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Technology: Embracing the Monsters

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As we stand on the threshold of the twenty first century, imagining the future of the globe, of humanity, we would be wise to look back into the past for a bit of guidance. History and literature can aid us, specifically in thinking about technology, in planning its implementations, and in using its by-products. Mere reflections and thoughts follow, and these are intended as speculative inquiry, certainly not prescriptive declarations.

Beginning with Western history, the Greeks believed there are essentially two sources of creative power in the universe. One source is that of creation itself, the inherent impulse in nature to create and to recreate endlessly. The second source of creative power is human. Generally speaking, for the Greeks, both nature and humanity are the sole matrices of original production; however, it must be added that some pre- Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus and Parmenides, and some twentieth century philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Alfred North Whitehead, have maintained that humans are the locus of nature's creativity. Stated more succinctly, humanity is where nature is most fully identifiable, most fully realized.

The Greeks viewed humanity's creativity as part of our end, our telos. Creative power channelled into producing is as human an activity as eating, or drinking. Products of human arts are the necessary effects of our drive to create. Further, there is no division between the arts, the fine arts and the not so fine arts. In other words, crafts and arts, pottery, furniture making, sculpture, and war weapons are all considered to be products of *techne*, products of our creative powers. Note that the root of our word "technology" is *techne*, a classical Greek term. Perhaps by keeping this ancient concept in mind we will be able to understand technology as a manifestation of our human creativity.

The creative power working in and through nature is, of course, considered awesome. Although much less forceful, human power, too, is awesome and worthy of reverence, according to the Greeks. To our "modern" minds, it might seem odd to think of ourselves as both a force of creation and as a source of mysterious power, but perhaps if we could think in such terms, we would enable ourselves to find solutions to some of the problems which are consequences of current technology. Technology is power, a manifestation of our own sacred creativity, every bit as beautiful and as mysterious as nature's power working in a far away galaxy, and although the problems which arise from this power might be anything but beautiful, we must remember that it is nature in us that enables us to create. Perhaps if we acknowledge technology as our creativity made visible, perhaps if we recognize the source of our powers as a force in the universe, we will begin to take responsibility for the many direct and indirect

results of our technology.

The other day, I heard a well intentioned, though misinformed, environmental activist on public radio. He was saying how scientists today are insane because they are currently creating Frankensteins in their high tech labs, and he added how grossly absurd it is for scientists to be playing with life. First of all, Frankenstein was the name of the scientist, not the “monster.” Secondly, and most importantly, Frankenstein is not about an evil monster, nor is it about the evil of human creation or creations. Had the activist read the novel, he would have known this. Rather, Frankenstein is about the inability of Dr. Frankenstein to understand and to subsequently care for what he had created. Literature, like history, provides a window through which we can observe ourselves and explore and examine our decisions regarding technology.

Dr. Frankenstein was curious, like each of us. Who has not been curious about life and its wondrous processes? Who hasn’t asked as did Frankenstein: “Whence did the principle of life proceed” (50). The fruit of the doctor’s curiosity and inquiry was knowledge. He, in fact, “succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life,” and he became “capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter” (51). Frankenstein’s story is not solely fictional, and after examining this historical novel, many readers are startled by its numerous prophetic characteristics.

Dr. Frankenstein also flattered himself, saying “a new species would bless me as its creator and source,” and in this way, he was vain and proud. A careful reading of the novel, however, suggests that the doctor also had within his heart altruistic motives, since he confesses:

I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time...renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption. (53)

It seems that Mary Shelley took great pains as an author to draw her character as honestly as possible. Dr. Frankenstein was a character fraught with ambiguities; he was neither wholly evil, nor wholly good, neither purely innocent, nor fully experienced.

As soon as his curiosity is satisfied, and his dream is realized, Frankenstein wants nothing of his creation. “Breathless horror and disgust” fill his heart. He rushes from the room, abandoning the being he alone created, and he continues to do so throughout the remainder of the story. He has neither understanding nor love for his creation, for there can be no love without a movement toward understanding.

Fearful, full of hatred, Dr. Frankenstein refers to the creature as a “wretch,” a “filthy demon,” and a “devil.” He hates his creation for what it is, for its

“unearthly ugliness,” and for what it does on its own accord, its actions. It is the doctor’s misunderstanding and hatred that turns his creation into a “monster,” a being determined to destroy others.

The monster hunts his creator down, until the creator is no longer able to escape confrontation and communication. During the confrontation, the monster indicts his creator:

All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. (95)

What precisely is the duty to which the monster refers? Quite simply, the creature implores his creator to ease the burden of his loneliness—to create a creature similar to himself, one whom he may love, and in return, and most importantly, one from whom he may receive love. The “monster” knows that he shall cease to be a monster once he is understood, just as he knows the power of love transforms.

The lesson, so to speak, to be learned from the fictional Frankenstein is that we must understand and care for that which we have imagined and subsequently created. Failure to do so is disastrous. We might ask ourselves: do we, does humanity have the ability and the capacity to understand and to care for the products of our technological advances? It seems that if we are unable to understand and to care for that which we create, there is no hope for ethical guidance. To explain, ethics might not help us solve problems which arise from technology and its use, for care and concern precedes ethical choice and action. The question now becomes: How do we learn to care?

The problems resulting from technological advancements are overwhelming, so overwhelming, in fact, that it seems easier to throw up arms in despair and hope for the best. No one needs to be reminded that technology can take us to the moon, that it enables us to cook food more quickly than ever before in history, that it can cure disease, or that it can be used to destroy every being on this planet.

Today in the laboratory life can be recreated; genes can be cloned, spliced, diced, dissected, and reconnected to form new species. Humanity stands on the threshold of a dream. The dream, however, could turn into an agonizingly wretched nightmare. For instance, wretched possible consequences surround eugenics, the “art” of creating perfect offspring. An equally frightening possible

consequence of technology is abnormal and atypical animals, such as cows and pigs weighing over 10,000 pounds. Beings such as these seem mere creations of an active imagination, dwelling only in the realm of possibility, much like the being created by Dr. Frankenstein. However, such creations are within the realm of possibility: within the next 10 years, technology will be sufficiently sophisticated to create these and similar creatures (Fox, 104).

Imagine a world populated and therefore surely transformed with such beings, beings engineered, developed, and produced by humans. Imagine, too, a world inhabited with animals half one species, half another, a “geep,” for example, half goat, half sheep. One might also imagine a world of people especially engineered and sanctioned to tenant the globe. These “people,” especially the prototypes, might resemble Frankenstein’s monster. Could we understand these creations? Love these creations? Could we embrace these as manifestations of the human impulse to create, as the glory of our own creativity?

Looking at technology and its accompanying dilemmas through the darkening windows of history and literature serves at least two purposes: we ought to be able to gain a sense of perspective, as well as a sense of evolution. History and literature attest to the fact that we are not alone, since our predecessors, too, were confronted with challenges and problems brought about by technology.

After accepting the idea that we are not sole wanderers, and that we are not isolated in time and space, we begin to perceive, to feel a sense of evolution, of dynamic change and growth. The most important question we must therefore ask ourselves is: how do we want to evolve? In what direction shall we point this rolling wheel? For what if deity is not behind us? What if God is not dead, but is yet to be created?

Notes

1. All quotations are from Frankenstein by Mary Shelly, Signet Classic, New American Library.
2. Fox, Michael, W. Superpigs and Wondercorn. Lyons & Burford: New York, 1992.

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