1-1-1993

Certain Angelic Characteristics of Computers

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CERTAIN ANGELIC CHARACTERISTICS IN COMPUTERS

I suppose I should start with a little background information: I am at present a professor of philosophy. To fulfill the requirements for my Master's degree during the sixties, I wrote a Master's Thesis on medieval angelology. In the early seventies, with a still-recent Ph.D. in hand, I revised that thesis and submitted it for publication. It was accepted very quickly by the publisher, who mentioned that he was impressed by the fact that this was uncharted area, and he had nothing on his "lists" on the subject. Since that time, I have published a few articles on the subject; but my interests, as often happens with people in my field, have taken a different direction. But some recent online bulletin board exchanges revived some speculative memories connected with that earlier work.

Here's how it happened: I was browsing through some BBS messages last month, looking for some information on DOS 5.0, and happened to notice some headings on "COMPUTER ADDICTION." This topic was a bit peripheral to my search objectives, but I couldn't resist exploring this novel addiction to find out what it was all about. I discovered that, no, it had nothing to do with addiction to video games and the like. The "addicts" in this case turned out to be a group of apparently mature adults who were "turned on" by computers, found very little sympathy for discussing computers at their place of work or among their usual friends or family, and just got together via bulletin boards to discuss hard drives, upgrades, utilities, LIM, LANS, operating systems, caches, memory and memory managers, etc. -- enough to turn off anybody's

"normal" spouse, don't you think?

My thoughts then went back to the time a couple years ago when the Dean of our College of Arts & Sciences was bemoaning the fact that he was losing some promising faculty to a disease he called "computerosis" —— a disease which allegedly hits certain scholars, who begin with the best of intentions using a computer to complete some scholarly project, but then get so fascinated with what computers can do that they get involved in endless tinkering and experimentation and lose sight of their original goals. I tried to ignore the little shudder of guilt I felt at hearing this. Could it be possible that the Dean has had his efficiency experts checking on me? Is he perhaps aware of those hours I spent learning to make special fonts that I would never be able to use in teaching or writing, or does he know about the days I spent fiddling with different parameters of PCKWIK and QEMM, trying to get them maximize memory and speed and avoid "exception 13s", or the time I went through all those benchmark programs I downloaded from bulletin boards?.... No, why should I feel guilty? These are just sidelines. I still did my work. He must be thinking of someone else.... I started to think of Professor X, and Professor Y, who have "gone off the deep end" in this way. Surely I have avoided the siren songs of temptation....

I suspect that my colleagues the psychologists on the other side of the campus have never researched this purported addiction with proper reduplicable methodology and control groups. If there are people afflicted with such a lamentable disease as computerosis, what might be the sources of attraction that could bring it about?

As I thought about this, I began to realize that many of the sources I turned up were precisely the sort of qualities that fascinated medieval metaphysicians like Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Suarez, and led them to produce their classical angelologies. The parallels began to jump out at me as I considered five sources of attraction:

■*Speed*, first and foremost. It never ceases to amaze a bookish person like myself with a 386/25 clone that I can index a thousand words with page numbers and update cross-references for a 350-page manuscript in a matter of minutes using Word Perfect's "generate" command, or transfer about 20,000 pages of text precisely from one subdirectory to another in minutes with Norton Backup. But isn't this the same sort of thing that fascinated the medieval metaphysicians about angels? The angelic mind was differentiated from the human mind insofar as it did not have to go through any laborious temporal transitions in thought processes. Everything was speeded up to such an extent in angelic cognition that, for all practical purposes, thought processes were instantaneous. Their speed was sometimes compared to the swiftness a light -- a particularly meaningful comparison for us who live in the era of electronics.

■*Multitasking*. This more recent advance in computer technology certainly constitutes another source of fascination for potential addicts. The machine that you are using may be engaged in transferring data through a modem, while at the same

time you are doing a search with Magellan or updating the records in your database. Of course there is a somewhat mechanical element in multitasking because of the "tics" —— e.g., 3 tics allocated to the background window, 3 tics for the foreground. But the tics are ticking at such a speed that they are undetectable by ordinary human sensibilities; so the illusion of actually doing several things at once remains. The medievals were not able to multitask in this way, but they contemplated multitasking possibilities in their metaphysical angelologies. They were no doubt influenced to some extent by the biblical description of angels with eyes going in every direction (*Revelations* 4:6). Every angel, they theorized, is continuously engaged in the "beatific vision" (contemplating the perfections of God) —— what in computereze is called the "foreground" task; but is also at the same time engaged in numerous "background" applications —— guarding individuals and cities, transmitting good inspirations to consciences, helping the dying to make their transition to the afterlife, etc.

　　■*Instant communication:* All one needs for relatively instant communication is a modem, or a network connection. No stamps, no posting, no air mail delivery necessary. Just type in the e-mail address and send your file. Even IBMs and Macs, which were not on speaking terms for a long while, can now communicate via networking or automatic conversion programs. At great distances, time seems to collapse. In a few hours, someone in England or Germany has received your message relayed by CUNY, and you have a response. Angelic communication, in the estimation of medievals, was even faster —— what we might designate as an instantaneous readout. No messy vocalizations or laborious translations were necessary. It was simply a matter of redirection of the will. An angel would just will that a certain thought be transmitted to another angel, and it was done. I read in a computer magazine some time ago that some of the more radical programmers are trying to work out ways to activate programs by mental/emotional signals, without keyboards. But this emulation of angelic communication seems a long way off, don't you think?

　　■Massive *storage capacities* of hard disks, tapes and CD rom. This is possibly another contributing cause of computerosis. My 85-megabyte hard disk allows me to store multiple volumes of electronic text editions of philosophical works; and ample conventional memory (pacé those continual complaints about the "640K barrier") lets me access desired references almost instantaneously with Word Cruncher. I think back on my laborious life as a graduate student in the 60s, when, having forgotten to take down the page number for an essential quote I wanted to use, I would spend the good part of a day trying to track it down, sometimes unsuccessfully. (The present generation of grad students has no excuse for not attaining greatness —— at least no excuse based on material impediments.)

　　■*Downward Compatibility:* Finally, I would mention the downward compatibility that enables more advanced operating systems or utilities or spreadsheet programs or video cards to do everything that earlier and more primitive versions could do. Rumor

has it that the downward compatibility of DOS may cease after version 5.0. But up to the present the downward compatibility of new versions of software gives the impression of never-ending progress toward greater speed and more powerful programs continually improved by upgrading. Downward compatibility is also one of the esoteric qualities (little known now, but widely accepted among medieval metaphysicians) of the angelic hierarchies. The basic idea was that there was a gradual increase in knowledge, power and love as you ascend up the angelic hierarchies from angels and archangels on the lowest echelons up to cherubim, seraphim, etc. on the higher levels. But the higher orders were not limited in the way, say, that higher administrative echelons are limited among humans (e.g. the President is does not necessarily have good senatorial qualities, a school administrator is not necessarily a good teacher, an editor is not necessarily a good writer). In fact, every angel of the higher order can do everything that his subordinates can do and do it better —— although for practical reasons he may not choose to exercise all these powers. The highest angels integrate all the perfections of the lower orders. (On the level of computers, it would be something like a DOS 10.0 or OS3 which included powerful integrated software and utilities, put itself up into expanded memory as you booted up, and maybe even made intelligent guesses as to what you wanted to do and when.)

Scholastic metaphysicians are sometimes criticized for wasting so much time calculating how many angels might be able to dance on the head of a pin, arguing about how good and evil angels manipulate human imaginations, etc. Vacuous pursuits, perhaps. But they had time to spare. They didn't have to beta-test new software or coordinate peripherals with system requirements. It was a more leisurely era.