Data and Identity: Notes Toward a Theology of the Digitally Enhanced Self

Michael J. Paulus, Jr.
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Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions by A Square
[Edwin Abbott]
London, 1884
A ROMANCE OF MANY DIMENSIONS

By A Square

The Sphere with his section at full size.

The Sphere rising.

The Sphere on the point of vanishing my eye.
Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions

*Edwin Abbott Abbott*

Multiple Editions

OVERALL RANK 3,662  APPEARANCES 409  SCORE 27

Syllabi by Field

130 Mathematics  63 English Literature  41 Education
28 Philosophy  22 Theology  15 Physics  9 Anthropology
9 Fine Arts  9 Political Science  8 Sociology
A new land called digital?

Stranger from the third dimension: “all that you speak of as SOLID (by which you mean ‘enclosed on four sides’), your houses, your churches, your very chests and safes, yes even your insides and stomachs, all [lie] open and exposed to my view.”
A new dimension called digital?

 Stranger from the digital dimension: “all that you speak of as SOLID (by which you mean ‘defined by physical limits’), your houses, your churches, your very chests and safes, yes even your insides and stomachs, all [lie] open and exposed to my view.”
Our revolutionary moment

• *Digital Transformation* by Thomas Siebel (2019)
• *The Fourth Age* by Bryon Reese (2018)
• *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* by Klaus Schwab (2016)
• *The Fourth Revolution* by Luciano Floridi (2016)
I. Information abstraction (~100,000 years ago)

II. Information agencies (~10,000 years ago)

III. Information artifacts (~5,000 years ago)

IV. Information automation (~100 years ago)
“While data has always been important to society, it has never played the role it does today ... every aspect of human life is fueled by data. ...

“With artificial intelligence, we’re doing more with data than ever before.”
A new data-centric branch of ethics

• **Data** (including generation, recording, curation, processing, dissemination, sharing, and use)

• **Algorithms** (including AI, artificial agents, ML, and robots)

• **Corresponding practices** (including responsible innovation, programming, hacking, and professional codes)

—Floridi and Mariarosaria Taddeo, “What is Data Ethics?,” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A* 374 (2016)
Evolution of privacy rights

1. Freedom from physical intrusion into personal property or other private spaces—the right to be left alone

2. Freedom from interference into one’s personal affairs—privacy connected with access to one’s body, thoughts, behaviors, and communications
3. Informational privacy: Ability to access and control personal information, including:

- information collection: surveillance
- information processing: aggregation, identification, security, secondary use
- information dissemination: confidentiality, disclosure, exposure, accessibility, appropriation, distortion
- information invasion: intrusion, decisional interference
Data and identity

• Identity: who we are, who we think we are, who others think we are

• Data about us shapes all of these: our social self, self-conception, and personal identities

• Data is part of our more porous, digitally extended selves
What Would It Mean for Humans to Become Data?

*Years and Years'* transhumanist character demonstrates the conundrum posed by merging human and machine.

By JOELLE RENSTROM

JULY 30, 2019 • 7:30 AM
We are data and information

Life 2.0: update software
Life 3.0: update hardware
Enhancement as augmentation

Alternatives to uploads: cyborgs and inforgs
Enhancement as amputation

- Scanned and simulated brains
- Gain “amortality” or “death after death” in Bitworld
- Digital afterlife more like a digital library
Theological responses

- Protological: original creation
- Incarnational: person and work of Christ
- Eschatological: teleological transformation
Information revolutions and revelations

I. Information abstraction
   (~100,000 years ago)

II. Information agencies
    (~10,000 years ago)

III. Information artifacts
     (~5,000 years ago)

IV. Information automation
    (~100 years ago)
The Apocalyptic City New Jerusalem

- Our ultimate *telos*
- The cosmic scope of the incarnation
- Our creative, relational, contemplative nature
The digital and apocalyptic dimensions: new creations and new creation
Questions? Critiques?

Digital extensions:

• Twitter: @mjpaulusjr

• Digital Wisdom blog at Patheos:
  https://www.patheos.com/blogs/digitalwisdom/

• Website: http://michaelpaulus.org