

Humans, Animals, Machines

Questions of a general kind about where to draw the lines of division between humans, animals and machines have a long history. But they are being posed today in a somewhat novel form in the sense that the current concern is less with finding and fixing the criteria for drawing clear demarcations between human, animal, and machine and more with winning acceptance to the idea that these borders are, or are fast becoming, more blurred than we previously thought. Very often, moreover, claims to this effect come with a suggestion that these hybrid forms and fusions are a positive development: that it is ecologically progressive and/or humanly emancipatory to break down these conceptual barriers and commit ourselves to less rigid, fuzzier modes of thinking. So much is this the case that one is often given to believe that merely to have pointed to a muddying of the conceptual waters is to have advanced some new, post-humanist form of enlightenment.¹ In some cases, too, the argument is explicitly pitted against a romantic reverence for the intrinsic value or “otherness” of nature. Instead of seeking ecological salvation by overcoming human alienation, this neo-anti-romanticism invites us to view the route to eco-redemption as proceeding via some kind of conceptual meltdown.

Of course, these calls for conceptual realignment are not without their rationale, with recent developments in science and technology playing a central role. Huge advances in the field of genetics, and their application in seed modification, cloning, nanotechnology, and organ transplantation from other species have created uncertainty about where to draw the divide between the artificially contrived and the naturally given and, in some cases, seem to pose problems for existing definitions and criteria for being “human.”

¹I take the term “post-human” from Robert Peperell, *The Post-Human Condition* (Exeter: Intellect Books, 1995).

The same is true of developments in information technology. The problem here arises not simply from the fact that machines appear to think or have powers of cognition that challenge the long held Aristotelian view of reason as exclusive to *homo sapiens*. The idea that artificial intelligence in itself collapses the distinction between humans and machines is, after all, readily countered by pointing to all those aspects of being human which are not purely matters of reason or cognition (by pointing, if one may so put it, to the “ensouled” nature of the human machine). But today there are so-called “connectionists” and advocates of “Emergent Artificial Intelligence” who are emphasizing the unpredictable nature, non-rule governed, and non-determined qualities of the most sophisticated computers, and view these as “psychological machines.” And this view, it would seem, is becoming increasingly influential among the experts. “My studies show,” says one observer, “that in the professional computer culture, scientists are starting to talk about machines in images ever closer to those we use to describe people. Now both people *and* computers are presented as fundamentally “beyond information.”² I am not suggesting that this kind of talk is unproblematic or to be readily condoned. The point, rather, is that it is illustrative of the kind of challenges to conventional modes of thinking about the human/machine distinction that science is throwing up at the present time.

The politics of animal liberation is a further area where we are being encouraged to reconsider earlier conceptual clarities, in this case with respect to the human/animal divide. We have witnessed in recent times the growth of a broad movement of ecological naturalism calling upon us humans to recognize our essential continuity and kinship with other living beings, or at least with the more large-brained and sentient among them. What I am here calling “ecological naturalism” represents a spectrum of positions, towards one end of which there are those who follow Peter Singer in calling for “equal consideration” to be given to all animals. They want the higher primates included within the human moral community. And they compare the “human speciesism” of those who resist their calls with “sexism” or “racism” within the existing confines of the human community.³ Towards the other end, are those,

²Sherry Turkle, “Romantic Reactions,” in James J. Sheehan and Morton Sosna, eds., *The Boundaries of Humanity: Humans, Animals, Machines* (Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 226.

³Peter Singer, “All Animals are Equal,” in Tom Regan and Peter Singer, eds., *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Second Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), pp. 73-86; see also, Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer, eds., *The Great Ape Project* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993).

like Ted Benton, who argue against human-animal dualism, and insist that the differences between humans and other animals are much less than often supposed, but who, nonetheless, refuse to compare resistance to the liberation of animals to racism or sexism within the human community.⁴ So, there are divisions within this spectrum, but what is common to all those sharing the anti-dualist perspective is a refusal to treat the differences between humans and other animals as anything but matters of degree within an essential ontological continuity. Secondly, the assumption that the more we come to recognize this and hence the fluidity of the conceptual divide between the human and the animals — the more eco-friendly our policies are likely to be, or, at any rate, the less tolerant we shall become of the maltreatment of animals.

Thirdly, and in part overlapping or complementing these calls to acknowledge our affinities with other forms of being, there are a number of anti-essentialist theoretical or postmodernist theoretical discourses encouraging us to blur traditional conceptual oppositions between humans, animals and machines. One of the more influential is Donna Haraway's invitation (already discussed in this column in *CNS*) to embrace a cyborg ontology which cheerfully accepts the "leakiness" of these boundaries, and applauds the emancipatory potential of cyber-technology. But one might also cite as relevant here, the Foucaultian influenced resistance to any final distinction between nature and culture; or Derrida's suggestion that our intuitive demarcations between human and non-human "others" are a form of unwarranted conceptual policing;⁵ or Richard Rorty's denial of any universally applicable attributes of being human, and hence of any grounds for human solidarity with those who do not belong to our own community in time or space. Rorty has argued, for example that,

...the traditional philosophical way of spelling out what we mean by "human solidarity" is to say that there is something within each of us — our essential humanity — which resonates to the presence of this same thing in other human beings. This way of explicating the notion of solidarity coheres with our habit of saying that the audiences in the Coliseum, Humbert, Kinbote, P.O. Brien, the guards at Auschwitz, and the Belgians who watched the Gestapo drag their Jewish neighbors away were "inhuman." The idea is that they all lacked some

⁴Ted Benton, *Natural Relations* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁵Jacques Derrida, Interview in *Radical Philosophy*, 68, p. 32.

component which is essential to a fully-fledged human being.

Philosophers who deny...that there is such a component, that there is anything like a “core self,” are unable to invoke this latter idea. Our insistence on contingency, and our consequent opposition to ideas like “essence,” “nature,” and “foundation,” make it impossible for us to retain the notion that some actions and attitudes are naturally “inhuman.”⁶

Rorty, of course, is only interested himself in challenging the possibility of universal human species solidarity, yet his grounds for doing so might allow — contingently — for parochial forms of solidarity to be extended to, say, some higher primates in one’s vicinity, and even maybe robotic entities or friends in virtual reality, too, even as it excluded members of the *homo sapiens* species with whom that specific local community had no geographical or cultural ties or shared experiences. Rorty and Singer, on the one hand, or Rorty and the cyborg advocates, on the other, might seem strange bedfellows in certain respects, but Rorty does, surely, have arguments supportive of their respective claims.

I have suggested that whereas formerly the concern was to set the criteria for inclusion within the human community, the focus has now shifted to winning acceptance to the breakdown of clear-cut distinctions between human and animals, mind and machine. But, some might object that this itself is not a clear distinction. They will argue, perhaps, that current calls to include higher primates within the human moral community instantiate not a blurring of the conceptual divide between humans and animals, but rather issue a challenge to the arbitrary, and overly exclusive, definition of what can or should count as belonging within the so-called “human” community. Thus, Singer’s argument is quite explicitly designed to show that there is no good justification for equality of consideration between human groups that does not also entail the same between humans and great apes. Any rational feminist or anti-racist must, therefore, according to him, also favor equality of consideration for these other animals.

Yet, the two cases are not comparable; and not only because these human groups, unlike the higher primates, are at least in principle able to articulate the rights claimed on their behalf, or to challenge the forms

⁶Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers, Volume II: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), see, e.g., pp. xiv and 189f.

of their representation by others, but for the simple reason that here we have a cross-species claim for inclusion within the rights-bearing community. The humanity of women, slaves, black people, and other oppressed groups may have been questioned in the past in the sense that such groups were said to be lacking in rationality, but it was not disputed that they were members of a common biological species. Nor, of course, are Singer and others who want to compare the “speciesism” which excludes higher primates from the human moral community with sexism or racism wanting to deny that apes and chimpanzees are not human. On the contrary, what they are arguing ultimately is that non-human beings possess qualities or attributes that are so similar to those of human beings that there is no justification for denying them similar forms of moral consideration. This is not, despite the misleading analogies with sexism and racism, like the call to allow a previously excluded group of biological humans to be recognized as having full entitlement to the citizenship rights accorded other biological humans. It is rather a demand that we be less rigid in policing the conceptual boundaries *between* humans and simians: that we allow naturally differentiated species to occupy a common cultural universe. And as such, it exemplifies a way of thinking about non-human animals that is both innovative and highly contestable. Singer’s critics have pointed out, for example, that true empathy with great apes would not be exercised by seeing how far they approximate to mentally deficient human beings. Instead, they have argued that there is something inherently ill-judged and inappropriate in applying the yardstick of reason at all.⁷ They have also objected that since rights entail obligations, non-human animals cannot properly be bearers of them.

But even more contestable, one may argue, is the contrary type of claim, namely, that we should welcome the move towards a blurring of the human-machine and the escape afforded by contemporary technology

⁷This seems, for example, to be the objection of Elizabeth Costello, the vegetarian novelist in J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Although Costello herself fails to appreciate the force of this argument with respect to the limitations it would place on human empathy with non-rational creatures. According to Costello, we mistreat or misunderstand the great apes in trying to reveal how like ourselves they are. But at the same time, she wants to insist that we have no problem in knowing what it is to be a bat or, so she implies, any other kind of animal. Yet the sensibility that makes us hesitate about assimilating apes too closely to human beings must surely also allow us to recognize the extent of failure of reciprocity between ourselves and other creatures.

from the flesh, the organic, the “animal” and the “real.” It is true, of course, that computer technology allows people to enter into virtual modes of existence via the Internet, which they may indeed experience as no less “real” than what they call RL (Real Life). But the precise novelty of this is not obvious since people from time immemorial have “lost themselves” in their non-electronically assisted dreams and fantasies, or a variety of cultural productions from epic poetry, to novels, music, or film. Nor does it in any way imply that people today are any more confused about the difference between persons and machines than they were in the past. Immersed they may be in the simulated world of the MOOs and MUDs, as none think it ethical to salvage the car rather than the car crash victim, or to rescue the computers rather than the persons from a burning building.

These points seem so crudely obvious that one is inclined to suppose that what is intended by the advocates of the blurring of the machine-organism divide is a more purely metaphorical reading of the “cyborg” as a figure to critique ideas of racial or ethnic purity, or sexual fixity. But in that case, where does the machine come in at all, and what does it capture about contemporary selfhood that is not already registered through existing notions of hybridity, complexity or cultural pluralism?

Moreover, even if intended purely as metaphor, those who celebrate the mind over matter, escape from the “meat” afforded by virtual existence in cyberspace, should recognize how close this rhetoric is to that of Christian Puritanism. Indeed, some of the more fanatical adherents appear to love “VR” (Virtual Reality) precisely for this reason. To quote one cyberist Professor at MIT: “we want to escape our bestial nature and become pure in spirit. Aspiring to be angels, if not God, is in our human blood. Who, after all, has not felt the “foulness” of the body and the desire to shake it off.”⁸ So here, in the very name of cyborg liberation and its deifying potential, we have a new version of a very old mind-body dislocation which ought to set alarm bells ringing, not least among feminists and greens. The rhetoric of some advocates of future technological liberation can sound very old-fashioned indeed. To play God, to be endlessly self-creating, to be unentrained by any origin in the body, or vile fleshiness: are not these among the oldest dreams of the patriarchs and technocrats?

⁸Bruce Mazlish, *The Fourth Discontinuity: The Co-evolution of Humans and Machines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p.182, cited in Mark Slouka, *War of the Worlds* (London: Abacus, 1996), p. 65.