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Abstract

HUMANISTIC DISCUSSION AND THE ONLINE CONFERENCE

by Michael Heim

Computerized writing and electronic text transmission touch all areas of the humanities. Projects are underway to explore the computer interface for philosophy and literature. This paper is a philosophical reflection on the promise and perils of computerized communication when applied to the humanities. I first present a traditional European ideal of humanistic discussion as currently revived by Ernesto Grassi. I then contrast the ideal with actual instances of computerized exchanges, analyzing them for potential contributions and obstructions to humanistic discussion.

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Rhetoric is the theory and practice of public speech. As theory, rhetoric reflects on the potential gains for public life to be gotten from applying human skills to situations of speaking and writing. Today we cannot really divorce human skills in speaking and writing from the technical devices the human race produces to enhance the exchange of words and ideas. Public speech, evident in the forms of politics and religion, has become wed--for better or worse--to the technology we so glibly call "the media." And now, after radio and television, with the proliferation of inexpensive electronic devices and the orbiting of communications satellites, rhetoric faces the introduction of yet another new apparatus: the computer interface.

The computer brings us to consider rhetoric or public speech under an entirely new aspect, that of information. The focus on information introduces a new principle into rhetorical theory, for the new common denominator is information, and information technology is based on speed of transmission, the manipulability of encoded symbols, and a vast linkage of all the texts ever created by the human mind. Because the computer can reduce the alphabet to ASCII code numbers for manipulation and electronic transmission, the symbolic life of the human mind must learn to dwell in a new element.

To understand the implications of this new symbolic element is something we must begin to do, if only to make a start. And one way to start exploring the implications of the new electronic element is to reflect on the current efforts to make operative the online conference. By "online conference" I mean the discussions or symposia currently being planned and even now already in operation on a small scale in the United States and in Europe.

Such conferences are taking place between writers and editors living in different time zones in different parts of the world, as well as among business associates wishing to confer with one another in a business-like manner without the overhead of personal conversation and the small talk typically associated with telephone communication. But, more significantly, there are now plans to relocate the world of thought and scholarship into the new symbolic element. Scholars and researchers are just beginning to set up computer nodes to serve as meeting places for the semi-public discussion of ideas and research projects.

Such a project holds great promise as well as great peril. This is the theme I want to elaborate on here. I want first to show what kind of scholarly and research needs can be satisfied by online

discussions, and then I want to look briefly at the limitations such discussions will inevitably place on our ways of thinking and writing.

The Idea of Humanistic Discussion

From a certain perspective it seems improbable that the world of thought will make such an unlikely journey: from the private but printed letters of Renaissance Humanists to the patronage and protection of European and Russian courtly life; from the royal academies of nation states to the cafés and salons of Europe; from the scholarly and scientific journals of the early twentieth century to the electronic element of computerized texts. The terminal point of this journey seems all that much more unlikely when we look directly at the current use of computer communication. As Professor Harvey Wheeler of the Institute for Higher Studies at the University of California laments, what passes for communication today on computer networks resembles more the static-laden chit-chat of the Citizens Band radio than it does the profound and free intellectual flights of the symposia attended by Socrates and first written about by Plato.

Yet when we see Professor Richard Slatta at the University of North Carolina, along with many others, struggle to establish HumaNet and ScholarNet as online exchanges of thought and research in the humanities, we must pause to wonder whether the present level of communication, which does its best when chatting about computer compatibility or software glitches, is the sum total of what can be gotten for public life from the computer revolution. After all, the first writing in the form of Egyptian hieroglyphics was used not for the word of God but for the accounting records of grain producers and the laundry lists of Pharaohs. One way to see the promise of the new writing element is to consider the intellectual needs of rhetoric or public speech today.

There is a fresh concern for establishing new forms of communication in intellectual life today. As an example of what I mean, let me describe briefly one primary example of the new developments in intellectual interchange that are taking place today in Europe. What I describe is an example taken largely from the efforts to renovate one important movement in European philosophy, a movement known as "Phenomenology."

To put it in a nutshell, Phenomenology maintains that science and truth can only be built up through intellectual intuitions that are corroborated and confirmed "intersubjectively"--which is to say, through conversations and exchanges with others who are thinking and exploring the same or adjacent paths of research. This intersubjective verification (in German, "Ausweisung") is not to be confused with the experimental confirmation by which the results of one experimental hypothesis are reproduced and confirmed by another set of experiments conducted by other researchers. On the contrary, Phenomenology maintains that basic truths are not ultimately founded or established "out there" in the world of experiments. Truths are rather first viewed individually as evidential visions of a subject matter. Individual visions may later become paradigmatic for a science--to use Thomas Kuhn's terms--if they are confirmed or corroborated by the social nexus of fellow thinkers. Experiments are, in this view, only one small ingredient in the process of validating knowledge.

A philosophy of knowledge such as that of Phenomenology obviously appreciates the need for occasions when human communication can take place. And during its inception early in the twentieth century, Phenomenology had ample occasion to bring together thinkers who stimulated, inspired, and in various ways corroborated one another's thoughts. Edmund Husserl's students developed their work together in close ensemble, though they often went in diametrically opposite theoretical directions. Heeding Husserl's epistemological battle-cry "to [describe] the things themselves," they each found their own intellectual paths as they emerged to become the renowned Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, and Eugen Fink. Phenomenology not only argued for the epistemology of interactive confirmation (Ausweisung) but it became itself an instance of such intellectual ferment.

But things did not necessarily get better as Phenomenology grew and became an international movement, eventually even expanding to a major philosophical force in the United States. In fact, as the philosophy historian Herbert Spiegelberg points out:

"Time was when the Movement consisted merely of two open circles of advanced students and teachers at Göttingen and Munich in face-to-face solidarity, though not always in agreement with one another. This type of intimacy weakened after World War I as the Movement proliferated and became more and more impersonal. Increasingly, names and titles of books replaced personal knowledge of the members of the Movement and their work. This impersonalization was bound to grow with the internationalization of Phenomenology after World War II. The larger the Movement, the vaguer became the awareness and knowledge of other co-Phenomenologists."

In our time, Spiegelberg notes, the process of intersubjective verification has been lost in a vast and impersonal international profession of academic workers. Once thought was nurtured by a closely knit and informal groups of thinkers who became the origin of intellectual movement and of new ideas. Current conditions, and the so-called "knowledge explosion" have made such groups a mere memory of an idyllic and intimate past. As we are told, it is through specialization and through more powerful techniques that our knowledge will continue to advance. Or will it?

The Revival of Humanistic Discussion

There are still today some few who believe knowledge is founded upon personal human interaction, even interaction that is not based on shared specialties. There is one European thinker, in particular, who has championed the view that thinking in its most creative mode is thinking that freely crosses disciplines to make new connections. Ernesto Grassi is a renowned European scholar who has made a careful study of the thinkers of the Renaissance in Europe, especially as it is manifest in the writings of men like Salutati and Vico. Grassi is also one of the last remaining direct witnesses to the work of many of the early Phenomenologists. His work over the last fifty years is an attempt to recover the postulate of Phenomenological methodology--which he takes to be also the potent source of Renaissance thought, namely, the postulate that imaginative conversation is the ultimate matrix of all human knowledge.

Grassi's theoretical studies of the Renaissance and of Phenomenology have culminated in what is known in Europe as the "Zurich Discourses" or, in German, *Die Zürcher Gespräche*. The Discourses are Grassi's attempt to revive the practice of an intersubjective verification that goes beyond mere casual conversation. Twice a year, Grassi invites scholars from all over the world to participate for three days in an international symposium in which nearly all the specialized disciplines of intellectual life are represented, from economics, philosophy, medicine, empirical and social psychology, religious studies, linguistics, semiotics, economics, and anthropology, to mention but a few. The diversity of cognitive fields insures a representative sampling of the Babel of knowledge under current conditions. To make conversation possible, the group is limited to 25 or 30 members on each occasion.

Because of growing international interdependence in our time, Grassi maintains that humanistic conversation today, if it is to hold itself to the highest ideal of cognitive insight, must learn to be international. If an experiment be set up to foster imaginative links among diverse disciplines, it must be intrinsically intercultural. Besides the diversity of cognitive fields, there must also be present differences between the Occidental and Oriental cultures. The Zurich Discourses have, therefore, encouraged the participation of intellectuals from Japan and India, in keeping with the notion that the great difference between East and West must be recognized as a constantly felt

presence. And to further emphasize the international flavor, the Zurich Discourses take place--where else?--in Switzerland.

To make these meetings work, the schedule has to be tight without, however, destroying spontaneity through too much intense and prolonged exposure. The structure of the talks has some variation but there are always three main kinds of formal verbal interchange on each day of the meetings. There is a brief (half hour to forty-five minute) presentation by a speaker; discussion of the topic then takes place in small groups, with five or six members to a group; after an hour or two of discussion, the groups return and present summaries of their results in a plenum session where the original speaker may respond to questions or make comments on the proceedings. There are usually two or sometimes even three such cycles per day; at times, too, a speaker's presentation might be referred to as that of the main speaker, especially if the talk has broader import for the theory behind the Zurich Discourses, as when Grassi himself gives a presentation. Informally and throughout the three days, the participants dine together and in this way carry the discussion over from the formal meetings.

How does Grassi bring off such group discussions where Peirce scholars meet with medical doctors, Zen Buddhists with Hebrew theologians, Indian anthropologists with business analysts and literary critics? What Grassi learned from the Renaissance is that it is the imagination that plays the central role in cognitive discovery, especially in interactive cognitive discovery. So it is by the use of imaginative metaphors that Grassi organizes and stimulates the discussions. One of Grassi's key notions is the fundamental role of imaginative, metaphorical language, a way of speaking which cuts across areas of inquiry separated by literally different subject matters. It is precisely the literal turn of mind that has brought isolation and sterility to the current state of knowledge, according to Grassi. This primacy of metaphor is nowhere more evident than in the formulation of the particular topics around which each of the meetings is conducted. Following the rhetorical tradition he champions, Grassi organizes each of the talks around a single theme, a theme which is formulated and understood metaphorically. This knack for getting just the right formulation of a topic, for striking the right metaphor, is what classical rhetoricians once called the human skill of *inventio*.

Without going more into specifics, let me just say that the topics Grassi introduces attempt to preserve sufficient ambiguity as metaphors so as to be able to suggest thought-provoking problems germane to many areas of inquiry. The topics formulated must not only begin in ambiguity--as do all metaphors; they must also remain ambiguous, never becoming the terms of someone's metaphysical system or professional jargon. One example of conversational metaphor is the central topic of the 17th Zurich Discourses held in May 1985: "On Dealing with Borders." The notion of borders became the matrix for interdisciplinary conversation. One speaker began by talking about the special difficulties of borders in the profession of psychiatry. General categories of mental illness are continually called into question and lose their utility where the patient is found to be a "borderline case." Such cases sometimes manifest incompatible symptoms and in their strangeness challenge the conventional categories of "manic-depressive," "schizophrenic," and "psychotic." New concepts of the self, of selfhood, and loss of self in general can emerge when the borderline case is allowed to remain on the border and where the case is taken seriously as an individual occasion where something new may emerge. A detailed case history presented the material from which discussion and clarification followed. Another speaker addressed borders from the current philosophical movements that challenge the fixity of conceptual limits as promoted by traditional metaphysics; the tendency of metaphysics is to elaborate a set of oppositions and to think then within the borders of definitions ("de-fines" itself being a term from Latin denoting borders). The speaker invoked the Deconstruction model of Jacques Derrida and applied this contemporary philosophy provocatively to a religious painting of the Crucifixion, which was laid out in the middle of the floor at the center of the plenum as a kind of topical shock. This free-spirited presentation of the fluidity and even the limits of borders provoked the theologians. They responded and grappled with new understandings of religious truth. Questions were raised about nihilism and

about a degenerate notion of the freedom from limits. A great variety of sparks were elicited by the introduction of a single controlling metaphor, in this case that of borders.

What I am describing here in very brief fashion (a considerably larger monograph on "Grassi's Experiment" is cited in the bibliography) gives some notion of the novel work being done today to overcome the sterile isolation and overwhelming complexity of knowledge today. There are many attempts being made to bring humanistic tradition to bear on the knowledge explosion. (By "humanistic," I mean the view that knowledge is based ultimately on the personal imagination and on the creative enthusiasm of human individuals--not merely on the advance of automated systems.) Now what I want to suggest is how online symposia and conferences have certain qualities that can supplement the sort of conversational work Grassi proposes. I also want to suggest some of the wide-ranging theoretical problems that ensue from such approaches for creating new knowledge through computer interaction.

Possibilities and Perils of Online Discussions

When public language takes the form of computerized information, one of the apparent benefits arising from the transformation is that human interchange proceeds more directly than before. There is greater immediacy. Studies have shown that computerized writing is more on the order of an exchange of inner thoughts. Evidence for this is the "flaming" or bursts of uncensored feelings that are frequently found in computer-mediated communications. This means that the formality of telephone conversation, and even more of written or printed pages, is greatly diminished in the computer interface. Such immediacy suggests that what Grassi champions as humanistic insight through conversation might well find an appropriate habitat in the digital environment of computerized conferences. The flow of ideas that crosses over compartmentalized areas may well be facilitated by thoughtful computer transaction. The greater directness of computer texts can simulate something of the directness of conversation. Through the computer thought seems to come across like a flowing stream from mind to mind.

Another benefit for humanistic knowledge is that digital writing can be exchanged rapidly without the delays of the postal service and without the burden imposed by differences of time zones. Computerized conversations or symposia would not suffer the inconvenience and expense involved in transporting thinkers physically over several continents (the Zurich Discourses are sponsored by a wealthy German industrialist). Because digital writing can be transmitted via phone or satellite, there is the convenience of immediate access without, however, the need for different time-zone provisions or complex cross-checking of schedules. In this way, computerized writing provides a symposium atmosphere with a placeless or international quality. One is not limited to the discussants in one's own physical environment nor burdened by the demands of a more formal and more time-consuming medium. Communication time with its formalities is reduced by computerized exchanges.

Yet, as promised, I will have to bring up the other side of the coin to these benefits--a critical procedure that has been reinforced by humanistic traditions going back to the philosophers Socrates and Empedocles.

Charles Bowen, a well-known writer of books about online communication, confesses: "Working in this electronic void also has changed the way I interact with other human units--alas, not always for the better. My system works so well that sometimes I get quite testy when things go wrong. Equipment failures paralyze me with rage. Then, I watch myself becoming abrupt with an unexpected telephone call. If I don't catch myself, I get unreasonably cranky with my face-to-face answers to people. Most important, I have learned that the same words that are pithy and business-like in an electronic message come across as downright rude when spoken. What is missing is the measure of small talk with which we humans balance our personal communications." What Bowen here suggests is that immediacy and speed may curtail the very background warmth

of conversation against which humanistic discussion can take place. When Plato in the Dialogues of Socrates ranked Eros up along with Logos it was because, as an ancient Greek, he recognized the intrinsic connection of human emotion with the freedom of abstract thought. It may be that the austerity of computerized language will undermine the sense of spontaneous pleasure in human presence that seems necessary for creative humanistic interchange. The immediacy of information may militate against joint cognitive discoveries.

Likewise with the abridgement of time. Due to the acceleration of text production, and due to the lesser resistance provided by the new writing materials, there will probably be less gestation periods for thought. There may have been something essentially contemplative, meandering, musing, and deep about the medium of books and handwriting. With less gestation and more productivity, the thoughts that are exchanged may lack the imaginative connections and associations that many, including Grassi, attribute to genuine humanistic knowledge (as opposed to information). This melancholy possibility was evidenced recently in some remarks shared by two participants on the CompuServe computer network, on a thread of messages entitled "Liberal Arts & Computin." I reproduce here the exchange in unedited and complete form so as to give you evidence of some of the things I have been talking about:

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#: 70339 S0/Gen/New Uploads (N) 19-Jul-86 18:59:11
Sb: #70186-#Liberal Arts & Computin
Fm: Tom Nash 74676,3310
To: Elias Baumgarten 76167,1257 (X)

Elias, before December 1984, I gleefully considered myself a Luddite. Liberal Arts man, that's me. B.A. in English Lit, M.A. in Counseling and Human Development. My only experience with computers was a disaster in the Library of Congress trying to do a literature search, which occurred because I wouldn't read the instructions (still don't read the docs enough, those who forget history....). Then I bought a PCjr on a whim. I felt like someone born 50 years after Gutenberg who didn't know how to read. Since then I've become obsessed. I now own 3 machines: my jr, now built up to 640K and 2 drives, this Leading Edge with a 20 megger, and an Osborne 3, an MSDOS transportable, actually a Morrow Pivot/Zenith portable with only a 16 line screen, which I keep at work and take with me when I travel (still do things the different way... my powerful desktop with HD is at home, the little transportable is at work). Where does it end? I'm reading far fewer books, due to online time, but more writing, both personal and work-related. I guess I need to check out the Whole Earth SIG and see where the other Luddite turned compunerds are at.

-Tom

#: 70409 S8/Village Inn (N) 20-Jul-86 22:28:48
Sb: #70339-#Liberal Arts & Computin
Fm: Elias Baumgarten 76167,1257
To: [F0] Tom Nash 74676,3310

I found your message a classic one, worth saving. I don't think I've gone quite so far yet (only one computer, and I managed to get away to northern Scandinavia for five weeks with no thought of computers), but I do know the phenomenon very well. There isn't much on Whole Earth these days on the subject. I recently uploaded a short essay on DL3 of Whole Earth that deals with some of these issues, from the perspective of my Arctic trip. Try the keyword "ARCTIC" if you are interested (and I'd be interested in your reaction). I THINK it's ARCTIC.DOC. Basically I ask whether the increased options provided by the computer might actually be lessening our freedom and causing us to lose access to important kinds of conscious states. And here I am, "entering data" on the computer....

#: 70465 S8/Village Inn (N)
21-Jul-86 23:47:15 Sb: #70409-#Liberal Arts & Computin
Fm: Chuck Wright 72667,1316
To: [F0] Elias Baumgarten 76167,1257 (X)

I don't sing too many arias, but I'd like to put my two cents in for my alma mater as a noteworthy liberal arts college. Dartmouth, up in the Granite State. For some reason, after getting a couple 800's in math, I majored in English and graduated with a B-. After that, attended Columbia Law, Woodstock P.C.P., L.S.D., United Steel Workers, Seton Hall Law too many nights. Now gainfully employed as title counsel, happily married and proudly daughtered. Ran the Little League softball league this summer.

I don't often ponder whether computers encourage linear thinking, but I certainly don't have that problem. It might be hard to imagine Keats or Joyce at a keyboard, but they must have had desks at which they wrote, or finished, their works. Might they have appreciated something like Sidekick? Poetry, and perhaps all literature and drama, is surely linear. The vidtex, like all life, sometimes 'creeps on in this petty pace', and then 'the magical mystery tour is coming to take you away'. Left/right, up/down; does reflecting upon life impede its flow or make it run more smoothly? From my experience, periods of self-examination and cosmic reflection were seen in retrospect as something close to clinical depression; my happiest, most productive days were so busy that there was no time to wonder what I was doing, or why. They were right, and I knew it.

The liberal arts are much more about pain and suffering than joy (maybe that's why so many liberal arts majors are lawyers [flick cigar]). Romeo and Juliet, The Idiot, Ahab, Abraham...kill me a son. Perhaps it's because nobody needs to be told how to feel happy, or rather need a reason or explanation for it. The classics deal primarily with the demonstration of pain, and then often pose a way of surviving and, perhaps, making the most of it (Sit you down, father. Rest you.)

Liberal arts helps you live with life, to cope better, not just to think you're more educated than someone else. It gives you an idea of honor, and what's right, and wrong.

Dartmouth College has a fine liberal arts program, together with comprehensive computer capacity. Professor Kemeny was its President; he wrote BASIC. It has a lot of beer, too. Anybody who knows what this is about, raise your hand.

Two final thoughts: 1) Two paths verged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by; 2) And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

#: 70527 S8/Village Inn (N)
23-Jul-86 21:09:38 Sb: #70465-Liberal Arts & Computin
Fm: Elias Baumgarten 76167,1257
To: Chuck Wright 72667,1316

If one's happiest days are when one is so busy he has no time to reflect and reflecting on one's life leads to depression, then the culture which created such a state is not one I wish to live in. But I think this is for another forum which does not (yet) exist on CompuServe.

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This thread on "Liberal Arts & Computin" contains a mishmash of literary allusions with a concern to connect somehow the technological interface with the traditional liberal arts and sciences. The connection obviously fails on the personal level, and the liberal arts are conceived as academically separate from computer technology and from technology in general. As such, there is a melancholy about the nature of the liberal arts themselves, as if the free use of imagination were doomed to "the contemplation of pain" and "clinical depression." At the same time, the technology itself, in its evident use, has failed to rise to anything like the heights of the human spirit and imagination. It is not just the liberal arts that seem to fail but technology itself. (Of course, there are those who would absolve themselves of all cultural responsibility by proclaiming that technologies cannot fail but only those who use them. This distinction neatly avoids the cultural embedding of the procedures and results of scientific thought.)

One of the points of this paper is to suggest that the traditional liberal arts are being transformed by an examination of the rhetorical basis of knowledge in general, including scientific knowledge. If rhetorical theory proceeds with Grassi's kind of experiments, in an effort to cross-fertilize isolated cognitive domains, then, we must continue to reflect on the potential and perils of the computer interface, for here the liberal arts of public writing and speaking meet the culmination of our science. Such a meeting is not done so much through awkward references to traditional poetry and literature, but through an understanding of the power of the imagination for developing and deepening the interface itself. Grassi's experiment is but one example of the genuine efforts to set anew the task of liberal education--not by turning toward an exclusive concern with pain and suffering but by drawing on traditional sources in ways that meet the new conditions. The self-examination of the liberal arts today means not the self-indulgence of clinical depression but the daring question of how the computer interface can liberate human beings to new flights of creative thought. And the question of the technologists today is not a technical one, but is rather: Now that we have made it, how shall we make use of this computer in liberating the energies of human beings?

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