

TECHNOLOGY AND THE CENTRALITY OF PERSON

ARCHANA BARUA

We are amazed at the way technology as a force has intruded our mode of appropriating the world. The modern industrial society is much characterized by a loss of significance as life has lost much of its quality and color at the altar of quantity and perfection. But one should not identify the root cause of meaninglessness and loss of significance only to the advent of technology. These are age old philosophical problems which drew attention of seers and thinkers from the time of the Upaniṣads till it attained the status of the noble four fold truths at the time of the Buddha. My special concern in this article is the tension that one feels at the gradual loss of the 'person' in man which can be addressed differently in the emergence of a new context of growing information revolution. Information technology is changing not only '....where and how we work, where how and how we learn, shop, eat, vote, receive medical care, spend free time, make war, make friends, make love'.¹ In a sense there is an unseen observer to all our activities who can read our secret dreams and our silent thoughts. This is how I see the need for addressing the age old problem of technology and value interrelationship from a new perspective. Our very inner and the deeply intimate personal area is taken away from us by the silent intruders in the form of computers. With computers one can easily invade the privacy of others in a more sophisticated way. This has obvious implications to the moral and valuational implications of the concept of person.

Humans as *homo sapiens* share biological identity with other members of the same species. In this regard there is not much difference between humans and other animals : one can use similar devices to identify human bones as one does in identifying bones of other animals. But the term person has a valuational impact,

it is much used in law and in morals. Instead of entering into the human person dichotomy in more details I would prefer a very simple definition of 'person' which has direct bearings on information technology. Person is one who has a sense of privacy, who can exercise his free will to some extent regarding controlling information about oneself so that not all informations are made publicly known. This has direct bearing on the common sense meaning of these expressions, 'being alone', 'no one bothering me' etc. As S. Muthuchidambaram gives an apt description of the need for privacy in any meaningful interpersonal talk : "...The meanings for the adjective private include 'away from public view', 'secluded', 'not publicly or generally known,' 'secret confidential' (a private matter)", 'not known or intended to be known publicly", and 'unsuitable for public use or display". All the above expressions and meanings make reference to separation from others through control over information, space or access, including simply being alone."² Through the new technology intrusion to our very intimate and private dimension can be done in a new and increasing scale, which is, ' According to Wade Robison, an "appropriation of a person's identity which is to treat a person as an object."³ Wade L. Robison cites an example of the close relationship that exists between these two concepts : privacy and person. To intrude one's private and secluded part is like damaging the person in man." After I directed a conference on privacy and the internet, I received a call from a young woman who was extremely distraught after breaking up with her boyfriend of five years she began to receive messages by mail, by fax, by phone, and by e-mail, at her office and home, from strangers from all over the world. The messages ranged from the ultra polite, ' You are an extremely beautiful woman, and I hesitate to introduce myself, but....,' to the unrepeatable. Unfortunately, the latter far outnumbered the former. Her boyfriend had posted nude photographs of her on his website, along with information about how anyone interested might contact her. And so, around the world many saw the photographs and responded..."⁴ Displaying objectionable letter or pictures is a pathology of an invasion of privacy and it is not specially related to the internet. But what is more serious is the pattern of inflicting it. With the help of the internet one can make it a global issue within very short time.

The growing information revolution, therefore, is not 'merely technological' it is fundamentally social and ethical. The reason why information technology is so powerful is well explained by James Moot in his classic article "What is Computer Ethics"? 'The computer', he says, 'is almost a 'universal tool' - because it is 'logically

malleable,' it can be shaped and moulded to perform nearly any task.'⁵ This has some implications to our understanding of the terms like person, privacy, freedom, sense of shame or of guilt etc. I am not only interested in the possible harm that can be caused to the privacy and the dignity of the person, I am also interested in exploring the possibilities of our willingness to accept a more value neutral idea of the self as a result of tremendous changes the emerging field of IT has introduced into our thought style. Before entering into this discussion I acknowledge my gratitude to Martin Chhen for a lucid description of the impact of growing information revolution on our thought pattern specially in the minds of the young generation in his article.' Ethical Issues In Computer Based Learning.' Cohen refers to Valdmr Setzer's book *Computers in Education* and states some of the educational problems caused by computers in the following manner:

1. Computers force everyone into a mould, force them into the same thinking patterns, and reduce variation. Individualized instruction is merely individualized in the attempt to force people individually into these thought patterns.

2. It offers short-cuts to achievement, leading to a sensation of power which my be" totally alienated from reality, it is possible to distinguish two industrial revolutions the first characterized by the replacement of human physical effort by machines, the second, which is still going on, the substitution of mental effort by computers.'

3. When mistakes occur, as the American psychologist, Weizenbaum also discussed in the 1960s, the user may become obsessed with correcting them.' The certainty of being able to correct every error is another cause of alienation from reality. It may even produce, mainly in children who are still forming their inner representation of the world, a schizoid effect of confusing fantasy with reality.'

4. A similar schizoid effect may result from the 'influence of months of computer usage producing the illusion that 'everything may be reduced to 'yes and no', to 'cause and effect', culminating in the assumption that man is a machine, and undue reverence for technology and science in general.

5. Apart probably from the intuitive stage in developing the algorithm, computers require logical, formal, mathematics and sequential thinking-similar to the execution of a computer program the children become machines themselves, 'reduced to a machine process.'

6. Acceleration of certain intellectual skills (such as reading) may be at the

expense of others, such as creativity, sensation and imagination. One of the surest ways of making a child lose his delightful and necessary childishness is to give him a computer.

7. Computer games may cause 'neurological short circuits', as the brain adapts to the need to send faster and faster signals to the fingers. The sounds of the games, being "rude, vulgar, coarse, exaggerated ones" appeal only to the lowest of our senses, to the 'animal in man', helping to eventually produce anti-social individuals.

8. The computer limits creativity.

9. Computers encourage criminal behavior-software piracy.'

10. Computers make possible hidden monitoring and interference by others, especially authority, akin to that of a police state."⁶

It appears from such observations that the traditional understanding of human person concepts would incorporate change to accommodate the more mechanical, corporate and public aspects of the self at the cost of the mysterious inner and private dimension which is becoming an invisible ghost in the publicly observable body machine and in the publicly observable part of us. This has obvious implications not only to interpersonal relationships, the need for tolerating and being exposed to thought patterns which are different from ours is essential for the growth and proper functioning of democracy as well. Deborah G. Johnson brings out some implications of the need for variety and plurality for any viable democracy in her thought provoking article 'Is democracy embedded in the internate'? She observes: 'The counter trend is a tendency towards, for lack of a better term, insularity. Individuals choose which forums they will participate in, what news they will read, who they will send and receive messages from, and so on. There is the possibility (if not likelihood) that individuals will choose like minded people to chat with and news slanted in the direction of their already formed biases, they will seek information on interests they already have. This is freedom and we can hardly argue against it. Nevertheless, there is the possibility that individuals will become even more isolated from diverse perspectives and people than they are now. Why deal with those with whom you have disagreements? Why deal with your difficult and 'different' neighbours, when you can simply avoid them? In the past, shared geographic space had necessitated contact and joint deliberation. It had compelled diverse people to figure out how

to live together. That necessity becomes weaker and weaker when the infrastructure of so many activities is global.⁷⁷ Philosophically speaking, this is an incomplete picture of man. Unless our ideas and beliefs are reshaped by ideas different from ours there will not be much scope for differentiating the private world from the public. We will remain shut to the world of our own fancy and in the process remain closed and isolated as, to use Leibniz's terminology, 'window less monads' whose private world is filled with one's beliefs, ideas, prejudices and fixed beliefs which are never corrected nor modified by different ideas and thought styles of others as these self closed minds and atomic individuals are window less monads. They are not persons as we understand the term." Person' is more than simply a synonym for human being. A person can be object of moral judgement, 'personal rights', personal liberty etc; and figures in legal talks. A person is a moral figure and bearer of rights.' But underlying the moral status as its condition are certain capacities. A person is a being who has a sense of the self, has a notion of the future and past, can hold values, make choices, in short, can adopt life plans at least, a person must be the kind of being who is in principle all this, however damaged these capacities may be in practice.⁸ As the life plan, the choices, the sense of self must be attributable to him as in some sense as thier point of origin, a person is a being with his own point of view on things.' A person is a being who can be addressed and who can reply: Let us call a being of this kind respondent.'⁹

In an attempt at exploring the concept of person, Charles Taylor poses some questions: what is so special about agents who are also persons? Do we accord personal status to animals to whom we do attribute actions in some sense? With these questions in mind, Taylor presents two views of what it is to be a person. In my attempt at exploring possibilities of understanding person-machine differences with special reference to the changes incorporated to our understanding the nature of person at the advent of the information technology, I would like to relate Taylor's understanding of person to the views expressed by Ilham Dilman defining person as a linguistic animal who is nourished by the society, a being whose ideas and beliefs are shaped and reshaped by the views expressed by others. In other words, a person is one who has a dependent and a flexible stand on many matters which make him different from mindless machines or from windowless monads. Taylor presents two views of what it is to be a person. The first view is rooted in the seventeenth century epistemologically grounded notion of the subject. A person is a being with consciousness as consciousness is the

power to frame representations of things. Persons have consciousness and alone possess it in a manner and degree that animals do not. A respondent is one who responds out of his own representations of the world and their situation. His view ignores the boundary between agents' things as it does not reflect a qualitative distinction. Descartes saw animals as complex machines. The proponents of computer based models of intelligence see no problem in offering these explanations of animal's performance. The second view that Taylor explores is focussed on the nature of agency. What is crucial about agents is that things matter to them. We can not identify agents by a performance criterion nor assimilate animals into machines. To say 'things matter to agents' is to say that we can attribute purposes, desires, aversion to them in a strong, original sense : humans and animals are subjects of original purpose. So the second view of Taylor takes the agent-thing boundary seriously.' What makes a respondent'? can be answered in the following manner;' An agent can be a respondent, because things matter to him in an original way. What it responds out of is the original significance of things for it.'¹⁰

The traditional theory of consciousness (the idea that representations are of independent objects) as representations does not help to explain consciousness in this characteristic human form which is seen when we come to formulate the significance of things for us. If I happen to see that my feeling of guilt was false, or my feeling of love self deluded, these emotions vary and fade away. One could say that there is a judgement integral to each one of these emotions. This shows that the consciousness of persons, when they formulate their emotions, are of another sort. If we understand an agent essentially as a subject of significance, then there are matters of significance which are peculiarly significant to humans. These are feelings of pride, shame, moral goodness, evil, dignity, the sense of worth or of insignificance etc. On the other hand if agents are seen merely as subjects of strategic actions then their superiority to animals would consist in the ability to plan, to understand more complex issues etc. as this representative power is the key to our evolution from animal to man. It would ignore the view that matters of pride, shame, evil etc are peculiarly significant for man. To be moral agents is to be sensitive to certain standards. It is not sufficient that one's behavior follows a certain standard but also that one in some sense recognizes the standard. Moral agency, in other words, requires some kind of reflexive awareness of the standards one is living by (or failing to live by). And something analogous is true

of the other concerns, so some kind of consciousness is essential to them." I think we can say that a linguistic animal is essential to having these concerns, because it is impossible to see how one could make a distinction like the one above, between for example, things one just want to do and things that are worthy to be done, unless one was able to make the distinction in some way : either by formulation in language or at least by some expressive ceremonial which would acknowledge the higher demands."¹¹

Human agents are not just abilities to conceive different possibilities, to calculate how to get them, the ability to plan, but are agents for whom things matter. The strong fascination for a significance free account of human beings is reflected in the distinction accorded to primary-secondary qualities and to accord anthropocentric, humanly significant qualities a low status. This ambition to follow natural science and avoid anthropocentric properties has been an important motivation of the representative view. It gives us an important reason to ignore significance and to accept a performance criterion of agency. The subject, according to the significance perspective, is in a world of meanings that he imperfectly understands. His task is to interpret it better, in order to know who he is and what he ought to seek. But the subject, according to the representation view, already understands his ends. His world is one of potential means which he understands with a view to control. He is in a curcial sense disengaged. To understand things in the absolute perspective is to understand them in abstraction from their significance. To be able to look on everything, world and society, in his perspective would be to neutralise its significance and this would be a kind of freedom, the freedom of the self denying subject who determines his own purposes.

This significance of human agency in the growth and development of persons is reflected in some writings of Sartre. Sartre characterizes man as being who is conscious of himself. The view which a person takes of his own existence shapes his mode of existence."¹² However we should not, on this account, confuse him with Descartes for although Descartes too distinguishes man from speechless animals and lifeless things and does so in terms of man's possession of consciousness and even acknowledges the active role of thought in human life (activity of the soul) he nevertheless falls squarely within the Objectivist Camp...., takes what I called an 'objectivist view' of the self. Whereas Sartre, not only rejects Cartesian dualism and Descarte's account of consciousness, he actually

brings in reference to consciousness to reject the objectivist view. In his emphasis on man's capacity to become conscious of his own existence in the way he feels and the conceptions he forms of it, the consciousness in question is conceived of as constitutive of his being and not merely as a form of cognition as in Descartes."¹³ In my acknowledgement of my shame I own it, as Sartre puts it. 'my shame carries the conviction of its badness.'

Sartre is right in seeing this internal connection between one's conception of the significance which things have for oneself and he rightly rejects the objectivist view of the self." ...but in the way he does so he falls into serious confusions. I want to concern myself with some of these now."¹⁴ According to Sartre to be true to oneself a person should own all those ideas and beliefs which are entirely his; only in what is his is he an authentic person. Right or wrong, true or false, these are all his beliefs and his possessions. If man has an animal part in him, let it remain so. Otherwise all the civilizing constraints that teach virtues like tolerance, self sacrifice etc are at the root of our divided personality. But Sartre confuses ontological non-being with contingent non-being, the one leads to stagnation and suffocation of some sort when sometimes people identify themselves with the roles they are supposed to play at different stations of life. This ought to be distinguished from the contingent non-being of a person who has failed to make anything of himself, who lacks the conviction of being a person in his own rights. But it does not lead to the idea that the moment we become someone we become false, that anyone who is anything can not be himself, that we all are in bad faith in what we are like Sartre's waiter.

We may think of thousands of people who take themselves seriously in what they do, whose voice is inseparable from the voice of his profession." This is what Erich Fromm writes about in several of his books, the way in which a society which measures the worth of everything by its market value, people package themselves as commodities and come to think of themselves such---that is comes to measure themselves by standards of worth external to themselves. The difference in the case of Sartre is that this phenomenon is made out to be rooted in our ontology - it is not seen as merely social or psychological and therefore contingent. Consequently, it is resented as inescapable. Sartre concludes that since no one can be who he is in what he is (a metaphysical claim per excellence), to be authentic a person must dissociate himself from everything that he is (radical divestment) and content himself with being nothing."¹⁵ But a person can find his real authentic

self in something or the other. He has to find his voice in something.¹⁶ Indeed apart from the language I learn to speak, the tradition in which I learn to think, I can neither speak nor think nor paint or sing either. I can not have any voice that could be mine."¹⁷ The nothingness one embraces is clearing the way towards more genuine forms of commitments. A man who can not find himself in his life actions he feels himself not to exist as a person. Sartre does not make enough of this debt. The individual owes to the society to which he belongs for who he is and what he believes, for everything that is original in him, his ideas, decisions, gifts, his art.

Humans are persons as well. While humans have publicly definable criteria persons need nurturance and sustenance. It is a fragile concept which is nourished by interpersonal and inter relational interactions. While computers may ultimately force everyone into a mould, forcing them into the same thinking patterns, persons are rooted in social, cultural contexts and line on traditions and customs and habits which contribute to their growth and also to their exploration to newer contexts. It is through some mediums that they learn to express themselves. To quote Pramod Talgeri;" A modern, pluralistic society, whether in a first or third world country, is essentially an 'architecture of complexity.' Such an architecture can not be built only on functional differentiation and individualisation. This is because the indeterminate heterogeneity constitutes the essential nature of a modern complex society. Ethnic identities, community feelings and regional affinities will also form an integral part of some complex plural society. I think we should be courageous enough to ascribe these value notions also to a secular and rational framework of social communication."¹⁸ I regard the world as a polyphony. I do not expect all of mankind to play the same musical instrument. This could be the lowest common denominator- may be MTV, Mc Donalds or something like that. There should be different musical instruments, hundreds of civilisations, thousands of communities, tens of thousands of local cultures. No nationstates. We should strive for another model' which will keep the dialogue of cultures going,' a dialogue that characterises our age, a dialogue in which no one has the last word, in which neither voice is reduced to the status of a simple project, and in which we gain advantages from our externality to other." (Amos Oz)¹⁹

Anything that enhances one's tendency toward insularity is a pointer against this direction. Is there any threat from the internet in this direction? To quote Deborah G. Johnosn, "The tendency towards insularity is facilitated further by marketing strategies based on analysis of transactional data. One's personal

tastes, hobbies, habits, needs and desires can be inferred from one's activities in the agii. These are already being studied in efforts to provide consumers with what they want even before they know they want it. Individuals are facilitated in becoming more and more what they are.²⁰ Like Sartre's observations about the impact of civilizing affects on one's personality, the GII is likely to foster our basic instincts and traits and our authentic existence at the cost of the cultured tastes and sensitivity which is crucial for the growth of the person. We become more and more global and less regional, and national as we interact more with others who are geographically distant. As Deborah G. Johnson observes: 'While democratic theorists have in the past dealt with the varying geographic scale of nation states, we now have the possibility of strong alliances among people based on something other than geographic location. Can democracy prevail in such an environment? The geographic space that people occupy has, historically, been the commonality that has drawn them into political communities. If we are less dependent on physical geographic space, then what will bind us together?'"²¹ Is this a trend toward more equality or toward widening the gaps between the developing and the developed, the rich and the poor, privileged and the not so privileged ones? It is yet to be decided. The global information revolution is more favorable to the elite select few or for all widening the gap between the information haves and have nots. We should be prepared to accommodating more culture and context neutral values and ideals keeping in mind the necessity of persons to be deeply rooted in some contexts which give rise to strong loyalties and strong commitments to some institute or the other, to one's family, to the nation, to animals or to one's creations. Humans as persons are attached and context dependent beings or else life and existence become mechanical and insignificant.

It is not enough that one is flooded with informations of all sorts. One should be able to critically organise relevant information so that a pattern emerges. That is how knowledge differs from ignorance. Informations can really enhance our knowledge which is accurate, unbiased and correct. Information can also be arbitrarily presented taking it out of its proper context which then act as a strong tool for arousing strong sentiments of the unreflective masses and within a very short time they can be passionately aroused. We have ample evidence of this specially during war and other national and natural disasters when distorted information and rumors play decisive roles. Providing information is not enough, there should remain vigilant, alert persons who can transform information into

knowledge bringing coherence and arranging bits of informations into meaningful patterns. But for that to happen there should be various thought models : all should not be molded into thinking in an identical manner. We have a stock of informations : now our task is to transform it into knowledge which in its turn should make us wise and human.

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries

Bring us further from God and nearer to the Dust²²

NOTES

1. Simon Rogerson and Terrell Ward Bynum (1995), Cyberspace : The Ethical frontier, Times Higher Education supplement, (*The London Times*, 9 June, 1995)
2. S. Muthuchidambaram : "Information Technology, Citizens Rights, and Personal Administration" in *Technology and Contemporary Life*, ed. Paul T. Durbin, Dreidel Publishing Company, Boston. 1988, p195
3. Goran Collste : Introduction. in *Technology and Contemporary Life*, ed. Paul T. Durbin. Dreidel Publishing Company, (Boston. 1988), p11.
4. Wade L. Robison : "Privacy and the Appropriation of Identity", in *Ethics and Information Technology* ed. Goran Collste. (New Academic Publishers, 1998).p 43.
5. Terrell Ward Bynum : "The Emerging Field of Global Information Ethics" in *Ethics and Information Technology* ed. Goran Collste. (New Academic Publishers, 1998). p 43.
6. Martin Cohen : "Ethical Issues In Computer Based Learning, in Ethics" in *Ethics and Information Technology* ed. Goran Collste. (New Academic Publishers, 1998). p 94.
7. Deborah G. Johnson : "Is Democracy embedded In the Internet?" in *Ethics and Information Technology* ed. Goran Collste. (New Academic Publishers, 1998). p 33).
8. Charles Taylor : Human Agency and Language, *Philosophical Papers*, (Cambridge University Press, 1985), P 97.
9. Charles Taylor : Human Agency and Language, *Philosophical Papers*, (Cambridge University Press, 1985), P 97.

10. Charles Taylor : Human Agency and Language, *Philosophical Papers*, (Cambridge University Press, 1985), P 99.
11. *Ibid*
12. Charles Taylor : Human Agency and Language, *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge University Press. 1985), P 97.
13. Ilham Dilamn : Sartre and our Identity as Individuals in *Human Beings*, ed. David Cockburn. (Cambridge University, Press) p 248.
14. Ilham Dilamn : Sartre and our Identity as Individuals in *Human Beings*, ed. David Cockburn. (Cambridge University Press) p 248.
15. Ilham Dilamn : Sartre and our Identity as Individuals in *Human Beings*, ed. David Cockburn. (Cambridge University Press) p 260.
16. In *Human Beings* ed. David Cockburn. (Cambridge University Press) p. 259.
17. In *Human Beings* ed. David Cockburn. (Cambridge University Press) p. 259.
18. Pramod Talgeri : Farewell to a classical University (CIEFL, 1999) p. 31.
19. *Ibid*. p 31
20. .Deborah G. Johnson : in *Ethics and Information Technology* ed. Goran Collste. (New Academic Publishers, 1998). p 33.
21. Deborah G. Johnson : in *Ethics and Information Technology* ed. Goran Collste. (New Academic Publishers, 1998). p 34.
22. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Pœems* : Translated Manju Jain.(Oxford University Press, Calcutta.)