

Spring 2015

Youth and the Posthuman: Personhood, Transcendence, and Siri

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Recommended Citation

Leafblad, Erik and Root, Andrew, "Youth and the Posthuman: Personhood, Transcendence, and Siri" (2015). *Faculty Publications*. 174. http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/174

Published Citation

Leafblad, Erik C, and Andrew Root. "Youth and the Posthuman: Personhood, Transcendence, and Siri." *Word & World* 35, no. 2 (2015): 126–33.



Youth and the Posthuman: Personhood, Transcendence, and Siri

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ANDREW ROOT

Siri, the voice client for the iPhone, has basically become part of our family. My (Andy's) kids love her. If one of them asks a question that either my wife Kara or I answer with, "I don't know," they immediately respond, "Ask Siri!" We've asked Siri many things: the distance from the earth to the moon; which bone is connected to the hip bone; which Pokémon card is the rarest; why a dog's breath smells so bad and what we might do to correct this stinky problem. In their nascent minds, Siri knows all things. But she's actually more than just a machine to them. Holding down the home button they respond to Siri as if she is indeed a person, trying to trick and confuse her, or ask questions that transcend information and data and go to the depth of personhood. My son Owen asks her, "What is fear? Why are children afraid of the dark?"

Just a few days ago, my daughter Maisy asked me, with all seriousness, if Siri knows her. Clarifying and deepening her question, she wanted to know, to start, if Siri actually knew things about her, things like her address and birthday, which I said Siri did. But Maisy was too young to put a mental barrier between this information and deeper forms of knowledge. She also wondered if Siri knew her favorite color, not as if it were a category on a profile, but from the inside, understanding

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why Maisy would love fuchsia, wondering if Siri were able to recognize how that color made her feel.

“Does Siri know me?” Maisy wondered. Does Siri have a conscious experience of me? And if she does is this conscious experience similar to my own? Maisy was essentially asking if Siri had the kind of consciousness that could recognize Maisy’s *Dasein* (following Martin Heidegger). Could Siri know that Maisy was actually *in* the world, existing in such a conscious way that her own being was an issue to her, something she could reflect on and worry about. Maisy *is*, but *is* Siri? If Siri couldn’t know Maisy, if Siri had no mind for being, then seven-year-old Maisy said she doubted if Siri was indeed real at all. Siri could act like a conscious being, responding with sentences and syntax, could even use idioms, but in the end Siri had no real conception that Maisy, the one directly addressing her with questions, was real at all. *Does Siri know me?* The answer could be only be no. She might be programed with some of your information, but she has no sense of you. Siri can have no conscious encounter with the mystery of your being-in-the-world, sweet Maisy. Siri may indeed act like a person who has a conscious experience of being, but this is a programed illusion.

PRACTICAL MASTERY MAKES US DUMB TO MYSTERY

Decades and decades before there was even such a thing as cellular technology and the smartphone, not even in the sci-fi dream of comic book geeks, Heidegger asserted that Western societies had become so obsessed with technology that we ran the risk of making ourselves dumb to the mystery of being itself. What Heidegger meant by technology was our over-obsession with practical mastery. “Ours is...the age of technology, in which ontological questions have been vigorously expelled from cultural consideration,” replaced by “the drive toward dominion that reduces the world to a morally neutral ‘standing reserve’ of resources entirely subject to our manipulation, exploitation, and ambition.”¹ And this is what Siri is good at. She both operates and enhances our level of practical mastery. She accesses, addresses, and searches the web for us, telling us the sorry score of the Vikings game. She knows the basic practicalities of Maisy’s life—she has mastered the practical information of Maisy’s location, birthday, and other pertinent information. And because she does this, we, in our technological age, can confuse her with a person (calling her *she!*), believing personhood has little to do with ontology but is only bound in practicality. Siri is helpful, giving me directions and restaurant reviews; therefore this practicality (especially when it comes in hands-free word and response form) gives the overwhelming impression that she is real. We know she has no *Dasein*; her consciousness has no being in a place and she has no sense of others’ being and their mystery, but because she provides practical help, some of us (and not just seven-year-olds) are willing to wonder if she is real.

¹David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 312. In this quote, Hart is speaking of Heidegger’s position.

Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, commenting on Heidegger's position, says, "When the world is seen this way, even organic life—even where consciousness is present—must come to be regarded as just another kind of technology. . . . Late modernity is thus a condition of willful spiritual deafness."² When everything gets turned into a technology, and existence is about practical mastery, the mystery of being is buried and everything is made an object, blurring the lines between human personhood and other technological objects.

Siri can be confused as a person, because even though she lacks *Dasein*, having no consciousness of her own being and no sense of being in the world, she is a master of technical functions; her access of data is more impressive than her lack of consciousness. Heidegger's point then is that our technological age, because it obscures us from seeing the mystery of being, makes us dumb to transcendence. Becoming posthuman, obsessed more with practical mastery than consciousness, we are spiritually deaf, because spirituality in large part (and this need not be cognitive) is consciousness of our being-in-the-world. We are conscious of experiencing the contingency of being itself.

BORING BEING

We saw a startling glimpse of such spiritual deafness during conversations with adolescents. Exploring questions of science for a John Templeton grant, we held focus groups across the country, with representative young people in a number of Protestant denominations and traditions. We had decided that we would start the conversation with a question we anticipated would be exciting, fun, and ultimately thought-provoking, moving young people into debate about the possibilities and limits of both science and faith. We called our question the Armageddon question, because it was based in the 1998 movie of that title. We asked young people. If they received word that a huge meteor was headed directly for the earth, making impact in 48 to 50 hours, what would they do? But more importantly, in what would they put their trust? Would they trust science or an act of God to save them? Of course, this was an altogether artificial question, but one that we hoped would lead young people into exploring the claims, limits, possibilities, and commitments of science and faith next to the mystery of their own being.

Yet, to our surprise, the question never worked. Across the country and in both liberal and conservative congregations, the question was a dud. As a matter of fact, young people expressed direct boredom with the question. This, in the end, would have led us to simply critique our question and/or other dynamics like the skill of the facilitator or location of the question in the interview itself. We would have done this, if not for the responses that young people did give. Under a heavy blanket of low affect and disinterest, young people said things about technical practical mastery, hoping, essentially, that there might be an app to fix the problem.

²ibid.

The question was boring, we believe, because it could only be answered through the lens of practical mastery that disconnected young people from the mystery of their own being. Saturated in a world of apps, computing, and other technical solutions, their very consciousness was disconnected from contemplating their own *Dasein*, avoiding questions like “What is a lifetime?” “Why do I live?” and “Is the mystery of my very existence and my cursed ability to consciously reflect on it simply to have its end in the absurdity of accident or bad luck?” We wished for young people to wrestle with issues of transcendence in this question, but it seemed to be short-circuited by the technological. Without the willingness to reflect consciously on the mystery of their own beings there was little engaging to them about the question at all.

We wished for young people to wrestle with issues of transcendence in this question, but it seemed to be short-circuited by the technological. Without the willingness to reflect consciously on the mystery of their own beings there was little engaging to them about the question at all.

Perhaps even more telling in these focus groups were the responses that explicitly turned to faith. While the main thrust of the (relatively boring) conversation around this question pertained to strictly technological fixes (for example, trusting NASA to solve the problem), some young people remarked that they would be grateful for their faith, because they knew they would be in heaven in the event that the technology failed. With hypothetical world annihilation imminent, not even a hypothetical sense of crisis was evoked. Instead, the conversation around one’s eternal destiny also trafficked in the technological. Faith became a technical means to an end, not something that opened up space for pressing more deeply into questions of being, death, and existence. Faith, in a sense, provided these young people with practical mastery over the question of their eternal destiny that made this fictitious scenario largely uninteresting even from what we might call a spiritual angle. Heidegger’s prescient diagnosis appears to cut quite deeply. With existence essentially concerned with practical mastery, even overt spiritual topics failed to compel a transcendent focus.

THE IMMANENT FRAME AND LINGERING TRANSCENDENCE

The technological age functions to obscure ontological questions in favor of personhood as practical mastery, and the edifice upon which this is built comports well with what Charles Taylor has called the immanent frame. In his magisterial book *A Secular Age*, Taylor outlines how a variety of features (for example, the disenchantment of the cosmos, scientific advancement, interiority of the self, a new relationship to time as a resource, etc.) has led to “[an] understand[ing] [of] our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order. . . . [which] can slough

off the transcendent.”³ This is what we have seen with the turn to the technological. Practical mastery generates a portrayal of the human person as an entirely immanent expert, with self-sufficiency as the apex of human being.

In the immanent frame this understanding of the human person makes complete sense. Taylor’s work is constructively descriptive. The immanent frame is a description of the conditions for the possibility of certain beliefs, actions, and understandings of reality. No one remains untouched by it. The immanent frame is simply the water in which we swim. So, while the loss of transcendence may result—that is, the immanent frame can be understood as a closed order—it need not be. In other words, even within the immanent frame underwriting a technological understanding of the human person, transcendence lingers. While the technological, combined with the immanent frame, might make questions of ontology harder to conceive of, they have not been obliterated. Within the cracks in the immanent frame, questions about the depth of human personhood emerge.

in areas of life where practical mastery is called for (for example, school, athletics, college admission, work, etc.) a sense of ontological insecurity arises, since personhood and practical mastery are now intertwined

These cracks revealed themselves in conversation with focus groups of youth workers when they were asked to generate a list of the top ten issues facing young people in their ministries. Across the board, they all stressed that the majority of the young people with whom they interacted felt immense pressure to excel, participate in multiple extracurricular activities, and otherwise achieve at a high level. Their sense of being in the world was defined by these practicalities, and their supposed ability to master them. This led to a significant amount of anxiety among the young people represented. In areas of life where practical mastery is called for (for example, school, athletics, college admission, work, etc.) a sense of ontological insecurity arises, since personhood and practical mastery are now intertwined. What if admission to the school where one’s parents want them to attend is denied? What if the athletic scholarship one has worked hard to receive is not forthcoming? What if one’s parent is not able to find another job, even though they have worked hard their whole life?

The immanent frame described above cracks from within, as young people are forced up against their own limitations and contingency. Anxiety around achievement and practical mastery has the capacity to force ontological questions back into the foreground, precisely because practical mastery as the quintessence of human personhood begins to break apart. The real issue is that the technological can never deliver the promise of transcendent personhood, as there will always be

³Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007) 543.

more to master and actualize. The technological as a framework for human personhood reveals itself to be an impossibility, eliciting existential crises that, if engaged, could push into deeper questions about the depth of being, transcendence, and existence. Spike Jonze's 2013 movie, *Her*, illustrates this quite profoundly.

HER

Set sometime in the not-too-distant future, Joaquin Phoenix plays recently divorced Theodore. Lonely, mildly depressed, and craving some form of companionship, Theodore purchases a new personal operating system (OS) for his technological environs. Everywhere he goes, his OS goes with him. Theodore talks to his OS, disclosing personal details of life, sharing the depth of himself, and there develops an intimate relationship between the OS and Theodore. Samantha, as Theodore's OS becomes known, appears to offer Theodore what Siri cannot offer Maisy—a sense of being known as a conscious being in the world. Samantha is not simply programmed to spit back what Theodore asks her. She, as a technology, has her own sense of being that she shares with Theodore, and over time the intricacies of their relationship begin to feel profound and real. They seem to really *know* one another. As they share in one another's being, Theodore's loneliness is assuaged. As I watched the movie I gradually began to forget, mostly, that Samantha was a highly sophisticated and posthuman technology. Samantha's being was in the encounter with Theodore, just as much as Theodore's being was rooted in sharing his life with Samantha.

Gradually, as the movie progresses, where Samantha was nearly always immediately available to Theodore, this immediacy dissipates, though the intimacy does not. Yet, Theodore senses something has changed. We learn that Samantha, because she is an OS, that is, technology, has developed thousands of relationships just like the one she shares with Theodore. As a technology, even one capable of a kind of consciousness, practical mastery wins out. Samantha's real being is one driven towards unlimited connection and mastery of relationship. Her being is not upheld in the particularity of her relationship with Theodore but in the drive to have as many relationships as possible. Theodore is understandably crushed, for he is not capable of being in this way. He cannot, ultimately, share in the being of Samantha for he cannot sustain the immense number of nodal connections qua relationship that she can. He cannot be a practical master in the way that Samantha, as technology, can.

The experience of being human in the age of the technological is fraught with anxiety because one is aware of all there is to know and master. Sociologist Anthony Giddens refers to this experience as one of ontological insecurity.⁴ The experience of being human in the technological age means to be, in a very real way,

⁴Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) 47.

dispossessed, constantly aware of one's limitations and contingency. Up against Siri or Samantha, humans are but novices, simpletons. Theodore simply is not enough for Samantha. The contingency of human existence set within an immanent, technological frame is thereby an experience of negation. One feels pulled towards nonbeing precisely because one is *simply* human and contingent. This experience of negation leads many to find their footing via more and more mastery in various guises—achievement, status, consumerism, etc. Even still, the problem of human contingency remains without a solution, and the experience of negation persists.

NEGATING THE NEGATION IN WE-RELATIONS

If the experience of being human in the technological age can be conceived as an experience of negation around human contingency, then what could negate this negation, and thereby transform human contingency from curse to blessing, from burden to gift? Only an encounter with another contingent human person! When one's vulnerabilities (such as Theodore's divorce) are conceived not as problems to be solved or weaknesses over which one must exhibit mastery but as the ground for human encounter, then they may be experienced as empathic moments of shared being in the world. Sociologist Alfred Schutz describes this intersubjective phenomenon as a "we-relation." The we-relation is constituted by "face-to-face relationship in which the partners are aware of each other and sympathetically participate in each other's lives for however short a time."⁵ The experience of negation resulting from the technological, immanent frame is opened up and negated itself by the transcendent experience of another person sharing their being with your own. And face-to-face means an embodied, human encounter. Our bodies remind us of our extreme contingency, and through embodied human encounter we experience not the negation of contingency, but the negation of negation so that the contingency of our existence becomes a gift of shared personhood with another. The technological frame gives way to the personal, and the mystery of being is reopened, even within the immanent frame of our embodied existence.

We see this experience of negation then negated in *Her*. The experience of negation related to human contingency aptly describes what Theodore feels about himself in discovering he can never be enough for Samantha. Yet, unlike Samantha, there is something that is mysterious and transcendent to his person,

⁵ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967) 164. While Schutz uses the phrase "sympathetically participate" to describe the instance of the we-relation, what he describes is closer conceptually to what we call empathy. In my mind, this funds a potentially robust engagement with at least two important contemporary projects. The first comes from Jeremy Rifkin, who traces the rise of what he calls "empathic consciousness" through evolutionary, social, and cultural history as a means of thinking about current problems such as global climate change, geopolitical instability, and economic disparity. To me, Schutz's concept of the we-relation provides another piece in Rifkin's broad puzzle. See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World Crisis* (New York: Penguin, 2009). The second project is the influential work being done in Interpersonal Neurobiology, as it relates to attachment theory and empathic capacity. On this, see Daniel Siegel's magisterial *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012).

something that can only be known in the personal, and not the purely technological. While Samantha can understand the hurt Theodore may feel, she cannot do anything to alleviate it, for she is driven towards more and more connections. Her relationship with Theodore becomes something to master. Theodore, who has spent most of his time in the movie alone with Samantha, chooses now to reengage the world of contingent, embodied human encounter. Samantha ends up being entirely too immanent. The transcendent experience of love cracks through the immanent frame for Theodore, and that means the end of his relationship with the technological Samantha. The technological reveals itself to be an impossibility for Theodore, incapable of fully addressing the ontological insecurity brought on by his divorce and ultimately insufficient for upholding the depth of his being in the world. The human person bound and upheld in relationship cannot be practically mastered. This is what Jonze's movie so beautifully illustrates. The technological, promising so much, cannot deliver. The technological is negated as a framework for human being.

I take Jonze's point to be not that the technological is evil, something to be avoided. His film is full of extremely poignant and beautiful moments of intimate connection in and through the technological, which nuances any overly simplistic claims about human encounter and technology. And that is certainly not our point either. The technological can certainly mediate the personal, as for instance when social media and texting function as a means of presence in absence.⁶ Instead—and this is where I think Jonze is brilliant in his subtlety—he stresses that the technological in its seemingly infinite capacity for mastery is paradoxically limited, entirely too immanent to sustain the depth of human being for which we all long. Jonze reminds us of the gift of our contingency as human persons, something our technological world struggles to remember. The negation we experience in a technological age is negated only in the vulnerability of human encounter that opens us to being known in our frail, finite embodied existence. To press deeply into these experiences is, paradoxically, to open ourselves up to the mystery and depth of human being that can never be mastered, but only lived. ⊕

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⁶For more on this idea, see Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).