users. Miller argues that this understanding is largely “a psycho-socially oriented aspect of interactivity relating to the perception of the user or the 'state of mind' of the audience in terms of taking a 'passive' or 'active' role in relation to the media, or the extent to which they feel invited to participate in an interactive experience.”¹⁴

From the foregoing, the idea of interactivity does not end with the built-in mechanism of the digital apparatus, but is a demonstration of a “socio-technical relationship between the user of the media and the media itself.”¹⁵ The trigger of interaction initiated by the structure of the media can generate a feedback or response from and in the user, therefore redefining his or her anthropological disposition in relation to the digital world.

In further making case for a philosophical anthropological investigation of the digital culture, I shall examine how the digital culture 'interacts' with the nature of humans in three main themes. This critical examination of human digital behaviour would focus on (a) individualization versus community, (b) changing work pattern, and (c) information decentralization.

1. Individualization versus Community

It has been argued that there is a convergence between the digital culture and individualism.¹⁶ From the perspective of the structural 'interactivity' of digital technology, the case may be made

¹⁰Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 55.

¹¹Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, 19.

¹²Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, 19.

¹³Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, 20.

¹⁴Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, 20.

¹⁵Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, 20.

¹⁶William C. Waddell, „The Convergence of Technology and Individualism,” *Business Forum* 24, nos. 1-2 (1999): 39.

that technology in creating a mode of interaction gradually cuts the individual user away from the social life of the community. To insist on such argument not only appears reductionist but may equally lead to incorrect conclusions.¹⁷ Thus, philosophical anthropology rightly probes further. It interrogates the nature of human beings in order to ascertain if they are more likely to yield to either an individualistic or community-centred lifestyle. While the effect of digital technology, on the face value, appear to create a more individualistic person, the interactivity structure however is grounded on a community-centred disposition of the human person. This chimes with Miller's third understanding according to which the psycho-social nature of human beings is explored and integrated in the designing of digital technology. The interactivity function in digital technology is, to put it in a layman's language, mere an invitation to a social space, a communal exchange, even if of a virtual type.

Thus, one cannot simply construe the anthropological assessment of digital culture as consisting of the contest between the individualistic and the community-centredness. In fact, beyond the interactivity between the digital device and the primary user is a second-tier level of interactivity. Within this second tier is a broader level of exchange in which virtual communities are created and sustained. To be concrete, one thinks of Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, joint computer games and so on. A multi-level interface structure that guarantees the interaction of different individuals, mostly of similar interests is built on the initial structure of interactivity.¹⁸ Of courses, there are limitations to this use but the interest of philosophical anthropology is specifically on the question of how this aspect of the digital culture could be explained in terms of the nature of humans.

2. Changing Work Patterns

The digital culture has equally redefined work patterns as well as behaviour in the work place. This is particularly the case in firms where digital technology is deployed, either minimally or extensively. Organizations and firms are taking advantage of the nature of digital technologies in “developing workstyles and office designs that are evolving around the possibilities of the new technology.”¹⁹ Simple changes such as the replacement of fixed telephones by mobile telephones have significant impact in the organization of firms and the behavioural patterns in workplaces today. The mobile nature of the digital culture implies a certain transformation of hitherto fixed workplace into mobile or flexible workplace. Tom Erik Julsrud mentioned the common characteristic of the mobile workplace as including:

1. Widespread use of open work-zones: most workers conduct their tasks in “open offices”.
2. No fixed desks: the use of desk sharing is common in the open work-zones. Use of individual offices is an exception.
3. Increased use of functionally focused areas: small rooms for “quiet work” or private phone calls are common, and also special rooms for project work, brainstorming, etc.
4. Use of mobile technology: portable computers and telephones are used in tandem with wireless LANs and Bluetooth solutions.
5. Flexible work schedules: there is openness towards work at home, at the customers in public places, etc.
6. Egalitarianism: managers use the same workplaces and technologies as the others.²⁰

¹⁷Saonee Sarker and Joseph S. Valacich, “An Alternative to Methodological Individualism: A Non-reductionist Approach to Studying Technology Adoption by Groups,” *MIS Quarterly* 34, no.4 (2010): 779-808.

¹⁸With the example of technology mediated learning, Steven Hornik and Anna Tupchiy, bot of the University of Central Florida, explore the issue at hand by looking at the four-dimensional patterns of horizontal individualism (H), vertical individualism (VI), horizontal collectivism (HC), and vertical collectivism (VC) to show how individual learners are brought into a feeling of the sense of community. Cf. Steven Hornik and Anna Tupchiy, “Culture's Impact on Technology Mediated Learning: The Role of Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism,” *Journal of Global Information Management* 14, no.4 (2006): 31-56.

¹⁹Tom Erik Julsrud, „Behavioural Changes at the Mobile Workplace: A Symbolic Interactionistic Approach,” 93-111 in Rich Ling and Per E. Pederson, eds., *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation of the Social Sphere* (London: Springer Verlag, 2005), 93.

²⁰Julsrud, „Behavioural Changes at the Mobile Workplace,” 96.

Mobile workplace resolves the dualism between the outside and the inside of the workplace, and had a lot of consequences for the work styles and behaviour of workers. The intertwining of the inside and the outside leads to greater networking in the workplace, which invariably redefines territoriality.

Anthropologists have always been concerned with the question of territoriality, place or space, whether individual/personal or common/public.²¹ Similarly sociologists are equally interested in the relationship between space and behaviour, as evident in the so-called 'symbolic interactionism'.²² Indeed territories are "the setting where action takes place"²³ and the actions can either be shaped or reshaped by the nature of the territories. People react differently when a territory is either personal or public, virtual or physical. Julsrud remarks that, "certainly, the new media at the workplace create a new social landscape, which goes beyond the mere physical interaction. In itself the development of a mere virtual workplace means that the individual has become less visible from a single point of view."²⁴ Anthropologically, the individual assumes a fragmented nature and thus becomes visible only in a differentiated manner. Visibility and invisibility within the context of work is merged in a way that productivity is retained albeit in a virtual mode.

Digital culture challenges anthropology in this cycle of transformation that involves not only the individual users but also the structure of organizations. The transformation of the workplace invariably affects behavioural patterns and social order. It promotes interactivity but in a way that combines both the physical and virtual spaces. From a philosophical anthropological dimension, it uncovers the nature of humans as adaptable creatures, open to transformation as a result of inherent dynamism. Thus, behaviour, role-play, and performativity are never fixed human characteristics but remain malleable actions in response to ever-shifting contexts.

3. Information Decentralization

In some ways, digital culture brings into common public discourse "the democratization of culture, empowerment and everyday creativity."²⁵ Democratization of information and communication, which is at the centre of digital culture is defined by some elements that include, "increased participation and access, a decentralization in terms of media organizations and technologies, equality in levels of reward and status for participants and the emergence of innovative and diverse forms of expression."²⁶ Practically, these elements manifest in the equal value of both print and online media as well as the liberalization of access to, and the sharing of, information. As indicated, a certain level of creativity attends to the democratization, or rather, the decentralization scheme that digital technology has introduced. Today, information is no longer restricted to the traditional (largely analogue) media of television, newspaper and radio but has been redefined by the vast world of possibilities of the internet. The creative dimension is evident in the varied content: from blogs to vlogs on various topics one can ever imagine, to all kinds of talkshows, satiric news, music, documentaries, comedy, games, and so on. The range of the possibilities is almost endless as it continues to evolve each day.

I shall elaborate further on the decentralization of information within the digital culture by highlighting two extra issues, namely a) the participatory element of digital culture, and b) the

²¹Cf. Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences* (London: Intercultural Press, 1990).

²²Cf. Erving Hoffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday/Bantam Books, 1956); Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1961); Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

²³Julsrud, „Behavioural Changes at the Mobile Workplace,” 98.

²⁴Julsrud, „Behavioural Changes at the Mobile Workplace,” 98.

²⁵Robert Strachan, *Sonic Technologies: Popular Music, Digital Culture and the Creative Process* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 20.

²⁶Strachan, *Sonic Technologies*, 22.

innovation of resistive forms made possible by this culture. The elements of democratization, creativity, participation and resistance could simply be construed as methodological expressions of the nature of humans. These are not the 'inventions' of the digital culture. They rather speak to the identity of the human users of the digital technologies.

a) Participatory Content of Digital Culture

The democratization and decentralization of information or communication process by means of digital technology implies that the digital environment must contend with “increased participation of all the parties involved in the communication process.”²⁷ This has a double implication. On the one hand, increased participation remains positive in terms of the diverse creativity that we witness in the digital environment as well as the different levels of collaborative works that it generates among the participants. In addition, it has broken the barrier to creativity created by the monopolization of the communication and information market in the analogue past. On the other hand, there is also the negative aspect which involves the challenges of “trust and reliability underlying the very act of communication.”²⁸ Today, the world is distressed by the prevalence of fake news, alternative facts, and hate speeches which find the digital environment as their easy outlets. Of course, a certain level of regulation of the digital environment is necessary, and actually put in place, yet one wonders how much of the digital content can be regulated in a space where the traditional editing of communication/information content is largely nonexistent.

b) Innovation of Resistive Forms

The democratization and decentralization of the digital environment also means that it can serve other purposes. Such purposes would include challenging the socio-political structures of power and domination. The offline-online interactivity, namely the impact of online, virtual exercises or campaigns on the real, physical world is now a common feature. Today protest letters, petitions, can be signed online by multiple individuals within a short period of time. Symbolic acts against social injustice can be expressed in pictures or videos posted online, and so on. This means that some traditional methods of resistance have been quite obsolete and less effective.²⁹ Even an 'oblique humour' might become more useful, particularly in ensuring that resistive performances do not degenerate into violent conflicts.³⁰ There is however, another way of interaction between the online and offline protest forms. This expressed in terms of the coordination of protests and innovative ways of executing such protests concretely. Examples that immediately come to mind are the Arab Spring (2011) and the Occupy Nigeria (2012) protests, which were coordinated and facilitated by the use of digital technology.

Through these means, the digital culture give expression to human behaviour, identity and the project of self-realization. The innate desire to realize one's self and even of self-transcendence are anthropological grounds for the resistance of territorial monopoly, whether of markets, opportunities or possibilities. They also constitute the reason for the rejection of any form of oppression or domination as well as constituting the drive towards freedom, innovation, and creativity.

Conclusion

This essay set out to examine the nature of the relationship between human nature and digital culture from the point of view of philosophical anthropology. Without doubt, philosophical

²⁷Kati Geber, „Digital Heritage News: Participatory Digital Cultural Content,” *Museum International* 58, nos. 1-2 (2006): 121-122; 121.

²⁸Geber, „Digital Heritage News,” 121.

²⁹Patrick Underwood and Howard T. Wesler, “‘The Internet is Here’: Emergent Coordination and Innovation of Protest Forms in Digital Culture,” *Proceedings of the 2011 Conference* (2011): 304-311; 310.

³⁰Underwood and Wesler, „The Internet is Here,” 310.

anthropology can no longer restrict its questions to the data provided by the humanities, namely sociology, culture, religion, psychology and archaeology. It must be applied to the scientific and technological areas in consistency with its central concern of the nature of humans. One of such novel area of interrogation is the digital culture which is brought by contemporary digital revolution. In line with this, Marcelo Dascal affirms thus, “the digital revolution has created an urgent need to reopen the debate on the basic questions of philosophical anthropology and to develop alternatives to the traditional answers. These tasks within the broader bounds of philosophy, for by their very nature they demand cutting-edge technical and empirical knowledge as well as a broad and extensive vision of the problems involved.”³¹ As the questions of philosophical anthropology address new frontiers, the implication is that its answers will also not remain the same. Perhaps other human attributes such as interactivity, democratization, creativity, participation and resistance would have to be taken seriously. These attributes have been shown in our examination above as underlying the relationship between digital culture and human nature.

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³¹Marcelo Dascal, „Digital Culture: Pragmatic and Philosophical Challenges,” *Diogenes* 211 (2006): 23-39; 26.

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