Employees as Sims? The Conflict Between Dignity and Efficiency

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“… that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me.” —Karl Marx

Today’s technological mediation allows for unprecedented amounts and depths of surveillance. Those who advocate for such surveillance tend to invoke a notion of public safety as justification. On the one hand, if acceptance of being surveilled follows a philosophy, it would seem to be a kind of “greatest good for the greatest number” philosophy. However, it may be the case that the philosophy functions as an after-the-fact excuse, and people are simply willing to accept surveillance so long as they are able to use their technological devices. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that with context shifts in which such a philosophy could no longer justify surveillance, a philosophy of ownership may be the only viable justification for such surveillance. Yet, insofar as we are discussing the freedom of individuals, e.g. “employees,” we should be critical regarding surveillance justified by a philosophy of ownership.

This article seeks to provide a critique of surveillance in situations where surveillance thrives despite the tension between freedom and ownership. Specifically, this article examines the development of workplace surveillance—through technological mediation—from “loss prevention” to “profit protection.” The tension between freedom and ownership in this context may be philosophically characterized as the tension between dignity and efficiency. After describing an actual workplace situation in which a retailer uses technological mediation to surveil employees for the sake of “profit protection,” a critique of surveillance will emerge from a discussion of the notions of efficiency and dignity in relation to freedom. Rather than determine the justification of surveillance through technological mediation in terms of the “justified true belief” of “profit protection,” this article—from the perspective of social epistemology—takes for its point of departure a conception of knowledge in terms of the “social justification of belief” (Rorty, 1979: 170). Hence, the policy recommendations regarding technological mediation with which this article concludes may be understood as developed through social epistemology and a concern for freedom most often associated with existential philosophy.

Employees as Sims?

It is already the case that business owners may use their smartphones to access “real time” audio and video surveillance of their employees. This article considers a retail business with stores in more than one of the United States; speaking with individuals who have worked under such profit-driven surveillance is illuminating. The retail space in question was small enough to have audio and video surveillance covering the entire premises where employees and customers could interact. One employee described how “the boss” was “on a beach somewhere having a drink” watching the employee in question work. The “boss” would then periodically call the business to have the “middle management” ask this employee why he was doing whatever it was he was doing. The employee described the experience as

1 From *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by M. Milligan (1964).
“stressful.” Further, he described feeling “paranoid,” at times, not knowing for certain how closely he was being surveilled from moment to moment.

The idea of using technology to surveil a workplace is not new. However, the kinds of technology available today allow for unprecedented levels of surveillance. Whereas less technologically-mediated work environments could have justified surveillance in terms of employee safety and loss prevention, e.g. theft and accidental destruction, today’s technologically-mediated workplace allows for greater depths of “micro-managing” through surveillance. What we will see is that despite any negative connotation associated with the notion of “micro-managing,” when understood along a spectrum of “loss prevention” and in conjunction with the technological mediation which allows for it, the use of surveillance for the purpose of micro-managing employees can seem as justifiable as locking the door when you close shop for the night.

Originally the idea of “loss prevention” included concerns to monitor for theft. If setting up video surveillance will deter theft or help you recover lost property after theft, then the calculation seems straightforward enough that the video surveillance of your business is a good investment. Further, if video surveillance helps defend business owners against unwarranted worker compensation claims by employees who were hurt on the job through no fault of the business, then again the calculation seems straightforward enough that the video surveillance of your business is a good investment. In fact, retail businesses often employ an entire “loss prevention” department tasked not only with monitoring video surveillance of the business’s premises but also often to appear as customers among the customers to assure shoplifters are quickly captured and restrained. From the perspective of a philosophy of ownership, the idea is that you own property which you are offering to sell to others, and if others attempt to take your property without compensating you as you deem appropriate, then it seems straightforward enough that your rights regarding your property have been violated.

Now, the idea of “profit protection” may be understood as an extension of “loss prevention.” Moreover, it should be kept in mind that such “profit protection” would not be possible without today’s technological mediation. “Profit protection” is supposed to refer to the reduction of the preventable loss of profit, and “the preventable loss of profit” refers to actions performed inadvertently or deliberately. Thus, notice how surveillance for the sake of “profit protection” may technically extend beyond theft and accidental destruction of property. In other words, if employees are not performing their job duties in a way that allows for the sale of your property, then the profit which you could have reasonably earned through their labor is lost.

There are a number of ways technological mediation allows for “profit protecting” surveillance. First, just like the popular smartphone applications which allow individuals to monitor their property while away from their homes or apartments, business owners may not only monitor their property but also the individuals tasked with facilitating the sale of their property. Second, a business owner could easily isolate which employees are not performing as efficiently as they should by simply tracking sales. If given the reasonable
amount of expected sale, whether determined by season and time of day or by the ratio of sales to customer traffic, etc. business owners can determine when their property is not being sold as efficiently as it should be. Lastly, then, business owners may use technology to surveil those particular employees who are working during the times when business operations are not as efficient as they should be. In doing so, business owners could learn what these employees are doing “wrong.”

Notice, if such surveillance is framed as a “teaching opportunity,” then an employer could construe the whole surveillance operation as benevolent and caring, without even needing to mention “profit protection.” However, to whatever extent there would be a calculation involved to justify the use of management time to surveil such employees, then the notion of “profit protection” could be easily revealed as operable, despite denial on the part of the business. In either case, notice how the surveillance of such employees seems to justify such “micro-managing” as questioning sales techniques, and such a technologically-mediated relation to the employee would extend all the way to monitoring what employees say and how they say it. After all, even an employee’s relation to customers, if understood in terms of cybernetics\(^2\) (cf. Scalambrino, 2014 & 2015b) may be quantified in terms of variables which correlate with successful sales. Thus, a business owner may be seen protecting profit by micro-managing the facial expressions, tone of voice, and suggestions made by their employees.

On the one hand, if all this is beginning to sound as if technologically-mediated business may make employee management and relations into a kind of video game (such as, for example, “the Sims”), then you are following the argument of this article.\(^3\) On the other hand, there are three points to keep in mind. First, it would be too cumbersome to conduct such management and relations to employees, as if they were Sims, without technological mediation. Second, notice how framing the micro-management associated with such surveillance in terms of “profit protection” makes the enterprise sound like good (cybernetic) science and a wise business investment. Third, we will consider the question: How does such surveillance and micro-managing affect employees and relate to the constitution of their employee-identity? As we will see, whereas the second point may be rightfully characterized in terms of the efficiency of an employee in regard to the performance of assigned tasks, the third, which we will characterize in terms of the “dignity of the person” who is the employee, is not a simple question to answer. Moreover, as we

\(^2\) Cybernetics may be understood as a kind of science of life. For our purposes, it refers to a relation to life such that events in life are understood as capable of being fully quantified and subjected to calculations which would render the eventual outcomes predictable. Thus, proponents of such a relation to life tend to hold that the only limitation on the total cybernetic revelation of life is processing power in regard to the requisite quantification and calculation. Its continued relevance for conversations regarding technology and freedom is that if cybernetics is correct, then human freedom is a kind of illusion which results from the inability to calculate (what cybernetics considers to be) the fully deterministic nature of events. In short, according to cybernetics, it would be as if life were a machine with completely calculable motions (cf. Ashby, 2012; cf. Johnston, 2008; cf. Heidegger, 2008; cf. Wiener, 1965).

\(^3\) For those unaware of the “Sims” reference, “The Sims is a video game series in which players “simulate life” by controlling various features of automatons and surveilling their activity. The video game was developed by “EA Maxis” and published by “Electronic Arts.”
shall see, the efficiency made possible by technological mediation seems to have tipped the balance in favor of efficiency over dignity.

The Conflict Between Efficiency and Dignity

There are a number of ways to articulate the conflict between efficiency and dignity, and in doing so a distinction may be made between the rationale and the value of such micro-managing and surveillance of employees through technological mediation. Privileging efficiency, it may be argued that the feelings and self-identity of an employee need not be included in the concerns of a reasonable business owner. In this way, it may be said that business owner's need not include concerns for employee feelings and self-identity in their rationale for implementing various surveillance and management practices. Yet, insofar as employee feelings and self-identity have value which can be correlated with profit, then it becomes an issue of efficiency to control these variables as much as possible. That is to say, a cost/benefit analysis may be called for in which the impact of such variables on profit could be determined.

Considering profit necessary to sustain a business, a cost/benefit analysis of the appropriate relation to employee dignity can be quite complicated. For the purposes of this article, consider the following possibilities. The value of privileging dignity may run directly counter to “profit protection.” That is to say, venturing into the dimension of surveilling employees to promote various dignity-related psychological features may seem counter-intuitive, not only because a certain amount of disgruntlement may be constitutionally the norm for some individuals but also because it may be difficult to control the cost of sustaining such a workplace environment. Further, it is not immediately clear whether surveilling, micro-managing, and subsequently firing an employee for their inability to sustain a profit margin may not be in the best interest of the dignity of the employee. Whereas it may be more consistent with “profit protection” to screen potential employees for job aptitude, rather than hire individuals and subsequently surveil them for aptitude, to determine for an individual that they are not good at performing a task may be seen as providing helpful guidance consistent with respecting their dignity.

The “helpful guidance” framing of firing an employee is reminiscent of the “teaching opportunity” framing of surveillance and micro-management. In other words, though it may seem intuitively beneficial for an employer to appear to its employees as concerned with employee dignity in its various rationales for investing in surveillance and micro-managing, again it seems concern for profit would be the ultimate determining factor in whether the costs associated with maintaining such an appearance to its employees constitutes a good investment for the business. Moreover, on the one hand, it could be construed as a kind of alternative compensation, so business owners could justify keeping larger amounts of profit, e.g. “At our workplace managers will work with you to ensure you love your job.” On the

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4 For a discussion of “efficiency” as indicative of the “Postmodern Condition,” see Lyotard, 1984.
other hand, establishing a workplace in which it is a requirement of employment that employees appear happy at all times may be considered unreasonably oppressive.

Hence, it seems even if a business were to remain neutral in expressing rationale for its actions regarding dignity, there may be a spectrum along which businesses cannot help but be placed regarding how they value employee dignity. On the end of the spectrum privileging efficiency would be located automatons, resulting from analyses and established through an investment in future profit; on the end of the spectrum privileging dignity would be autonomous persons, perhaps involved in a “profit-sharing” business.

**Autonomy and Self-Awareness: The Scope of Simulation**

There are three (3) distinctions which are now classic in the history of Western philosophy, which will help articulate the conflict between efficiency and dignity. These distinctions come from Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) ethics. The three distinctions are: the “three natural pre-dispositions to the good,” the “principle of ends” (as the second formulation of Kant’s famous Categorical Imperative), and the difference between “a person of good morals” and “a morally good person.”

Building on Aristotle’s divisions of the soul, Kant distinguishes between the “animal,” “human,” and “personal” dimensions. Each of these dimensions has a corresponding type of “self-love,” which individuals use to determine self-worth. At the level of animality, self-love is “mechanical” and determined by physical pleasure. Individuals centered on this level determine the value of their existence by how much physical pleasure they experience in life. At the level of humanity, self-love is “comparative.” This is due to the fact that rationality cannot help but determine ratios. Individuals centered on this level determine the value of their existence by comparing aspects of their lives to the lives of others.

Finally, at the level of personality, according to Kant, the “predisposition to personality is the capacity for respect for the moral law as in itself a sufficient incentive of the will.” (Kant, 1960: 34). Thus fully actualized individuals determine their self-worth as “a rational and at the same time an accountable being” (Ibid), and the difference most relevant for our discussion is the sense in which a person has self-respect beyond the natural human tendency to compare oneself with others. In other words, though someone has more money or better possessions than you (cf. Epictetus, 1998: §6), you may value yourself in terms of your disciplined harmony with right living. Insofar as “right living” is meaningful, then its truth and reality precedes an individual’s acceptance of it. That is to say, it is true that touching the hot stovetop will hurt you, prior to your touching it and independent of your beliefs regarding it.

Hence, there are two conclusions to be drawn here. First, “dignity of the person” is meaningful, whether the self-respect associated with it is actualized by individuals or not.

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6 I present the distinctions in this way for the sake of brevity and clarity; however, it should not escape Kant scholars that these three distinctions in essence represent a movement along Kant’s three different formulations of the Categorical Imperative, respectively, i.e. the principle of the law of nature, the principle of ends, and the principle of autonomy.
Second, “dignity” refers to the self-actualization which corresponds (as we will see more completely in a moment) with the highest natural capacity for living in humans. That is to say, individuals who have not actualized the personal dimension, and thereby self-respect, are individuals who are not living the most excellent life available to humans.

Two brief references to other philosophers may be helpful here for clarification. In regard to the second point, Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) statement, “the seal of liberty” is “no longer being ashamed in front of yourself” (1974: 220) need not be understood as a philosophy of “anything goes,” but rather may be understood as indicating liberation from a life of self-shaming in regard to a comparison with the rest of humanity. Further, the first point, above, invokes a classic passage in Plato’s Republic where Socrates notes that rulers (i.e. employers and bosses) “in the precise sense” are people who “care for others” (Plato, 1997: 340d). This is, of course, juxtaposed with the definition of justice offered by Thrasymachus, namely, that “Rulers make laws to their own advantage.” (Ibid: 338c).

The next distinction from Kant is his “principle of ends.” This is the second formulation of his famous “Categorical Imperative,” and it suggests you should act in such a way “that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” (Kant, 2002: 38). On the one hand, notice how this suggests we should not use others as a means to determine our own self-worth. On the other hand, it also points to the dignity of persons as ends in themselves. That is to say, the principle of ends suggests a person should not use others in such a way that it is merely for utility. As we will see, for Kant this goes beyond J.S. Mill’s “principle of liberty” in that to treat another person—even a consenting person—merely as a means, and thereby not as a self-respecting person, may be construed as a kind of harm to their person insofar as their ability to self-actualize their personhood is conditioned by their capacity for self-respect.

The final distinction from Kant, then, is the one between “a person of good morals” and “a morally good person” (cf. Scalambrino, 2016c). What is fascinating about this distinction is that it is not in terms of the actual action that the different types of individuals perform. Both persons may perform the same action; however, the latter type of person is motivated in terms of the self-respect of personhood, and the former is motivated in terms of a different pre-disposition to goodness. Notice that because all of the pre-dispositions are “to the good,” it is not in terms of the goodness of the action that its performance should be evaluated. Rather, it is the motivation that determines which performance of the action is better. This will be important for the thesis of this article, as there is no attempt being made to suggest that profit is “not good.”

To synthesize these distinctions from Kant, notice he believes the “morally good person” is freer and is existentially-situated better than the “person of good morals.” Further, he thinks the “morally good person” is living a more excellent life than the “person of good morals,”

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7 Mill’s “Liberty Principle” suggests you are at liberty to act as you please so long as you are not harming others, i.e. so long as others consent to the treatment to which your actions subject them.
and all of this is despite the fact that both individuals may be performing the same actions. How is this the case?

Because the three pre-dispositions to the good constitute a hierarchy, in order for an individual to actualize the highest capacity, i.e. for personhood, the existentially-prior capacities must first be actualized. This means “personhood” is a higher excellence than mere “humanity,” and personhood is existentially-situated in a better way, therefore, since the person has a wider horizon of evaluation available to it than in terms of mere humanity. For example, even if someone merely at the level of humanity were hoping for the best means to manipulate others, having a wider horizon of evaluation would provide a wider range of potential justifications, i.e. this may be seen in the attempt to suggest that profit-driven surveillance is somehow for the benefit of the surveilled—when the motivation determining the performance of the action is clearly “profit protection.”

In order to understand how the “morally good person” also lives the better life, a brief reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* may be helpful. As Aristotle goes through the various types of life in his search to discover the best life for humans, he notes, “The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.” (2009: 1096a5). The idea here is that to ask regarding the natural purpose of human life is to ask what human life is in itself, i.e. as an end for itself and not as a means to be expended for something else. This points directly to the synthesis of Kant’s distinctions as a justifying how the “morally good person” lives the better, i.e. the most excellent life available to humans, in that the natural presence and hierarchical order of the dispositions suggests that life was made to fully actualize itself. To be fully-actualized means to actualize the highest pre-disposition, which is the predisposition in which life treats itself as an end in itself, whether in its own person or in that of another, and thereby constitutes the dignity of personhood thru its self-respect. 

Lastly, notice how the above explication of Kant’s ethics regarding the dignity of personhood may be characterized in terms of “self-awareness” and “autonomy.” Because the individual who has actualized the capacity for personhood may relate to itself in terms of a greater number of dimensions than the “person of good morals” who is not performing actions with the full actualization of their self. In this way, the “morally good person,” in expressing the self-respect associated with the dignity of personhood, is more self-aware. Were this in terms of content, then it would be as if age should determine greatest amount of self-awareness; however, this is in terms of capacity, not content. In a similar way, Kant characterizes the autonomy of an individual, not in terms of content but rather, in terms of relation (cf. Scalambro, 2016b).

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8 Before even considering other reasons to justify this claim, notice the word “rational” in Kant’s articulation of the pre-disposition to personality.

9 In Nietzsche’s language it is “to overcome itself.”

10 This is, of course, why Kant thinks we naturally have a “duty” to be excellent.

Thus, it is the “autonomy” of the fully actualized person which makes them freer. According to Kant, the “principle of autonomy” is “The principle of every human will as a will giving universal law through all its maxims [i.e. its code of conduct].” (Kant, 2002: 40). Notice, because both the “person of good morals” and the “morally good person” perform the same action, it may be said that they are following the same “law.” However, it is not the following of the law but the relation to the law when following it that differentiates these two types of individuals. In other words, because the “morally good person” understands its self-worth in terms of its accountability to the Natural Moral Law, it is motivated in terms of self-respect exemplary of the dignity of personhood. In this way, this type of person is freely choosing to follow the law. Because other types of individuals have motivations other than the accountability determining personal dignity, their decisions to follow the law are compelled by other motivations. The motivation to follow the law for its own sake is not an additional motive from the motive made possible through the actualization of personhood.

Efficiency and Dignity

In what way does the above section illustrate “the limits of simulation,” and how do the limits of simulation relate to the conflict between efficiency and dignity? Again, it is, of course, technological mediation that conditions the whole problem under discussion. In other words, it is the amount and depth of surveillance made possible today by technological mediation which has allowed for the shift from “loss prevention” to “profit protection.”

On the one hand, the above section helps illustrate that though loss prevention and profit protection may be good, the surveillance of employees for their sake is founded upon a relation in terms of “humanity,” at best, and not “persons.” In other words, it seems to neither treat employees with dignity nor to provide an environment which may help them fully actualize self-respect as an employee. Like “persons of good morals” in Kant, employees under surveillance may perform the right action and the same action that an employee with dignity and self-respect may perform; however, also like “persons of good morals,” employees under surveillance may lack the best motivation to perform their work “duties.”

On the other hand, it is autonomy and self-awareness that limit the scope of possible simulation. What this ultimately means is that if the goal is efficiency, then approaching it through technological mediation, as if to make employees simulations of the desires and knowledge of their employers, may only lead to short-term capped-amounts of efficiency. In other words, it seems consistent with the above Kantian discussion of self-actualization to note that employees who respect themselves as persons who do the kind of work they are employed to do should make for the best employees. That is, long-term efficiency seems predicated upon autonomous employees who are self-aware for their own sake. Simulation is ultimately limited by the lack of autonomy and self-awareness associated with employees motivated at Kant’s level of “humanity,” and even when performing the correct actions, it is as if they do so like “persons of good morals,” not “morally good persons.”
For those who advocate for efficiency, even at the cost of dignity, the above discussion suggests promoting dignity might be a better way to promote efficiency. One, it is inefficient to “micro manage” employees. Two, even with the use of cybernetics and technological mediation to help indicate where such “micro-management” may increase efficiency, such practices may work against efficiency to the extent that they undermine employee dignity. As the above discussion suggests, employee dignity indicates more self-actualization, i.e. a freer and better existentially-situated employee. In this way, though it may be true that if an employee will not be subjected to conditions of technological mediation, perhaps a replacement who would will be easy to find. However, the ease at which individuals with less self-respect and dignity, or with greater compelling conditions, may be found neither resolves the conflict between efficiency and dignity nor does it ensure efficiency.

**Excursus: Control & Inauthenticity: Simulation, “Legacy Protection,” and Despair**

Some readers of our edited volume *Social Epistemology & Technology: Toward Public Self-Awareness Regarding Technological Mediation* have recognized, at least, an analogy between society and families in regard to the control for which technological mediation allows. Though we cannot work out every detail here, we can provide a sufficient sketch of the analogy to, if nothing else, provoke deeper thinking and self-awareness regarding the potential effects of technological mediation. In general, this question relates to the chapters located in the second half of *Social Epistemology & Technology*, and specifically in regard to my chapter “The Vanishing Subject: Becoming Who You Cybernetically Are.” Of particular interest regarding this topic may be the section of that chapter titled “Pro-Techno-Creation: Stepford Children of a Brave New Society (?),” though if read in isolation from the rest of the chapter, that section may seem obscure. Since my second article in this SERRC Special Issue will be devoted to discussing the theme to which the second part of *Social Epistemology & Technology* was devoted, i.e. the theme of “changing conceptions of humans and humanity,” we will not engage such a discussion in this excursus (cf. Scalambrino, 2015b & 2015c).

In regard to the analogy, “profit protection” is to the use of technological mediation in business as “legacy protection” is to the use of technological mediation in the family. The basic idea is that: just as technological mediation may be used to control employee actions, technological mediation may be used to constitute select attributes of a child (e.g. IVF, PGD, CRISPR-Cas9, etc.) and to promote and sustain a select identity for the child. The motivation may be characterized as “legacy protection,” since the ends afforded by technological mediation constitute a kind of investment made by parents. In this way, the dynamics of the problem we uncovered above concerning employees, employer desires, and technological mediation, manifest analogously in regard to the family. That is to say, the question of the employee’s existential-freedom becomes the question of the child’s existential-freedom, and the dilemma regarding whether to risk losing profit to allow for the individual’s autonomy and increased self-awareness becomes the risk of losing one’s legacy and “investment” in their children.
Given the large cost associated with what amounts to genetically engineering one’s children, it is clear that parents have some goal(s) in mind when selecting various attributes for a child (cf. Marcel, 1962). Whether this initial investment is made or not, some see it as the technologically-mediated equivalent of mate selection; however, notice, whether equivalent or not, the level of control increases significantly thru technological mediation. Beyond the birth of the child, then, there is the question of how to sustain the initial investment made—whether through mate selection or genetic engineering—to ensure “legacy protection.” The idea here is that whatever goal(s) parents have in mind when selecting, perhaps as best they can, various attributes for a child, those goals point to the legacy the parents are attempting to protect.

As the technological mediation of a child’s life increases so too does the potential to surveil and control the child. Since the idea of increasing surveillance should be obvious (e.g., checking to see what websites they view, what they text to friends, GPS of where they go, and so on.) we will focus only on the control piece here. Control is understood here in the sense of limiting the full self-actualization associated with personhood above and discussed through the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. That is to say, if you are able to limit an individual’s self-actualization to the level of “humanity,” then they will continually constitute their identity through comparison with others. Just as I indicated in my second chapter of Social Epistemology & Technology, the way to “lock down” such self-awareness is by “misunderstanding nothing.” What this means is that if you can provide an individual with a worldview that seems to provide an account for everything in terms of that individual’s comparative self-worth to others, then you control that individual’s ability to interpret their own existence.

When this can be anchored through a talent in which the individual excels, then the comparative model may be all the more effective, since the individual seems themselves as “winning” or a “winner” based on an identity which takes itself as able to account for whatever happens in life. The problem, Kant would say, is that the individual is not fully autonomous. The “law” given to them is not of their own choosing. There are a number of ways to use technological mediation to control individuals, and thereby to ensure “legacy protection.” On the one hand, a discussion of inauthenticity and memes would be appropriate here, since it becomes possible to understand the whole enterprise for “legacy protection” as founded upon the comparative understanding; thus, the agency more commonly attributed to the parental desire ensure legacy protection may be attributed to the transmission of the comparative worldview itself from generation to generation—like the transmission of thought memes—in that the parent evidently operates with the same worldview which is successfully engineered into the child should likewise promote that child’s desire to pass on the same worldview that values “legacy protection” to their children, and so on.

In this way, cybernetic theories of human existence function as a kind support for holding individuals at the human level in which self-worth is determined through comparison and self-awareness and autonomy are thereby diminished. What the phrase “cybernetic theories of human existence” refers to is precisely any theory of existence which believes all of existence
can be explained. The sense in which such “epistemic closure” misunderstands nothing suggests to the individual’s inhabited by it that it is a worldview that can provide them with the truth in regard to everything (cf. Scalambri, 2012). “Existentialists,” resist such systemization because it treats life like “a problem to be solved,” rather than (as Kierkegaard phrased it) “a mystery to be lived.” It is worth noting that Kierkegaard characterized such an inauthentic relation to life as “despair” (cf. Scalambri, 2016b).

Some of the memes that are easy to notice are phrases such as “a gap year.” When an individual looks at the time of existence as though it is merely fulfilling a pre-established form, like a “cookie cutter,” then we should ask: How did that form get there? Notice how the perfect example here would be to invoke the self-understanding of individuals in “third world” locations, and ask what a “gap year” is for them. The idea is not that “gap year” has no reference. Rather, the idea is that individuals who truly believe that their lives are, and should be, following a pre-established pattern are individuals who are neither fully autonomous nor fully self-aware (cf. Marcuse, 1991). Of course, proponents of “legacy protection” may suggest that insofar as the individual in question is not from a “third world” location, then understanding the time of one’s existence in terms of “gap years, etc.” is a privilege to be coveted. Why is it a privilege to be coveted? Perhaps because such a self-understanding is more efficient for the individual to live (and pass on) the privileged existence which is their legacy.

Beyond any technological mediation used to genetically engineer a child, technological mediation helps hold individuals at the human level in which self-worth is determined through comparison by helping to sustain an identity, however explicit it may be to the individual, anchored in a cybernetic worldview. Technological mediation does this in all the ways philosophers have been saying it does this since at least when Plato talked about the techné of “writing” and its effects on human self-understanding. Yet, more to the point, when Heidegger and Jünger discuss the “form” in which humans understand themselves as “standing reserve” or as “workers,” then we can see the insidious influence of technological mediation as twofold. First, the efficiency allowed for by technology becomes an expectation. For example, the expectation is common today that we should have all our email accounts consolidated in an app on a smartphone, so you can receive emails with a level of efficiency as if they were all text messages, etc. Second, the idea that you may have some self-understanding other than legacy “protector” or germ-line “curator” is really just the folly of an inefficient employee or the noise of malfunction in a cybernetic human machine.

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