

Modern Culture and the Death of Human Nature

Ken Myers

A supportive order for ethical concerns is placed into a central concern. De-humanization is the concern.

Kevin Warwick (Wired Magazine Cover Story: Cyborg 1.0: Kevin Warwick Outlines His Plan to Become One with His Computer)

Warwick described the elaborate implants that he is installing into his body, implants with miniature transmitters that link up various signals from his nervous system, and other bodily activities with his PC. He is thus able to monitor, record and playback a range of experiences, and to use his PC as not only a bio-feedback device but to also initiate certain pre-programmed biological responses. His was is said to have some similar implants, and as their computers are networked, this may, I suppose bring them somewhat closer. Kevin Warwick declares near the beginning of the article, "I was born human, but this was an accident of fate, a condition of merely time and space, it is something I think we have the power to change." Human, for Kevin Warwick, and presumably for some of the avid readers of Wired, is a transitional-disposable state, which can be transcended through acts of will, imagination and technology. Warwick's cyborg project fits the description of what scholar Katherine Halle describes as the "post-human" point of view, in her 1999 book *How We Became Post-Human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Halle observes that the "post-human" view, sees the human in terms of information, more than material existence. The post-human view sees embodiment as accident of history, rather than an inevitability of human life. The post-human thinks of the body as the original prosthesis that we learn to manipulate, so that extending, or replacing that body with other prosthesis, becomes the continuation of a process that began before we were born. Most important, by these and other means, the post-human view configures human being, so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the post-human view, there are not essential differences, or absolute demarcations, between bodily existence, and computer simulation, between cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.

In another book that came out recently called, *Becoming a Cosmopolitan, What it Means to be a Human in the New Millennium* (Jason Hill) demonstrates similar fluid hopes. Where Warwick wants to amend his existence and leave behind his humanity, Hill insists that humanity implies necessarily an ever-changing identity. "The human project is truly one of self-creation, of making ourselves into as many as we can, of as many different kinds of beings as we can possibly be." Hill celebrates the modern tendency of becoming over being with an enthusiastic voraciousness. "As a self in becoming, or as an aspirant intent on embracing becoming, as a moral imperative, I am moved by a manical will, by a vision of a heightened form of existence, and again, by a surge of movement, of restlessness, of a desire to create myself over and over. Because I am a self in becoming my ruling emotions are dissatisfaction, and a nagging sense of incompleteness. The self in becoming is an eclectic honorable thief in relation to ideas, to the world and to

socialization. All must be put in the service of this the hunger for completion. Appropriation, when governed by “scrupulous means,” becomes a moral imperative. Failure to appropriate means complacency, stagnation, and eventual burial under the musty debris of dated labels and the weight of cultural traditions that are two sizes too small for the enormity of a hungry and ever expanding soul. The self in becoming faces the world it has inherited with a yawn, and a sigh, is that all there is?” Later in the book Hill describes his notion of the self as a transcendent chooser with an apparently God like will, he insists that the self is at base nothing but a capacity to put into question all that is alleged to be unalterable.

Both these accounts reminds one of the Borg, the incredibly hostile race on Star Trek the Next Generation, who are hybrids of mechanical/cybernetic beings. They appropriate technologies from other races who they then annihilate. They have no real purpose beyond assimilating. It can be looked at as a picture of the triumph of the pure will to power to serve nothing beyond the pure acquisition of power.

Warwick’s project resonates immediately with the Borg, the cybernetic implants and the collectively networked feature entailing his wife as she is perceived in terms of data, known better by her PC than by another person.

Hill’s vision is also like the Borg in an ever deeper way. He doesn’t aspire to be on such intimate terms with his PC, but his acquisition of new identity is just as depersonalizing. For he neither has, nor is, a persona for long. As a manical will he is faceless and homeless. He is a self-described cosmopolitan, a citizen of everywhere and of nowhere. Hill insists that such a restless existence is the very meaning of being human today. Beyond the associations with the Borg, whatelse do these two voices have in common?

One is interested in evolving into a new lifeform via technical prothesis, the other seems unconcerned with physical aspects existence all together, and is eager to assert a version of moral freedom. One, Warwick, sees himself as leaving his humanity behind, the other, or Hill, believes he’s fulfilling it. What they have in common is the view of the self that exalts the will as ultimate attribute. Finally, an attribute which negates all others. For Jason Hill, to be human is to have a sovereign unincumbered will. For Kevin Warwick, fulfillment as a post-human being is again an act of will, unrestrained neither by physical barriers or by conventional ones.

These two voices are representative of many contemporary philosophies, cultural trends, and social movements actually represent neither the fulfilling of human personality and freedom, nor the transcending of identity itself, but the destruction of human nature that extends a long standing project in western history that pursues a self without limits, and without a nature, a project that C.S. Lewis termed, *The Abolition of Man*. Until recently however, the rhetoric of humanism [the distinctive differences between the tenets of modern and post-modernism would go well here] of a high and noble identity to human being prevailed in public life, so that the charge that a particular activity was dehumanizing, or depersonalizing was one that tended to have the moral high-ground.

Now, in many academic circles, such language would be regarded as a quaint vestige of pre-modern, and modern, naiveté, if not a kind of male-chauvinism. In public life at large one doesn't encounter same level of outrage at the prospect of something being inherently depersonalizing. C.S. Lewis' concerns voiced in his *Abolition of Man*, were published in 1947, when the memories of Nazi crimes against humanity were still frighteningly fresh, and when the parallel tract of Stalin's political project were just being acknowledged in the west, we have neither ovens or gulags to stimulate a defense of the human. There are contemporary atrocities but they tend to happen in Africa where they are very easily ignored for us. Unlike Lewis we have no Hitler or Stalins casting lengthening shadows, but we do have Kevin Warwick and Jason Hill, we do have numerous voices in the academy that champion an anti-humanism, or who speak somewhat ominously of the post-human.

Two patterns that speak against the specifically human, two trends seem to reappear time and again, seem to be, one is the exaltation of the will, the other is a denigration of the body. The way these two patterns are related is that the body is a limiting factor in human experience. It is tied to space and time, to history and community in a way that thwarts the will at times. If the will is to succeed in its project of self-exaltation, then it must silence the claims of embodiment. And yet, embodiment is an essential aspect of our being. To despise the body is intrinsically dehumanizing, but positively, to recover a perspective on the body that are rooted in our origins in both in the dust of the ground and the breath of God and act in accordance with it, we will do a great deal in coming to terms with the biblical injunctions to act generously toward orphans and widows and in loving our neighbors.

In the past, under Greek prejudices against the material world (neo-Platonic forms of influence) have tended toward a denigration of the body, that Salvation is a means of salvation of our humanity, as opposed to a restoration of our humanity.

Pico della Mirandola

The abolition any notion of a fixed human nature may seem like an odd chapter of the story of western culture, and think of the Renaissance as the birth time of the modern way of viewing the cosmos, and Renaissance Humanism as the fulcrum that established a point of leverage to usher in this new way of seeing reality, it is ironic that humanism should give rise to its antithesis. And yet, even in the earliest expressions of Italian Humanism we see the stage set for a drama of moral inversion. In the thinking of some of the leading 15th century humanist, human dignity was predicated on the grounds of an absolute human freedom. Instead of seeing human worth and honor rooted in the structure of a God given nature, these seminal thinkers asserted that human brightness was a function of a dynamic human will restricted by no nature at all. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was presented in 1486. In the oration, Pico offers an account of Man's creation, a kind of supplement to Genesis, wherein God informs the newly made Adam, and Pico is writing as a professing Christian with the blessing of the Church, although there were some suspicions about him, God informs the

newly made Adam that he, that man has a unique place in the cosmos. "We have given you OLE Adam, no visage proper to yourself, . . . trace for yourself your own liniments, . . . as the proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer . . . " Pico later makes it clear, in good neo-Platonic fashion that "this freedom to define oneself is best exerted by the contemplative who distains all bodily existence, seeking God like knowledge through the exercise of magic over creation in magical ways.

Marcilio Ficino's Platonic philosophy presents, in 1482, an argument that "man is a terrestrial god . . . the entire striving of our soul is that it become God whose striving is no less natural to men, that flight is to birds . . . the immense magnificence of our soul can be seen from this, that he will not be satisfied with the empire of this world, if having conquered this one he learns there remains yet another one that he has not yet subjugated . . . thus man wishes no superior and no equal and will not permit anything to be left out or excluded from his rule, this status belongs to God alone, therefore he seeks a divine condition." Ficino latter asserts that man has the power to acquire knowledge even to change fate, to change and his own destiny. Now, Ficino and Pico were writing from an ostensibly Christian position it is clear that were influenced by Gnostic sources, their view of the propriety of man to an aspiration of Godlike knowledge and power flatly contradicts the biblical account of the fall, in which the account of the origin of the fall is the origin of sin.

This suggests that this seed implants the thought for the denial of human nature, to value becoming over being, and finally to the point of skepticism about human nature altogether.