Notes to lead Session

FACING THE POSTHUMAN

The Phenomenology and Imagination Research Group held a seminar on 24 March 2015 led by Yvonne Jones, with the title ‘Facing the Posthuman’. Developing thoughts from the previous sessions this session asked ‘How do ‘dwelling’ and ‘authenticity’ relate to the twenty first century and notions of the posthuman?’ This article provides notes drawn from the seminar and commentaries from the participants, Yonat Nitzan-Green, Bevis Fenner, Jane Bennett, Noriko Suzuki-Bosco and Chenh-Chu Weng.

Texts for the Seminar:

* Bachelard – The Poetics of Space 1994 (p 3-7)
* Surgeon Plans First Human Head Transplant , A Sky News Item

<http://news.sky.com/story/1434435/surgeon-plans-first-human-headtransplant>

* Outline paper to stimulate conversation and exploration

  

**Yvonne Jones**: Having circulated the texts and looking to focus on Conversation as Methodology the session opened with a short introduction explaining my journey and how I have reached my current position in terms of the posthuman. The distinction between a literal posthuman envisaged by Moravec and the subject posthuman proposed by Katherine Hayles was made. Picking up on Patti’s session and Bevis’s session I wanted to open the questions of how dwelling and authenticity have meaning in our time when we are faced with the possibility of the coming into existence of literal posthumans. Many challenging questions and thoughts were voiced.

Theorists brought in were Foucault, Tim Ingold, Lacan, Heidegger and Bachelard amongst others. Their ideas were compared and contrasted with group members bringing their specialist knowledge. Bevis pointed out how we are often too busy to notice our senses and also how they have been hijacked by consumerism and society at large and used for ends other than direct sensation of our body and environment. Yonat raised the question, exactly what is the connection today between the senses and humanity? And that technology is changing us into something else even now. She put dialogue as an important element of being human, the breaking down of barriers and isolation. Noriko spoke of knowledge through experience (of making, and doing). Dwelling was tracked backwards to consider the womb as the ‘first shelter’ and the body as the ‘first shelter’.

The authentic self was considered in terms of existential authenticity considering Heidegger’s idea of the present already being the past. This led to discussion of consciousness and my interest in the recent development of the notion that consciousness may yet prove to be another externally existing energy that is of itself, as magnetism is (David Chalmers). Without debate, without deconstructing of both the theoretical and material realities and possibilities of our human pathway, it is possible we could slip into a literal posthuman future where human qualities are not of value, where ( to use the four characteristics used by Hayle) information takes precedence over instantiation, where the upstart consciousness is dismantled, where the body (the first prothesis0 is side lined for a machine and where humans are seamlessly joined to intelligent machines. Whether that is the headless body to an intelligent machine or a bodiless head to an intelligent machine is anyone’s guess.

The session opened up a sense of hope, optimism and movement that was a new insight (for me), based on sense that there is a ground swell being presented in society from the younger generation, one of promoting human attributes; the knowledge through making, through doing, spoken of by Noriko, the authenticity searched for though airb&b spoken of by Bevis. This move may be a natural backlash to the pervading indirect relating between people and to gaining information (through technology).

The discussion in the session repeatedly came back to the body and its value, the positive value of humanness. The group is functioning in a way that crosses boundaries, and opens new insights, bringing differing knowledge bases together. It is rewarding and enriching.