

Humans as relational selves

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Abstract Instead of wondering about the nature of robots, as if our thinking about humans was stable and straightforward, we should dig deeper in thinking about how we think about humans. Indeed, the emotions embedded in the ethical approaches to robots and artificial intelligence, are rooted in a long tradition of thinking about humans, either in an instrumental or in a pseudo-divine way. Both perspectives miss humanness, and are misleading when it comes to thinking about robots and their relationships with humans. With the instrumental way to grasp humanness, humans are seen as machines and, by the same token, robots can easily be seen as human, as a matter of fact. With the quasi-divine way to grasp humanness, humans are seen as aspiring omniscient-omnipotent creatures and, by the same token, robots are projected to be, what men will always fail to become. Hence, our way to think about robots is mirroring our way to think about humans...as long as we hold rationality as a distinctive criteria for humanness. The text below flows from a TEDx-ULB talk that took place in Brussels on May 4, 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcGywYSJlf0>). It calls for leaving behind the rational subject as proxy for humanness, and embracing instead the figure of the relational self. The relational self is rooted in the Arendtian concept of plurality. Embracing the relational self, instead of the rational subject, has several advantages: it allows to distinguish humans from artefacts; it allows to grasp the dynamics between control, orientation, and recognition and to understand how

human freedom flows from this dynamics; it opens to the foregrounding of vulnerability, as a shared characteristic of humanness, instead of as a defect touching only some; last, and surely not least, it points to a new form of vulnerability: that of our attentional spheres, whose protection may deserve a new fundamental right, in order to ensure our integrity, besides and beyond body and home.

Keywords Hannah Arendt · Hyperconnectivity · Relational self · Rational subject · Post-human · Attention · Ethics

1 Introduction



The other day, I was in Paris *Gare du Nord*, queuing to buy a ticket for the metro. I had the choice between machines and humans. I chose the humans! Approaching the teller, I discovered this sticker: “*Good morning*” makes *good mornings!*” And I thought: “Why the hell, do I need to be reminded that I am in front of a human and not in front of a machine? What is broken in how we think about humans?”

"The views expressed in the article are the sole responsibility of the author and in no way represent the view of the European Commission and its services".

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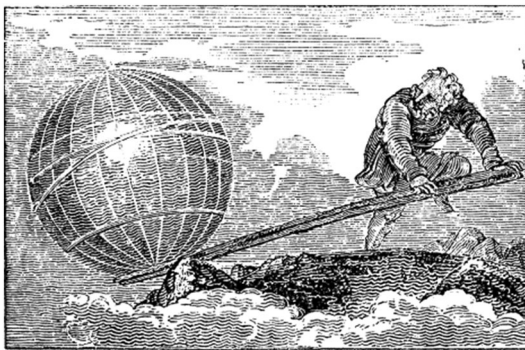
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It all starts by acknowledging that words matter! Like a magnet which generates a field around it, words generate a semantic field, and this semantic field conditions the effect of the words. “Human” is a word. So, what is the semantic field around it? And why is it broken?

2 The rational subject

Aristotle suggested that humans are beings with “logos”. Logos can be understood as language or reason. If it is about language, my GPS is human... If it is about reason, IBM’s Watson is human... We all agree that neither talking devices nor computers deserve to be granted human status. So logos, as a distinctive criteria for humanness, does not work anymore!

The modern version of logos is rationality. And it is one of the—heavy—legacies of Modern Times to consider humans as rational subjects!



The rational subject is driven by an omniscience-omnipotence utopia: there is no limit to what the rational subject can achieve, provided he gets the knowledge and the means... Like Archimedes, who thought that he could lift the earth provided he had a lever. The freedom of the rational subject is about autonomy, disconnection, control! It stops only where that of others begins... or in French*Sa liberté s’arrête là où commence celle des autres*... In other words, the rational subject would be freer if he were alone. His freedom is like a truncated divine freedom.



There is another version of the rational subject: that of a compliant being who follows procedures. This is the lower version of the rational subject!



Both versions share the fact that each is alone. And that it is all about control! Either to be in control—for the upper version- or to be under control—for the lower version. And the rational subject never knows on which side he stands: in the upper version, with the puppeteer and Archimedes, or else in the lower version, with the puppet and the compliant being? He is haunted by this perpetual doubt!

If you permit, I have a few things to say to Descartes.

- René, if you hear me, please give me a ring! ...*Imagine a ringtone*...
- Hi. This is Nicole! I am calling you from the XXIst century.... 2016 to be precise... just a few time zones away.
- *Hi Nicole*...
- I wanted to let you know that weird things are happening down here.



- *Tell me*...
- You remember you were puzzled by the fact that men might be fooled by an Evil Genius?

- *Yes, indeed...*
- Well, let me tell you, men are very good at fooling themselves! No need for an Evil Genius!
- *How so?*
- They make computers and robots to replace and even mimic themselves ... Don't ask me why! Perhaps they fool themselves, just to put an end to wondering. It must be that they hate doubt or uncertainty even more than being fooled... You know, when you were around, there were not so many artefacts ... Now, we are surrounded by them! They speak to us and call for attention. We are flooded with information and bombarded by notifications of all kinds. When we want to speak to a human, we need to go through call centres and their endless option trees. We even have to demonstrate to machines that we are human... to interact with them... Frankly, René, your rational subject does not help us much anymore... We need a new proxy for humanness!
- *I see, but are you sure?*
- Yes! Your rational subject was immensely useful in order to distinguish men from nature... By the way, it was not so useful for women, but I'll call you later on that one... So, back to our business... today, your rational subject does not help us to grasp humanness anymore. Instead, it powers the blurring of the distinction between humans and artefacts. I hope you won't mind if we move on...
- *OK. I get it.*
- Thanks, René... Speak to you soon about women! Good bye!

3 The relational self

Ladies and gentlemen... With gratitude to her, I am pleased to introduce one of the fundamental concepts developed by Hannah Arendt. She is also a major philosopher and political thinker. She lived in the XXth century. She paves the way for the new proxy for humanness we are looking for...

So, let's say "Thank you" to the rational subject for what it has delivered, as proxy for humanness... and Good Bye! Let's get ready to welcome the relational self, as the new proxy for humanness in this hyperconnected era!



For Arendt, plurality—not rationality- is at the heart of the human condition. Plurality is a precise concept: it is not just “many” or “diversity”. It is made up of three components.

First, equality! We are all human! “If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them.”¹

Second, uniqueness! As human *qua* human, we are a “who”, not a “what”. And this “who” is unique!

With Arendt, we embrace equality and uniqueness in one go: we are equal because we are all unique.

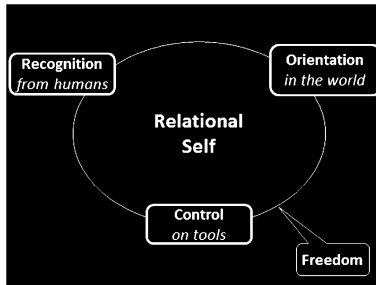
Third, Relationality! In the past, human relationality has been seen as a threat to individual freedom; hence we emphasized autonomy. However, human identity is not this thing that I own and control. To reveal who I am to myself, I need to speak and be heard by other humans. “This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction of ‘what’ somebody is-his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide- is implicit in everything somebody says and does [...] its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of his ‘who’ in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more likely that the ‘who’, which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself...”². In other words, human identity has a revelatory character, most importantly for myself. Relationality is therefore neither a threat nor a “nice-to-have”; it is the exclusive path to our identity... This is what was denied or missing in Descartes’s rational subject... It is what is “broken” in how we think about humans.

And it is precisely in a world of exploding “material” connectivity—Internet, smart phones, sensors,—that we must embrace the inherent plurality of the human condition. This plurality is the true path to our authentic sense of identity, freedom and purpose. Plurality—made up of equality, uniqueness and relationality—allows us to distinguish “humans” from “artefacts”! This is why I would ask you all to consider changing your personal proxy for humanness from “rational subjects” to “relational selves”!

With the relational self, and the foregrounding of plurality over rationality that it entails, we have the vital tool to fix what is broken in how we think about humans.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 155.

² *Ibid.* (p. 159).



Control remains important for the relational self. There is indeed a need to be in control of our tools. But that need for control does not expand endlessly to all humans and to the world, as it did for the rational subject. From humans and in the world, relational selves seek something other than control. From humans, the relational self seeks recognition. Remember: humans cannot access their identity without this recognition from other humans. This is why being deprived of recognition or being humiliated is a form of political exclusion. In the world, relational selves seek to orient themselves. We navigate in the world, rather than controlling it. Contrary to the rational subject for whom freedom was about autonomy and control, the freedom of the relational self relies on a proper balance between control, orientation, and recognition.

You remember the rational subject, and its haunting perpetual doubt, about whether he is the puppeteer or the puppet? Well, the relational self is instead simply vulnerable. Vulnerability is not for victims only. Nor just for women. Men, even the ones deemed most powerful, are also vulnerable. They know it, even if some try hard to hide from it! No vulnerability, no humanness...and no freedom! So, as relational selves, let's acknowledge, and even embrace, our vulnerability! It is just the other side of our true power as humans.

4 Concluding remarks



In this hyperconnected era, a new form of vulnerability comes into play—and this will be my conclusion: the vulnerability of our attentional spheres. We should take care: there is a risk of our attention being cannibalised by automated systems. Why call them smart, by the way? Our attentional spheres require protection. They may even deserve a new fundamental right in order to ensure our integrity, as we are all—I hope you are convinced by now—relational selves!