

With Humanism Like This, Who Needs Posthumanism?

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In “Telepresence and the Posthuman,” Norm Friesen sets out to chasten posthumanist enthusiasm about telepresence. He presents a critical consideration of various forms and aspects of telecommunication and their collective inability to fulfill the conditions required for “pedagogical tact.” The article cleverly inverts the core of “representability” from presence to absence in relation to the distance of the *tele*. This inversion provides the basis for his central claim that the immediacy of technologies of telepresence constitute a withdrawal that, as Friesen puts it, “rob us” of the qualities that “constitute our very ‘being’ as educators” and even as humans.

FIVE MOMENTS OF MODERATION

One might hear Friesen’s critique in concert with critics of modern technology such as Shelley, Heidegger, Illich, and Elull. However, unlike the more radical critiques, Friesen’s criticism is blunted by five moments of moderation. The first is when he grants the posthumanist assertion that technologies of telepresence “are changing what it means to be human.” The second, third, and fourth are when he grants the posthuman “prosthetic” description of the body and consciousness and then, “for the sake of argument,” goes further to admit that “technological innovation may someday be able to overcome much of this [prosthetic] ‘trouble;’” followed by the warning that with increased innovation the trouble of prosthetics could increase. The fifth “moment” of moderation are the collective and recurring points where Friesen’s argument relies on the counterfactuals of “empirical research.” These five points of moderation reveal that Friesen, unlike more forceful critics we might think of, grants out of hand a number of posthumanist assumptions about the present and the future and, furthermore, that his argument is essentially confined to

the sense certainty of empirical observation.

In reply, I will outline four objections to Friesen's article. I already mentioned the first two as the moments of moderation in his approach; the second two objections are related as outcomes to what I find missing in that approach and its implications. This should demonstrate why I believe that Friesen's moderate approach fails to address what is perhaps most alarming about the overdetermined claims of posthumanism with respect to recent technology in general and, of course, with particular attention to telepresence in telecommunications: that their claim to novelty is both the main crux of their argument and, as such, easily refuted by history.

Objection 1

Friesen claims that "tablets and smartphones are ... changing what it means to be human." This opening claim strikes me as provocative but profoundly unpersuasive. For one, it presupposes that "what it means to be human" is widely agreed upon and settled. This is a typical caricature of "humanism" found in recent posthumanist critiques, but it hardly stands up to scrutiny. Compare, for instance, the various images of the human within the Romantic tradition, or simply compare Rousseau and Shelley, and one will quickly see how deeply contested humanism has always been. That posthumanism wants to join that contest is one thing, that it wants to exempt itself from it is another. Accepting this exemption at the outset does Friesen's argument no favors.

Furthermore, examples such as Skype and FaceTime and the rest may dazzle the late modern imagination, but they hardly move or surprise anyone who has considered even the most basic theological questions, not to mention something like the mystery of transubstantiation. To again invoke Shelley, Frankenstein teaches us that tablets and smartphones are hardly the vanguard of alternative forms of humanism, and Shelley, unlike today's posthumanists, was aware that her creature was nothing new - she subtitled her story "A Modern Prometheus."

If today's sci-fi Jetsons panorama is really changing what it means to be human, then both Friesen's moderate humanism and the ever-forgetful posthumanists will have to show how all radical notions of a temporal, spiritual, energetic, and non-human sense of life, self, personhood, and so much more, from Ancients and Medievals across the globe, have somehow failed to imagine and create notions that change what it means to be human until only very recently. On this claim alone I am not sure that Friesen's article addresses a new situation so much as it grants the faulty assumptions of a very old one.

Objection 2

Following the first point, Friesen's specific critique of the posthumanist understanding of technological advances, most of all through telepresence technologies, as forms of "ill tempered prosthesis" nonetheless grants the prosthetic diagnosis the status of being a real problem. While he offers critical insight into the posthumanist idea that "the body is only the first of any number of possible prostheses for the many possibilities and adventures of a liberated, posthuman consciousness," he nonetheless warns, via Waldenfels, that "the more powerful our technological prostheses may become, the greater the difficulties we will face."¹

This, again, seems rather overblown. The prosthetics metaphor partially critiqued and partially endorsed by Friesen is embedded in an ancient mythopoetic imaginary. One example can be found in Homer, where Hephaestus, the god of fire, blacksmiths, and stone masonry, fashioned the most famous prosthetic known to the classical Greco-Roman world: the shield of Achilles. The later atheistic humanism of Protagoras opposed Homer's theological prosthetic in his famous dictum, "Man is the measure of all things." This meant that it was not the immortal gods of Olympus who fashioned the world, but, instead, the mortal humans who, like Homer and Hesiod, even fashioned the gods from their song.

This example alone should reveal two things that go unaccounted for by Friesen's analysis. First, insofar as we imagine the body as a prosthetic with

technological options for add-ons, we are not extending the human form in new way so much as we are repeating an ancient somatic relation. Second, we realize that a prosthetic notion of the body is perhaps, like the Protagorean objection, the most remarkable expression of an atheistic humanism that retains an ontogenetic distance between the human form and its prosthetic addition in order to reject the determinism of a theological expression of humanism. Surely when we refashion the body and the human into a new creation we find ourselves at the most ironic point of a particular definition of humanity, not, as the posthumanists suggest and Friesen allows for, something other than merely human.

Objection 3

Friesen finds the telepresent visual encounter incapable of a pedagogical encounter, specifically because of the lack of eye contact, extending into “the gaze.” This digital critique would put limits on many real pedagogical encounters that happen in total analog. A few examples that comes to mind would be any and every situation where mostly we rely on senses other than empirical sight to listen and pay attention. This could include everything from podcasts to the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, it is said that Jesus often taught on water in order to amplify his voice, and the acoustic structure of many lecture halls, concert halls, and other pedagogical spaces are all built for a pedagogy of the ear.

Reading books may not be literally oral, but there is an orality of a text, whether it is read by the eye or the finger or dictation software. Finally under Friesen’s lament we would have no ability to conceive of pedagogical tact without what seem to be ridiculously narrow cases of sensory encounters that exclude a number of well-known forms of teaching. Most glaring of all is the question of how one could begin to appreciate the pedagogical genius of some like Stevie Wonder or José Feliciano. And what about a student wearing a burka or someone for whom the pedagogical gaze is threatening or creepy? This, by the way, is not for me a question of ability; it is simply a question of

whether what is said to be the case is in fact the case or not.

Objection 4

Finally, it is not at all clear to me that the pedagogical tact described by Friesen through his selected sources is a necessary condition for pedagogy and it seems to go without saying that it is not a sufficient condition. The sort of pedagogy described happens at intimate quarters and works well in a particular sort of classical relationship, the sort we might imagine in Aristotle and Alexander or Rousseau and *Émile*. As compelling as this specific relationship is, it seems overdetermined to expect it to support the basis for the pedagogical relation as such. This seems to appeal to an immediate “natural attitude” about pedagogical tact without performing the necessary reduction, and shows an empiricism that threatens the integrity of any true phenomenology.

FINIS

It is for all these reasons that I find myself invoking the cliché, “With friends like this, who needs enemies?” While I share Friesen’s critical attitude toward posthumanism and agree about the potentially deleterious effects of taking telepresence and other forms of educational technology at face value - and while I also find the use of sources from the past refreshing - I nonetheless find myself asking “With humanism like this, who needs posthumanism?”

1 Friesen, this volume.