

Being human in modernity and postmodernity

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The historical phases of modernity and postmodernity can be characterised as being defined by humanity seeing themselves as an autonomous and subjective observer of a world 'out there'. Human subjective observation has become our central referencing point; central to our understanding of ourselves and our actions. Such ideas began to emerge in philosophy around 300 years ago, but have further emerged from the human sciences in the twentieth century. Increasingly they have become the terms in which 'we' have come to understand the concept of self; understand our thoughts as well as understand change and life events.

These themes will be explored in four sections. Each of these 'layered' sections will be integral in forming the 'foundation' for the next section. First, drawing on the thought of Bruno Latour, we will show how the *subjective observation of the world* 'out there' is the foundational philosophical position of modern culture. Upon this foundation is the cultural tendency of the West to split *reality into a public and private realm*, something that causes us to build our private lives in public ways. The rise of the human sciences in the past century is a central event in the remodelling of the human as the subjective observer: *the subjective observer is observed*. The final section explores the fact that this subjective observer is now able to construct its own meanings and live within the perspective that they have built, and hence only willing to *govern themselves*.

The subjective observer of the 'world out there'

Have you ever heard the suggestion, or had the thought in a moment of armchair philosophising, that the world and everything in it might simply be a figment of your imagination? Reality might be a virtual reality generated by your brain. The Matrix film trilogy concentrates on this theme, raising the possibility that our lives are mentally and digitally constructed. As this film suggests, we might actually be lifeless bodies in a vat, experiencing nothing physically but the world within our consciousness. These are 'modern' thoughts. Organising reality into the world of the mind and consciousness that only knows appearance and a real world outside of the mind is what Bruno Latour¹ describes as the 'modern settlement'. This is how the past 300 years of western culture has accounted for and managed the world and humanity.

Reality might be a virtual reality generated by your brain.

The ancient Greeks distinguished between reality and appearance; a distinction that Rene Descartes gave a distinctly psychological flavour. Descartes reworked the difference between appearance and reality into a problem of the distinction between the mind and the body. Within Greek philosophy reality was split in two; pure forms or 'ideal types' which were real, and the world we know (the appearance of 'ideal types') as a close approximation. For example, the world is full of trees, but each tree is a tree in as much as it is an appearance, a copy, of an ideal form of tree. For

¹ Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard, 1999.

Descartes appearance became a mental issue and the 'real' was no longer a world of pure, ideal forms, but it was instead the real world outside the mind that reaches us through our senses and that we encounter through representations, images or appearances in our minds.

Descartes divided reality into two: the mind and the body. The key to this mind-body distinction is substance. The world and the body has substance. They are physical and take up space and so can be measured as extended phenomenon. The mind on the other hand had no substance and is by definition an unextended phenomenon. At one time the question of how we know the world was addressed in terms of the correspondence between things and their ideal forms. Now the world is a psychological problem of how we deal with the appearance or representation of the world in the mind. The question has therefore become: How does a mind, that is not part of the world, come to know the real world out there? How do I know that what comes into my mind through my five senses is a faithful representation of the world?

Descartes' solution to this problem was twofold. First, he gave God a 'back door to the mind' to help guarantee that our mind correctly organises the incoming representations. Descartes also looked to mathematics to guarantee the faithful appearance of the world-outside in the mind. Mathematics (a mental system – we think logically and mathematically) was increasingly seen as the way the world was organised thanks to the emergence of Newtonian physics.² Mathematics became the bridge between the material world (which could be expressed as coordinates and mathematic relationships) and the mind which worked with mathematics, logic and immaterial systems of representation. Mathematics was a kind of mental grid that the mind laid over the real world to organise incoming pictures from the world into a coherent picture so that it could know reality.³

Essentially the human has become a subjective observer of a 'world-out-there', knowing the world through pictures or representations but not first hand.

Descartes put knowledge and reality on a subjective footing. Objective reality and truth was now based on our own 'inner' or conscious ability to organise information about the world outside. Mathematics and logic provided the guarantee that we could know the real world and enabled us to talk with each other and have a common experience of the world outside, keeping us from losing touch with reality. The world today (thanks to Descartes) is fundamentally construed as the world of appearance in the mind. Essentially the human has become a subjective observer of a 'world-out-there', knowing the world through pictures or representations but not first hand.

Meaning through the mind (or 'the brain-in-a-vat')

This 'modern settlement' stands on what Latour calls the 'strange invention' of an 'outside' world and the subsequent fear of losing it.⁴ The fear of losing such a world was the foundation of Descartes' philosophy. Latour argues that Descartes reinvented humanity as prisoners locked away from the world outside, peering through the bars to catch a glimpse of it;

² M. Heidegger, 'Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics,' in D. F. Krell (ed.), *Basic Readings: Martin Heidegger*, Routledge, 1978, Rev. Ed.

³ P. Stenner, 'Heidegger and the Subject: Questioning Concerning Psychology,' *Theory and Psychology* 8:1, 1998, 59-77.

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 3.

deciding in our minds what it looks like.⁵ Descartes presented us with a 'brain-in-a-vat', separated from the world and its body, where the only connection that matters is the tenuous link to the world formed by the gaze of the subjective observer. Everything then hangs on this link between the world and the human as a subjective private observer with a unique individual experience or view of the world. The notion of a 'worldview' and the possibility of alternative 'worldviews', 'perspectives' or 'outlooks' are all modern ways of describing the differences between the ways people act in the world and interpret the world, relying as they do on visual metaphors which place us outside the world as observers looking on.

The 'modern settlement' describes us relating to the world psychologically. To be human is to have a unique perspective on the world. Reality depends on our ability mentally to construct the world and our mental health depends on our ability to 'see' things – to keep a grip on reality (since reality is now something we can become detached from in our perceptual prison cell). Scientific methodology is all about being objective and that means guaranteeing that the link between the world outside and the subjective world of the observer's knowledge is strong. The human, as subjective observer, becomes the focus of politics and government as democracy is organised by opinion polls. Social values and what it means to live well revolve around being free to construct our own worlds and express our subjectivity⁶.

Within psychology, science, politics, as well as our individual values, there is tension between the influence (wanted or unwanted) of seeking the definitive version and alternative perspectives: a tension between the one and the many. For example, the therapist gives the patient an 'authoritative' view of the world and their circumstances, driving out alternative, unhealthy, perspectives. Scientists are clear that the view of the world that is methodologically most rigorous should stand against other less rigorous and value-led perspectives on the nature of the world. Democratic government operates by accounting for multiple opinions, but also wants to influence opinions and perspectives, including some and excluding others under a single value system. Therefore questions emerge such as the choice between integration or multiculturalism or balancing being free to express your perspective with the need curb freedom to protect the interest of others – the one perspective or the many.

The 'modern settlement' of the subjective observer connected to the world-out-there through our perception is our point of reference in all areas of life and all significant questions. Latour argues that this 'modernist settlement'

has sealed off into incommensurable problems questions that cannot be solved separately and have to be tackled all at once: the epistemological question of how we can know the outside world, the psychological question of how a mind can maintain a connection with an outside, the political question of how we can keep order in society, and the moral question of how we can live a good life – to sum up, 'out there', 'in there' 'down there' and 'up there'.⁷

Within the modern and postmodern West, our approach to the sciences, politics, and living well all have their roots within this framework of the subjective observer.

Descartes' ideas of the 'brain-in-a-vat' have now been surpassed. The empiricists dispensed with Descartes' appeal to God as a 'survival kit' for the 'brain-in-a-vat' to shore up its connection to the world outside. Instead they suggested that the world was able to send 'enough information to

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ N. Rose, N, *Governing the Soul: the Shaping of the Private Self*, Free Association Books, 1989.

⁷ Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 310.

produce a stable image of itself in our minds'.⁸ The empiricists did retain some semblance of 'brain-in-a-vat' training it to recognise patterns that were in the world. The empiricists had more confidence in the world to represent itself to the mind and for the mind to guess the connections and learn to make associations between the bits of the picture that it received. Latour again:

The result was like a badly connected TV set, and no amount of tuning made this precursor of neural nets produce more than a fuzzy set of blurry lines, with white points falling like snow. No shape was recognisable. Absolute certainty was lost, so precarious were the connections of the senses to a world that was pushed ever further outside. There was too much static to get any clear picture.⁹

To arrive at the settlement between the rationalists (e.g. Descartes, Kant) and the empiricists (e.g. Lock, Hume) required both a redesigning in the concept of the soul and also the world rediscovered as picture. The soul went from being fundamentally constructed as a moral relationship between a person and God to a psychological, perceptual relationship with an outside world. Ian Hacking argues that during the nineteenth century the soul was replaced by something more measurable and manageable.¹⁰ We essentially became our memories. What constituted the person was having a life history, a sense of continuity. This happened at a cultural as well as an academic level. Hacking sees this cultural shift in the way we understand ourselves as the fertile ground for psychological disorders. For example, people switch between personalities by changing personal histories to cope with adverse circumstances. As we become our histories, we essentially become perceiving subjects. Although there are notable exceptions (e.g. Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*), memory in modern psychology and philosophy is essentially a stored faded picture or perception of the past. So modern philosophy and the human sciences have replaced the soul with a psychological perceiving subject which stores the past as pictures.

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The 'modernist settlement' cuts God and the world off from one another as it begins to describe humans as essentially subjective observers locked into their own perceptual world. Therefore the new 'modern' way to be human is to be autonomous, disconnected and sovereignly looking onto the world. The world now only works and has order if there is this 'despotic TV set' to pick up the transmission and to manage it.

Meaning through society (or 'brains-in-the-vat')

This brain-in-a-vat, however, was soon felt to have limited strategic value:

It would not be long before people realised that this 'transcendental Ego', Kant named it, was a fiction, a line in the sand ... a negotiating position in a complicated settlement to avoid the complete loss of the world or the complete abandonment of the quest for absolute certainty.¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ I. Hacking, I., *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Princeton, 1995.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 6.

The replacement for the brain-in-a-vat kept the ‘modern settlement’ going. Instead of reuniting the mind with the body and the world, the brain-in-a-vat was replaced with an equally unworldly and immaterial category: ‘society’. Instead of Kant’s categories and structures of mind organising our view of the world, it became society’s categories and structures – cultures, traditions and languages – that organised our view of the world. Subjectivity became social!

The move from mind to ‘society’ made humans, who were once prisoners of their own individual categories locked away from the outside world, into prisoners of the categories belonging to their social groups. The prisoners were all thrown into the same dormitory and that, far from escaping the brain-in-the-vat, simply grouped brains-in-vats together against the world outside. The move from mind to society also led to the loss of any notion of a universally stable view of the world: once society is set up against the world as the authoritative place to view the world, and then multiple societies start to appear to us, these multiple societies have multiple cultural perspectives that replace any possibility of encountering the real world. The search for social explanations of how we know the world opens multiple prisons:

Everyone was not locked in the same prison anymore; now there were many prisons, incommensurable, unconnected. Not only was the mind disconnected from the world, but each collective mind, each culture was disconnected from the others.¹²

In this perspective we moved from the brain in the vat and the mentally fabricated world of *The Matrix* to multiple matrices creating the real world through social agreement: the world, therefore, is what my culture says it is.

Within this ‘modern settlement’ knowing the truth objectively depends on a straight-forward connection and faithful representation of the world to minds and culture. Objectivity, therefore, becomes threatened at the moment someone suggests that our ways of seeing the world are culturally conditioned. Scientists (and Christians for that matter) get nervous!

Christians play the modernist game when they cordon off biological and natural scientifically explainable causes of psychological disorders from spiritual and scriptural intervention. For example for many Christians if depression can be shown to be a biological entity, it slips out from under the remit of scripture, repentance and belief. But if it is shown to be a social and subjective entity then it is open to the word! They act as if science gives us natural truths and the Bible gives us spiritual truths (taken under modernity to equate with subjectivity) and that the Bible cannot stray into natural or biological territory with its spiritual (subjective) content. As the scientific community expands its claims to knowledge the Bible is forced to retreat to account for the as-yet-unexplained. Effectively the word is increasingly disqualified from commenting on the ‘objective truths of science’ unless they can be shown to be faulty and value-led modernist Christians functionally buy into a fantasy notion of value-free science. The Bible is left to address the subjective world and not the objective, scientific world.

Scientific objectivity is maintained by excluding culture and purifying the view of the world by scientific method. Either the world offers itself purely as truth or it is constructed socially and is therefore subjective. We have no other way of thinking about the relationship between humans and the world or nature inside the modern settlement. Things are either biological and naturally caused or socially created! To the degree that one allows culture or society some constructive influence, objectivity is seen to be threatened. So even our understanding of truth and objectivity are

¹² Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 6.

settled in terms of a division between mind and body, society and nature. Under this settlement it becomes impossible to talk about knowing truth through science and at the same time how science is a culturally created and culture bound set of tools for seeing the world. Scientists can talk about knowing the world and nature, while sociologists can talk about cultural forms of knowledge. But they are not interchangeable explanations. You have to switch registers. Either everything is social or everything is true! It becomes impossible to accept that we know truth through its cultural expression because in the 'modernist settlement' either the world is faithfully representing itself to humans or humans are making it up.

In fact we always encounter the world through the mediation of cultural artefacts – including science. 'We' never view the world in a value free, objective state. The world always meets us through words, labels, tools, procedures and theories: these things are all cultural facets. Culture is always shaping our encounter with the world and each other. Within the 'modernist settlement' this presents us with a problem!

This may sound like I am claiming with relativists that there is no truth and all is culture. This, however, that is not my argument. Instead I am arguing that the 'modernist settlement' is a wrong turn that *artificially* pits culture against nature. The creation account of Genesis 1-3 shows that there is no nature or world that is separate from the purposes, interpretation and action of social beings. Creation is always interpreted, purposed and ordered by its trinitarian (and inherently social) Creator as good and for his glory, with humans made to work, discover and organise it under the cultural mandate in the image of God under his word.

Modernity has reorganised the relationships between man, society, God and nature into its own settlement of a world 'out there' with minds and culture separated from these. God is rejected and man's subjectivity (whether social or mental) becomes the pivotal organising point of reality with society, culture and creation transformed in a world-'out-there' to be brought before the human in the despotic TV set.

Meaning through language

The latest historical phase of postmodernity continues this settlement. It is modernity 'gone to seed' or, perhaps, collapsing in on itself. The postmodern turn to language as an explanation and referencing point is the latest twist in this tale. Language comes to replace Kant's mental categories or mental structures as the medium for organising the real world. Some have gone further and taken language as the medium that not only organises but also creates the 'world out there'. The writers of these social explanations have given up the idea that the world 'out there' is objectively accessible through culture and so they have cut it off. These explanations have become more powerful than the natural explanations that seek to invoke nature as the foundation for truth statements. The world is no longer organised by Kant's mental structures but social representations, language and images. Nature is seen as a social construction through language and culture. Latour sees much social constructionism not as a solution to the 'modernist settlement' but the next stage in its development. The only change, he says, is that now the shift to language celebrates the loss of the world behind language.

Every defect of the former position is now taken to be its best quality. Yes, we have lost the world. Yes, we are forever prisoners of language. No, we will never regain certainty. No, we will never get beyond our biases. Yes, we will forever be stuck within our own selfish standpoint. Bravo! Encore! The prisoners are now gagging even those who ask them to look outside their cell windows; they will "deconstruct," as they say – which means destroy in slow

motion – anyone who reminds them that there was a time when they were free and when their language bore a connection with the world.¹³

The modern has mutated into the postmodern and humanity has finally reached the point of being absolute creator! Our minds, our perspectives, our cultures, our words have become the last refuge of truth for us: Humanity creates the world as it wants it, as if it depended on our minds, brains or language for its existence. Within this context humanity sometimes wonders, in moments of armchair philosophising, whether there is truth at all or if it is made up ... forgetting that, when the mind stops functioning and society stops talking, the world remains. The world's existence is not dependent on us or our subjective gaze for its construction. This cannot be an accurate explanation of what it means to be human.

The public and the private self

Modernity assumes the individual subjective observer as the point of central reference and so cannot account for its emergence because it is understood to have been the pivotal organising point of the world. Any questions posed within this framework about how we can know reality and how we can be sure of truth, all assume this position. Therefore, in order to be objective, we need to recognise that humans as subjective observers is an effect of the way we have explained what it means to be human, and not a universal cross-cultural explanation.

The subjective observer is not in fact the origin of order but a by product of the ways in which we have explained ourselves and the world through measurement, calculation, mass production, mass media, industrialisation and the growth of human sciences. This has produced a world which is fragmented into the public world of mass production, image and information in constant flux, zipping around us as a ceaseless deluge of repetition, picture and report and the private world of observation, receiving, appropriating and consuming.

The origin of these faulty explanations does not simply lie at Descartes door. Instead the explanations were a product of his culture and the way in which his culture understood itself and explained the world. The world of Descartes day was being turned into information. Newtonian physics started to talk about the world in terms of a code. Descartes then asks how we can know this world of code first through an unmeasurable mind, and second through mental management of the code rather than by direct encounter.

The creation of the subjective observer perfectly fits a world that is not experienced firsthand but one that is turned into representations, pictures, images, text, and code. Through modernity, man has conquered every realm of nature by measuring it, recording it and turning it into information that can be brought to us conveniently for processing without going to the original source.

What emerges is a view of the human as a private receiver of the world as representations (pictures, texts, code) passively brought to us for processing. It is not hard to see how our culture puts us in this position and how we know ourselves in this way. J. Crary argues that a key part of modern culture is that it has grown up as a distinctly visual culture built around the observer. Modernity saw the rise of an array of optical devices and new cultural contexts for seeing. From the camera obscura to a range of optical devices, photography and the growth of theatre and illusions, cinema, and TV we have intensified versions of these technologies. Modernity has communicated with, and organised its populations through, mediums whose essential design is to bring to observers a two dimensional plan of an original source through a screen, photographic paper, or through a sound system angled towards a seat, a sofa, a computer chair. We

¹³ *Ibid.*

are positioned as receivers and consumers of the world, which has been broken down into a fleeting collection of visual and auditory stimuli. In the West the world has become a framework that is experienced as pictures directed to perceivers. The sense of private consumption of a world that is produced as a set of publicly consumable images and messages goes hand in hand with the modern settlement of the human as subjective observer and the world as picture to be encountered psychologically. The modern media takes world events and translates them into fleeting images that are received as anaesthetised experiences of tragedy. The world 'in flux' through the media turns us into passive private observers of an overwhelming and fleeting public world. The world then relies on the individual absorbing and privately sorting the information to ensure coherence.

Modernity sub-divides the world into the public and private; the world out there and the world of the receiver. What also happens is that through the constant consumption of the public image, message and logo, our private worlds and identity start to get constructed from those public images. There is also an option in which private is taken as distinct from the public, but the inner world is in the end made up and populated by the public. One example of this creating the private out of public information is the way humans consume mass produced products and relate to them for their identities. Products used to come imbued with the identity of the author and community of origin. Logos were fixed to families and social casts as crests and such icons were not transferable. Modern mass production ensures products have no locality to them, produced on mass as infinitely repeatable and publicly and globally available. The same product can exist in infinite times and places, homes and cultures. These public things are experienced as we consume then privately. These products do not arrive imbued with our identity and community; they come blank waiting for us to fold our identity around them and, as we do, our identity and private lives become as mass produced as the product.

There is a difference, for example, between how we experience the world through an antique and how we experience the world through the Barbie doll. We encounter the antique as an expression of its locality as it brings its history of production, use and uniqueness into our lives. The Barbie doll is one of many. It is the exact repeat of the one next door and the one on the advert. We relate to it differently. It links that little girl to a wider public community so that her private experience itself is mass produced. As we privately consume mass produced items and make our family and personal identity out of them we also start to make our inner private lives part of a wider public movement. Our inner lives, our private perspectives and experience of being human get made out of mass produced things (public things). For instance private memories of a childhood populated by mass produced items and brands take on a mass produced quality in a way that was never possible before industrialisation and the rise of consumer culture.

The world is now brought to people in their homes through these mass produced products and news clips. It is no wonder that construing the human as the subjective observer becomes a solution to the way the world works. How we privately receive the world and organise the flux of the public sphere becomes a psychological problem of perception, attention and sensation. It is no accident that as industrialisation spreads, philosophy, art, human sciences, industrial practices, forms of democracy and government start to emerge describing humans in these terms. The world is fractured into the public and the private in modernity and postmodernity in a way that elevates the sovereignty of the individual and their personal identity and also increasingly constructing individuality out of the public and non-unique. Modernity, therefore, has acquired a tricky tension. It looks like it gives us a way of having a unique identity, but it

turns us into consumers. The human sciences, which are sent to describe us, work in the same way. They give us individuality as a collection of non-unique variables, numbers and scores in psychological tests.

As we come to know ourselves like this, as we measure ourselves and produce public knowledge through the human sciences, as we render our inner private selves and psychology measurable and visible, we end up both creating ourselves as private subjective perceivers of the world and describing ourselves in public terms. We become 'interiorities without intimacy'.¹⁴

Observing the subjective observer

Modernity and its scientific methods have helped us conquer the world and render it calculable and measurable, and subsequently endlessly malleable. The onus has fallen upon humanity, therefore, to conquer the inside – to render everything calculable and manageable by government, by therapy, by education and by managing ourselves.

As the basis of knowledge about the world has become contingent on our own understanding, rather than on the nature of 'reality', we have become the target of knowledge and observation ourselves. We have been systematically put on display and reduced to psychological, sociological and biological systems. One result has been that the 'brain-in-the-vat' has had a strange reunion with its body and the world. We were still understood as essentially subjective observers but since the mid-nineteenth century the biological underpinning and workings of 'knowing' become fair game and have become understood in terms of the 'modern settlement'.

In his book *Techniques of the Observer*, Cray charts the emergence of this physiological and psychological view of knowledge in the nineteenth century. Cray cites Goethe, for example, for whom vision was demonstrably a bodily achievement as shown by the phenomena of the after image – the chemical echo of an object or a scene on the retina that we still see after our eyes are shut or we look away. Cray also cites Maine de Biran who made perception inseparable from the muscular movements of the eye and who argued for a link between colour perception and physical fatigue. Mind and body come to a strange unity with the immaterial having a basis in the material, as knowledge about the world out there became rooted in the physiological system. (The mind, however, was never easily reunited with the body for we are still stuck with Descartes' problem: If the mind is immaterial how does it control a material body and vice versa. Are we our minds or our brains? The mind and the body have not been reconnected – we are still ghosts in the machine, subjectivity in bio-machines. The best we can say is that the body brain-state mirrors the organisation of immaterial mind.)

The universalisation of human capacities was made thinkable by locating knowledge in universally available physiological structures. Cray goes on to describe how Schopenhauer and Goethe, among other physiologists, had by the 1840s moved 'the holistic study of subjective experience or mental life to an empirical and quantitative plane'¹⁵ and achieved 'the division and fragmentation of the physical subject (the person) into increasingly specific organic and mechanical systems'.¹⁶ This fragmentation occurred precisely because of the methodological procedures that accompanied the epistemological shift to subjective knowledge.

With this epistemological shift came a parallel shift in the way objectivity and methodology were conceived. What was deemed scientific and objective knowledge became associated with the observation of

¹⁴ C. Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity*, Routledge, 1997.

¹⁵ J. Cray, *Techniques of the Observer*, MIT Press, 1990, 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

increasingly specific elements of a whole.¹⁷ Explanation moved from the brain to the neuron. The effect on what it means to be human was that it became conceived as a set of discoverable structures and that these structures were best displayed through a methodology that increasingly isolated each element for further sub-disciplinary observation. As a result of this increasingly specialised separation of human physiological systems and the separation of the senses, humans were displayed through the practice of experimentation and all its surrounding paraphernalia, and in scientific experimentation and research as collections of systems.

While this shift occurred in biology, the human sciences began to focus on the psychological (the mind and brain) and sociological level (culture and cultural behaviour) with research founded on techniques of behavioural observation. Through observation and categorisation technologies like photography and archiving practices, people could also be pictorially displayed in terms of social strata as types and genres.¹⁸ Techniques of observation presented people as collections of properties drawn from two distinct realms, the social and the biological. While in scientific discourse the social investigation and organisation of humankind was seen as a different but complimentary discipline to the biological sciences, Crary makes clear that in reality these two realms were not so inseparable. Rather, they served each other. The 'isolated' biological system was (and is) a social achievement as well as a natural one.

Crary points out that alongside the emergence of this new discipline of physiological psychology came the economic and social need for rationalising human labour. The economic need for repetitive actions and hand eye co-ordination shaped and underpinned by machine technologies of mass reproduction began to carve out a need to organise workers in terms of the tasks afforded by the machines. The quantitative study of the eye, attentiveness, fatigue, reaction times, and stimulation thresholds undertaken by physiological psychology provided society with a metaphysical subject, laid bare for empirical mapping and for understanding universal qualities of humanity. Paul Stenner agrees that the conditions for psychology and its subject to emerge were established by at least three interdependent 'events'.¹⁹ First, evolutionary theory had pushed mind into the realm of the extended world as it became located in the brain and so was made calculable. Second, experiments by Wilhelm Wundt promised a mathematically readable psyche or subjectivity. Third, both Stenner and Crary argue that, through the social and human biological sciences, society and its constituents (humans) became a useable resource shaped for emerging industrial requirements. Through the instruments of the human sciences, our inner selves were taken up and redesigned as measurable for the purposes of war, work, education, therapy and democracy.²⁰

The human soul, and the inner life which the Bible seamlessly connects with God and one another other, became, through this period, disconnected and redesigned as the autonomous subjective observer was laid out for all to see in terms of these measurable systems. Nikolas Rose documents the way subjectivity was rendered as measurable opinion and attitude scores which could then be included in policy making and governmental programs to manage morale during the war years.²¹ He argues that through such instruments the inner life of the individual was inscribed and described in ways that the government could manage. Our inner life was translated into numbers and scales. The subjectivity of the individual turned into opinion poll statistics and thereafter became a pivotal

¹⁷ P. Stenner, 'Heidegger and the Subject.'

¹⁸ C. Lury, *Prosthetic Culture*, 1998.

¹⁹ P. Stenner, 'Heidegger and the Subject'.

²⁰ N. Rose, *Governing the Soul*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

part of post-war democracy. Citizenship and responsibility took on a subjective form and government was about targeting aspirations and attitudes.

Rose also documents the rise of the science of subjectivity in the workplace. Fitting the job to the man and the man to the job became a subjective issue of quantifying and managing aptitudes and motivations through survey and interview techniques. The subjective observer could have his perspective on the world and the company captured and analysed this in terms of statistical norms and appointed technicians of subjectivity, experts on motivation and attitude, to change the work environment, change views, or fit the right personality profiles to the right jobs.

The subjective observer became a selection of specialist systems, each one of these constituent systems having a measurement system, improvement technique and an accompanying expert. The terms of human individuality are now given to us in mass produced forms: individuality is built from variables. Humans are described by a norm or deviation from the norm and hence there is nothing personal, unique or intimate about ourselves in the way we act. The modern and postmodern elevation of the subjective observer has made us (pseudo-)masters of the world. In the postmodern world, humanity as a collection of systems has now collapsed in upon itself with the move to fleeting images, messages, mass media, temporary meaning and social construction.

Governing our selves

As the soul was replaced by an observable and measurable subject during the nineteenth century, humanity came to know itself in terms of the 'modern settlement'. Strathern argues that during this time the individual was understood by partial analogy to these distinct categories of 'nature' and 'society or mind'. Personhood and identity has become established and represented as different relations between nature and society or mind. We are partly our biology; partly our socially assigned gender or class role; partly our inner motivations, perceptions and memories.

By making partial analogies of nature and society, the 'modern settlement' has managed to define the terms of identity and difference for humanity. Uniqueness, identity and difference has become achievable by drawing from these three categories of natural, social and psychological variables. As Lury describes:

The classifications of genre – of gender, class, race, sexuality, age or other natural, political and social categories or types – and other aspects of the individual come to inhere in different bodies in different ways.²²

Lury calls this 'synthetic culture' since identity is made up of a synthesis of social, psychological and biological systems. Each individual becomes a single instance or collection of properties that are common to all. The individual is translated into a system as something readable - as a collection of properties drawn from the distinct realms of nature, society and mind. Yet, as a collection of natural, social and mental kinds, the individual is an apparently cohesive but ultimately fragmented 'whole'.

In her book *Prosthetic Culture* Lury elaborates Strathern's argument that our culture has started to move beyond constructing humans from the partial analogies of society and nature. Through new technologies of mass production, mass media, mass information, which turn the world into digital code, alongside technologies and scientific intervention that increasingly treat humans as code to be manipulated (e.g. genetic engineering) and medical procedures like gender reassignment, our culture has moved from synthesis to prostheses. A prosthesis is an artificial substitute or replacement for some aspect of the human. Prosthetic culture

²² C. Lury, *Prosthetic Culture*, 14.

sees humans not so much as the interconnection of discrete systems but pushes that metaphor to its natural conclusion that we could be built out of exchangeable code and parts. We can augment ourselves biologically and sociologically. Increasingly modern and postmodern culture resists fixed identity markers. Lury writes:

The suggestion is that the classifications of genre – of gender, class, race, sexuality and age or other natural or social categories – no longer inhere in the individual as they did in plural or synthetic culture; instead, they are seen as the effects of (mechanical and perceptual) prosthesis.²³

In other words all boundaries are broken and technology allows us to change categories to add things to ourselves, to exchange attributes from sexuality, to gender, to body shape and identity; moving in and out of categories, adding new identities and attributes to ourselves. Therapeutic procedures such as narrative therapy even aim to help humans to rewrite their personal history while the internet allows us to adopt identities that we are physically incapable of owning.

The self has become an identikit self. The aspiration of our culture to evolve out of any restrictions that may be placed upon it is clear in the realm of sexuality and gender. The aspiration to change and augment ourselves is seen in science fiction: for instance, Robocop (part man, part machine) or the cybermen transferring brains into new bodies are visions of transferring personality into machines and technology.

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With the rise of a science of human subjectivity has come the rise of 'the expert'. We have experts who focus on many different aspects of humanity and come up with ways to change them – our social skills, our past memories, our body shapes, our confidence, our motivation levels, our addictive behaviours, our misbehaving offspring. But augmentation, identity change and governing our inner worlds through therapies and science is not just the work of trained 'experts'. Through the media, TV, books and magazines they give us the tools to work on our own selves to fulfil our potential. The TV talk show calls us to repentant from self-curbing ways of life; to break free from bad relationships to 'find' ourselves and our identity and to become what we should be: autonomous, self-directed demigods who shape the world by opinion and culture. The subjective observer who has come to understand himself and the methods for change seeks to fulfil his or her potential, to achieve freedom and to express himself. However, in a culture of mass production, media and consumption, the private world of identity is increasingly populated and constructed from the public world of images. Thus a marriage occurs between the postmodern superficial construction of ourselves from publicly available images, and the 'expert' of the measurable self, thereby providing us with a world of personal change and endless possibilities to re-define ourselves but always out of mass produced materials that are temporary (images, logos, and clothes). The postmodern spice in this marriage is that humanity and identity can be endlessly re-arranged from a stock of possibilities by these 'experts' to 'let the real you out'.

Hence we find that fashion 'experts', lifestyle 'experts', and home interior 'experts' fiddle with how things look so that humanity can change its measurable attributes by attending to the experts' prescriptions for our

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

lifestyle. Humanity has now become seamlessly blended with our aesthetic world (i.e. what ourselves and our surrounding looks like). Therefore, my image expresses me and a wrong image curbs me and hides me. I express my identity and my spirituality through off-the-shelf aesthetics. Inner change is now managed by manipulating exterior aesthetics.

Conclusion: life managed by style

Modern and postmodern culture have rewritten the recipe for humanity. Human beings are now subjective observers of the world outside; we are detached perceivers. We are essentially human through being a perspective or a sovereign gaze on the world outside, rather than through our relationship with God, each other and a life lived as part of creation. Truth, politics, values and self-understanding all begin and end with this subjective observer. Truth is rooted in the biological underpinnings of our psychology and is contingent on our psychological and social forms of organising incoming information. Politics and government have built democracy around measurable subjectivity (attitudes, opinion polls and so on). We have come to know ourselves and act on our selves as autonomous subjective observers and value the chance to express that identity.

In many ways this constructed version of humanity is a response to, and part of the package of, a culture that incessantly treats the world as representation and fragments it in to message and image through mass media and mass production. We become receivers and consumers of the world by being private subjective organisers of the world as information, image, logo and report. The result is that, while we are positioned as private observers, our private lives are constructed in very public ways. Our inner worlds are folds in the public fabric of images, messages and logos.

*Our souls have been replaced by observable subjectivity:
attitudes, personality, motivation, memory, perception,
emotion, reaction times, social skills and so on.*

The human sciences have put this inner subjective world on display in increasingly fragmented ways. We have experts and measures for a growing number of emerging components that make us human under the modern gaze. Our souls have been replaced by observable subjectivity: attitudes, personality, motivation, memory, perception, emotion, reaction times, social skills and so on.

The intensification of these trends that many call postmodernity sees the coming together of the systematic ways of measuring and understanding our subjectivity, the experts that tell us how to manage our inner worlds and the superficial public forms of knowing and managing our identity through image and aesthetics. The result is a postmodern self who constructs its own truth and identity with a range of experts of the self who go to work on us by managing our lifestyle. Lifestyle sums up the postmodern management of inner subjective life by external aesthetics: life is managed by style!

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Northern Training Institute

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