New Explorations
Studies in Culture and Communications

NaturArchy from the Point-of-View to the Point-of-Being

Derrick de Kerckhove

Volume 4, Number 1, Spring 2024

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111621ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1111621ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

de Kerckhove, D. (2024). NaturArchy from the Point-of-View to the Point-of-Being. *New Explorations*, *4*(1). https://doi.org/10.7202/1111621ar

Vol 4 No 1 (Spring 2024)

Online: jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/nexj
Visit our WebBlog: newexplorations.net

NaturArchy from the Point-of-View to the Point-of-Being

Derrick de Kerckhove
Polytechnic Institute of Milan
Formerly University of Toronto
dekerckh@gmail.com

Marshall McLuhan suggested that the notion and experience of one's point-of-view had to do with the invention of the phonetic alphabet but did not elaborate further to probe literacy's impact on how humans would eventually treat the environment.

Eric Havelock was the first to propose that Greek literacy was the source of the 'separation of the knower from the known'. Reading words as opposed to hearing them creates a physical distance between the reader and the text. Given enough play, literacy will extend that distance to the whole 'world-object', a trend that began in late Middle Ages with the proliferation of metaphors comparing the study of nature to 'reading a book'.
Reading words silently (a practice that took several centuries to become the norm) strongly emphasized the separation, turning writing, a medium destined to communicating, into one reserved for subjective interpretation and meditation.

The accumulation of reading material, tested against experience and integrated into the mind's database would constitute then as now a personal *cognitive capital* to be used in instances requiring judgment and decision-making. That cognitive capital was developed in silence and took place in a private space of the mind where it became defined first as 'consciousness' and today as 'privacy' thus further isolating the individual.

Over time, the maturing cognitive capital, reflecting the predispositions and the experience of the subject led to the development of the point-of-view, a spontaneous assessment of whatever presented itself for consideration. The notion and the habitual practice of having, using and giving one's point-of-view was reinforced during the Renaissance by Brunelleschi and Alberti and other architects and painters' practice of fixing geometrically the place from which one could get a 'perspective' on what was seen, a physical practice that became a mental one too.

All the above depended on phonological literacy which acted as an *operating system of culture*, not only by archiving spoken words and generating institutions such as education, constitution, and law, but also accumulating a *collective cognitive capital* that required constant curating in scientific, philosophical, medical and many other kinds of specializations, disciplines, treatises, and classified storage in libraries. Specializations such as manual or intellectual labour would depend on inherent proclivities, education, and positive or negative life experiences. The collective cognitive capital was formalized and externalized in written documents (scientific treatises, legal and other documents, literature, etc.) but there was also a distributed subjective part that became named and known as 'common-sense', a shared but

tacit agreement about what was right or wrong, true or false, successful or bound to fail. This collective cognitive capital became the reference base to objective knowledge and standards everybody agreed upon. One's individual point-of-view would combine the subjective interpretation of any situation based on common-sense with the standards existing in writing, hence the abundance of written contracts from birth to death.

During this development the separation between the knower and the known was reinforced and projected onto people's attitude towards the environment. At first it was beneficial because the individuation of thinking processes afforded more innovation potential that led to a kind of technological dominance that was not accessible to the East, despite a superior and durable competence earlier. The Chinese had invented many technologies centuries before the West, but their *cultural operating system*, that is, their writing did not allow them to separate the knower from the known because it was and is still impossible to read any except the most common ideograms without knowing the context. The same can be said about Arabic or Hebrew that also require to know the context before being able to decipher the text. This may seem like an anecdotal and dispensable difference, but being trained from an early age to prioritize the context just to decipher the text might also train one's judgment and carry over in all circumstances. We can imagine that every child who has learned to read one system or the other would grow up with a different mindset, one that carefully considered the context to make sense of any and all situations, the other, being satisfied with the text to provide the context without further ado. The difference in focus would entail a different attitude to the environment: cultures that put the context forward would experience the world as participants not as detached observers.

Of course, the argument can be made that the Chinese today don't give much evidence that they care about the environment any more than Westerners do. Having adopted many western technologies, as well as the analytical scientific process that brought the West to intuit first the atom 2500 years ago, and now the quanta, they may have put on hold their traditional values. Be that as it may, both East and West are being challenged by the digital transformation which by-passes meaning and sense-making to arrive at decision-making.

The digital transformation is behaving as a new *cultural operating system* that doesn't agree or disagree with literacy but simply co-opts it. Phonological writing and generative AI both present simulations of human language. Literacy is an illusion of language in the way photography is an illusion of physical place and objects. Both are only representations, but both are taken for granted without further ado. Alfred Korzybski and John Austin, however, remind us that 'words don't mean, people do'. The trouble is that algorithms are getting much better at simulating language and meaning than literacy does, witness the imitation – and predictable take-over – of learning in Machine-Learning (ML) and of reading and writing in generative AI. Using data without any knowledge of any science or discipline, algorithms are already better than the best experts at life-depending decisions about medical, judicial, defense, financial and other human prerogatives. The fact that algorithms do not need to make sense about anything leaves them without self-restraint or the autonomy to judge or predict their effect. This also leads them to

disrupt social and political order by supporting technically the creation of fake news and deep fakes and distributing them virally into targeted social networks and echo chambers, throwing the whole world in an epistemological crisis.

The crisis is also one of identity, compounded by the tendency of digital technologies to externalize and take over the users' innate cognitive faculties such as memory (smartphones), judgment (digital assistants, influencers, and algorithmic recommendation systems), learning (machine-learning), imagination and creativity (generative AI) and even spatial orientation (navigators). The result is the depletion of people's cognitive capital and the weakening of their resistance to emotion-trigging opinions, thus limiting their ability to judge for themselves things such as political opinion and scientific qualifications. Overall, a negative psychological effect of the digital transformation is to undermine the constituents of the individual point-of-view, to reduce, if not cancel the distance between subject and object, discourage trust in objectivity, and repurpose people's subjectivity to heal some of the loss of identity by joining political populists and uninformed social networks, returning to para-tribal social responses. This neo tribalism enforced by the brutal surveillance and control of people in autocratic regimes is now leading humanity on the brink of nuclear war, to say nothing of wilful denial and downplaying of climate change.

Is there any way out of this?

Maybe something could repair the loss of objectivity and recreate global consensus by sharing a concept and an experience more palatable than having misguided points-of-view, perhaps even exciting enough to change one's mind. This is where, a few months ago, two previously unrelated directions of my own research came together, one on the possible psychological and consequent social impact of quantum physics and technologies, the other, on proprioceptive and tactile experiences of space, body, and mind. Among the basic differences between quantum and classical physics is what quantum physicists call 'entanglement', a feature of particles that divide themselves into two or more entities and stay corelated at any distance immediate or cosmic, a profoundly counter-intuitive but proven fact that has led Einstein to talk about 'a spooky action at a distance' and other scientists to posit a physics of non-locality in research that earned three quantum physicists a Nobel prize two years ago[1], but a radical non-starter in Newtonian physics terms. This entanglement of particles at the absolute smallest scale of matter would indicate that nothing in nature is separate, meaning that 'we, the people' are intrinsically part and parcel not only of material, but also of mental processes in constant motion and relation. Of course, the notion that humans are at one with nature is neither new nor original, but it is not taken seriously by anyone except mystics and perhaps also, for good reasons explained above, by traditional Chinese philosophy. But, if we are that close, how can that intimate relationship be experienced on a permanent basis?

Replacing the point-of-view with the 'point-of-being'

[1] From the announcement published by the Nobel Prize organization newsletter (2022): "Alain Aspect, John Clauser and Anton Zeilinger have each conducted groundbreaking experiments using entangled quantum states, where two particles behave like a single unit even when they are separated. Their results have cleared the way for new technology based upon quantum information". https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/2022/summary/

The other strain of my research that became a collection of ten essays on touch and culture, edited under the title *The Point of Being*[2], came to mind too late to find a place in our book, *The quantum Ecology*[3] already in production, but it was an answer to what I had been looking for over four years during which I tried to find what people might experience once the effects of quantum physics and technologies were generalized. The point-of-being stands in direct opposition to the point-of-view, both geometrically and sensorially. Instead of visually detaching the human person from the world under observation, through our tactile experience of self and space, the point-of-being brings both together as a sensation, a sharing of space, being and things literally entangled within the immediate and the distant environment, as is all our life all the time. But that is hardly what we usually pay attention to. Today, however we are entering the "point of being" phase. What exactly does that mean?

The point of being is the tactile and proprioceptive dimension of our perception and sensation of being. Touch unites, joins, and brings people and things together but touching for a long time was the object of anxiety, criticism, and prohibition by the church and English Puritanism. Basically, a culture of repression of tactility has spread for centuries. But we can experience it again any time by simply paying attention to our body, its position, its sensations, our feelings. The point of being, instead of depending solely on awareness of the outside, is a recognition of the centrality of the body in living. According to William Bogard: "Unlike vision, which is concentrated in the head, tactility is distributed throughout the body (including the eyes), in layers of varying intensity. Touch is not one of the five senses, but a competence of all the senses, a quality of openness or sensitivity. Tactility involves not only exteroception (perception turned outward, toward the environment), but also proprioception, the internal sense the body has of itself and of the effort required to move or resist movement"[4] Bogard emphasizing the tactility of the eyes could have been inspired by Thomas Aquinas who considered "touch" as the most refined of the senses. For Aquinas, the eye was an organ at the service of touch to probe and appreciate what is visible.

The first senses are touch and hearing and it is only after co-ordinating these senses with what the eye surveys does the sense of sight emerge. -RKL

Today we are entering a completely different dimension, in which our bodies become the recognized interface with reality. The culture of the body has changed profoundly: today we are much more attentive. We pay more attention to nutrition and physical activity. There are those who recommend that we also do our best at something that is natural from the moment we come into the world: breathing, breathing well. Breathing done well allows a kind of dialogue with one's body. Asian cultures have been teaching this for millennia, but only now are **Westerners** also appreciating how important it is to do it correctly. Our body is the interface of being because breath is our constant exchange with the environment and with life itself. In the way Henri Bergson describes the experience of life’s continuity, there is something that prefigures the point-of-being: "The more we succeed in making ourselves conscious of our progress in pure duration, the more we feel the different parts of our being enter into each other, and our whole personality is concentrated in one point, or rather in one sharp edge,

---

[2] D. de Kerckhove and C. Miranda (ed. 2014) *The Point of Being*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing
[3] S. Calzati and D. de Kerckhove (2024), *The Quantum Ecology*, MIT Press (in Press, due in October).
[4] William Bogard (2007) “The Coils of a Serpent: Haptic Space and Control Societies”, CTheory, p. 5.

pressed against the future and cutting it incessantly. It is in this that life and action are free."[5]
Returning to the possibility that the quantum ecology might introduce a new sensory relationship between humans and the world, I am encouraged and inspired by Finnish architect Juhani Palasmaa: "Touch is the sensory modality that integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves. Even visual perceptions are merged and integrated into the haptic continuum of the self; my body remembers who I am and where I am in the world. My body is truly the navel of my world, not in the sense of the central perspective's point of view, but as the very place of reference, memory, imagination, and integration."[6]
Here I must insert a parenthesis to describe a double displacement of the human person. The first displacement was that of the preliterate human participant of nature to that of the spectator and judge, a situation introduced by the transfer to the environment of the reader-page relationship. It is this kind of relationship that gave humanity - Western in particular - a paradoxically central position of control over the world and a kind of license to appropriate it, with the consequences we know today of very serious environmental danger. The digital transformation has put man back at the center, not of the universe in the medieval way but only of its immediate context. The arrival of virtual reality, though practiced by the few is a symbolic sign of the reversal of perspective by bringing the user into and no longer out of context.

Digital culture is transforming our sensory experience to prepare us for the next, the quantum era, and I believe that artists with their sensibilities and forms of expression are showing us the new realities in a plastic way, a kind of transition between "the point of view" and "the point of being." In English, "The Point of Being" has three meanings. The first indicates the point at which we stand, then the point from which we feel the co-presence of the self and the reality of the world. The third, however, questions us about the "reason for being." And this last meaning brings us to the great question of human history: what are we doing here? Don't worry, I don't have the answer, but in my opinion asking ourselves this question (already present in Shakespeare's 'To be or not to be'), freeing ourselves from the routine, from the imprisonment of the obvious and the ephemeral, is already a huge achievement. To be or not to be? It continues to be the main question that pervades all cultures on the planet.

[5] Henri-Louis Bergson (2008 [191 I], *Creative Evolution* p. 202).
[6] Juhani Pallasmaa (2012) *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the senses*, Wiley, p. 157.