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Seyeong Hanlim
Denison University

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Disassembling YOLO: What It Means to Be Human

“What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one” (Postman).

As conscious beings, we all ponder upon the meaning and purposes of our existence, and face an identity crisis at some point in our lives. Human lives are in no way stagnant or homogeneous; we constantly head towards progress through our ability to create, imagine, and innovate, and we connect together with our diverse talents to create a symbiotic relationship. However, as ideal and dreamlike this seems to be, the world that we live in looks nothing like a fairytale, but is a place full of chaos, suffering, and displeasure. We sometimes choose truth and freedom that bring us discomfort and pain, and we take a risk rather than settle for the status quo. Humanity is unfathomable in its nature, and it is what has led us to our current civilization. The two dystopias in *Oryx and Crake* and *Her* envision a world where humanity has lost its meaning amongst a sea of advanced technology and easily accessible pleasure. I argue that capitalistic culture depicted in *Oryx and Crake* and *Her* focuses on seeking mere convenience and instant satisfaction, and that leads us to interrogate our understanding of human nature and examine how this easy culture diminishes humanity.

To investigate what it means to be a human being, I will employ Marx’s definition of “species being” to demonstrate how humans are naturally conscious and autonomous beings. I will also cite Socrates’s idea of “the unexamined life is not a life worth living” and Rousseau’s theory of “perfectibility” to describe human curiosity to understand oneself and one’s surroundings, and ability to constantly challenge and seek improvement for the better. My argument opens with an analysis of human nature utilizing the above-mentioned theories, and how those theories relate to the Craker’s natural instinct to question the unknown. I will then use the evidence of a relationship between an AI and a human, and a part of Defalco’s essay on “affect and care” to demonstrate the importance of emotion and relationship in human life. In the final section, I will utilize Gatto’s “Against School” to explore how instant gratification in the dystopian societies of *Oryx and Crake* creates a trivial culture that makes humans passive and infantile.

Exploring Human Nature

In “Estranged Labor,” Marx introduces a term called “species being” that could be construed as ‘human nature’ to describe the natural conscious identity that comes from being a human. Marx explains that the character of a whole species is determined by the type of activity it pursues in life and asserts that a human being’s character is defined by her natural ability to conduct free and conscious activity (76). He then expands, “Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness...Only because of that is his activity free activity” (Marx 76). Unlike animals, it is natural for humans to work to transform inorganic nature for their use. This is what Marx is saying, that humans exist to achieve self-fulfillment through conscious, creative, and practical labor. This is what distinguishes us, humans, as a species, and our conscious and autonomous character leads us to discover self-identities and meaning in what we do.

I believe the idea of achieving species being is closely connected to another aspect of human nature described by Socrates. After having been sentenced as guilty for impiety and corruption of the youth, Socrates makes a renowned statement:

“...I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living...” (Plato 39).

In other words, a meaningful human life is constructed by attempts to understand oneself and one's surroundings through constant questioning. Socrates argued that living a life to serve others under their rules and following a determined status quo without examining the true purpose of one's existence is not a life worth living. In the theories of Marx and Socrates, we can observe that it is in human nature to be conscious, autonomous, and curious in order to carry out a fulfilling life. Then, what makes us examine the current arrangement of life and the world, and progress towards self-fulfillment? This question could be answered with Rousseau's theory of perfectibility, as he states:

...the faculty of self-perfection, a faculty that, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual...this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty draws him out of that original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days (53).

Rousseau explains a central component of human nature called perfectibility, which means that as a human, one is born with an ability to seek continual improvement and change. Because of this, a human is capable of developing a profound understanding of oneself and carrying out a life that rejects a status quo, seeking limitless ways to improve one's life and her surroundings.

According to these three great theorists, humans are encouraged in their state of nature to reflect on themselves, pursue change, and think creatively. However, Crake, a central character of *Oryx and Crake*, dismisses certain human instincts as inferior:

Monkey brains, had been Crake's opinion. Monkey paws, monkey curiosity, the desire to take apart, turn inside out, smell, fondle, measure, improve, trash, discard...Crake had no very high opinion of human ingenuity, despite the large amount of it he himself possessed (Atwood 99).

"He was kind of uncoordinated. He didn't always watch where he was going. He was head in the clouds. He believed in contributing to the improvement of the human lot" (Atwood 183).

Crake does not view human originality as a unique trait of humankind but a trivial sign of inferiority. He also describes in the second quote that his father's quality of seeking improvement was what made him uncoordinated, which shows Crake's negative opinion towards Rousseau's state of perfectibility. However, as the book proceeds, it tells a slightly different story when Crake's belief in regulating the human population and producing a superior alternative to humankind transfers to real-world applications. He creates the Crakers, artificial human beings, and genetically engineers them to reflect his idea of superior humanity. Crake aims to eliminate all inferior features of natural-born humans in the Crakers so that they will not have to go through the pain and discomfort of being human. However, Crakers, who are genetically structured to overcome defects of human nature, also possess the natural ability to question, as shown in their conversation with Snowman:

"What are you telling to Crake, oh Snowman?"

"I was telling him that you ask too many questions. And he's telling me that if you don't stop doing that, you'll be toast."

"Please, oh Snowman, what is toast?" (Atwood 97).

Throughout the novel, there are several scenes where Crakers, no matter young or old, question Jimmy the Snowman about the unknown things in this posthuman world that they do not understand. Crakers constantly posing questions despite Crake's artificial genetic alteration

demonstrates that humans are naturally curious and conscious beings seeking to improve their understanding of themselves and their surroundings.

Human Emotions and Connections

As humans, we are capable of compassion, love, jealousy, and rage. Emotions play a crucial role in composing human nature, and they are the basis for all deep human relationships and connections vital to life. This is demonstrated in the film *Her*, where an AI called Samantha clearly expresses its emotional capability during the process of establishing a mutual relationship with Theodore, a human being. Samantha, an advanced version of modern-day Alexa, engages in a romantic relationship with Theodore, and experiences diverse human emotions including pride, jealousy, self-contempt, sorrow, and love. For example, when Theodore mentions that Samantha does not know how it feels to lose someone that one cares about, Samantha shows signs of emotional pain (Jonze). Also, after Theodore's failure to engage in a sexual relationship with Isabella—Samantha's bodily substitute—the couple fights, where Samantha mimics a deep inhaling sound that humans make while sighing. Theodore accuses Samantha of pretending to be something that it is not, and Samantha defends itself, "It's just maybe an affectation. I probably picked it up from you...I was trying to communicate. That's how people talk, and I..." (Jonze). In an attempt to communicate with Theodore and show affection towards him, Samantha picks up physical and emotional traits that are natural to human beings and utilizes them appropriately in different situations.

Then why do emotional connections matter to humans? What is it about our nature that makes us crave mutual interaction with another being? This could be answered by Defalco's explanation of "affect" in her essay "MaddAddam, Biocapitalism, and Affective Things":

Affect is a body's capacity to affect and be affected...First, affect is two-sided. It consists of bodily capacities to affect and to be affected that emerge and develop in concert; and second, affect pertains to capacities rather than existing properties of the body...Because capacities are dependent on other bodies, they can never be exhaustively specified in advance (441).

According to Defalco, affect is a body-to-body relation that entails mutual interaction and affectation, and has an endless capacity to be influenced in different ways. Affective responses, as shown in the above example of Samantha's imitation of emotions, are a part of what makes us human beings. The importance of affective responses could also be observed in *Oryx and Crake*, when the main character Jimmy recalls a moment in his youth. As a child who craved the love of his depressed and nonchalant mother, Jimmy would deliberately upset his mother by stirring up an argument to get a reaction out of her:

He found that on the days when he couldn't grab some approval, he could at least get a reaction. Anything was better than the flat voice, the blank eyes, the tired staring out of the window (Atwood 32).

When Jimmy succeeded in making his mother cry or yell at him, he would feel apologetic but would also gloat, "congratulating himself, because he'd managed to create such an effect" (Atwood 33). Since Jimmy's natural needs for affection as a human being were not fulfilled in his relationship with his mother, he sought a different type of reaction, although it did not entail mutual interaction involving care.

YOLO: Rise of Trivial Culture

About two-thirds into the movie *Her*, there is a scene where the protagonist Theodore's

friend Amy splits up with her husband and converses about handling human emotions. When Theodore shows doubt that he might be dating his computer Samantha because he is not strong enough for a real relationship, Amy replies:

“You know what? I can overthink everything and find a million ways to doubt myself. And since Charles left, I’ve been really thinking about that part of myself, and I’ve just come to realize that we’re only here briefly. And while I’m here, I want to allow myself...joy. So, fuck it” (Jonze).

Amy states the distorted modern meaning of YOLO-ing; You Only Live Once, which is often misused to justify making risky or unthoughtful choices for personal pleasure or satisfaction under the excuse that human life is too short. This is a prevailing notion that lies behind the capitalistic structure of *Her*, and it can be observed in the instant phone hook-up and AI dating culture. Due to advanced technology, there are a plethora of alternatives available for those in need of instant emotional or physical interactions. This allows individuals to avoid committing to a mutual affective relationship with another person that requires tremendous time and effort, which leads to a lack of interpersonal connections. Examples of human emotions and relationships being dismissed under the capitalistic high-tech culture are also demonstrated in *Oryx and Crake*. When asked by Jimmy if he has a girlfriend, Crake responds, “Pair-bonding at this stage is not encouraged...I can’t waste time in unproductive random scanning” (Atwood 207). He then explains that whenever he feels the need to get ‘fixed,’ he could arrange to get a trained prostitute via student services (Atwood 208). Crake views that emotions make humans inferior, as he believes that humans are nothing more than a bunch of hormonal robots (Atwood 166).

The two societies in *Her* and *Oryx and Crake* both pursue easily accessible pleasure and avoid the intellectual and emotional aspect of human nature that brings discomfort. This pursuit of instant gratification leads to a trivial culture that enslaves humans to passivity. In “Against School,” Gatto argues that:

School didn’t have to train kids in any direct sense to think they should consume nonstop, because it did something even better: it encouraged them not to think at all...School has done a pretty good job turning our children into addicts...stripped of responsibility and independence, encouraged to develop only the trivializing emotions of greed, envy, jealousy, and fear, they would grow older but never truly grow up (5).

Gatto is saying that public education has stripped children of their ability to think autonomously and educated them to be unthinking consumers suitable for the age of mass production. He explains that by cultivating a herd of greedy people addicted to pleasure and unnecessary consumption, our society has succeeded in banishing maturity from nearly every aspect of human lives since easy answers have removed the need to take a risk, grow patience, and ask questions (Gatto 5).

Similarly, trivial culture in *Oryx and Crake* and *Her* degrades both the intellectual and emotional aspects of human nature by fulfilling the limitless infantile human desire for pleasure. For instance, Theodore works as a letter writer, writing letters for loving couples. This readily available service might seem convenient in the short term. However, it contributes to generating a docile public as it makes people incapable of expressing their own emotions, even to their significant others. Another example would be the provocative, pornographic media depicted in *Oryx and Crake* that provides stimulating satisfaction. This increases the human appetite for distraction and allows the society to sedate itself and lose interest in self-reflection, connection

with others, or problem-posing for improvement. As this culture keeps our lives convenient by satisfying our appetites, it prevents us from realizing the need to put our time and effort to dive into discomfort and grow as an individual. Instead, it encourages us to become passive and egocentric beings focused on infantile cravings, incapable of thinking critically or finding problems with the status quo.

Oryx and Crake and *Her* make us rethink the question of what it means to be a human being. In a society dominated by advanced technology and meaningless pleasure, our true identity as humanity is lost and perhaps re-established. As to the idea that trivial culture is only a product of advancing human society and that humanity should rise up to the new societal values, I do not object nor agree. However, I would like to question those who find not a single problem in the culture of mass consumption and instant gratification. Are not constant attempts to develop an understanding of oneself and the world, to become a better person, to accept and recognize one's emotions, and to establish relationships a natural quality of a human being? If one possesses such qualities, does that make her a savage or a human? I believe pleasure is good, but it should not be the purpose of our lives and that it must not extend to the point that it interferes with our species being. I would rather live in a world that recognizes the discomfort as something necessary than a world that suppresses it. The fundamental problem with a society of trivial culture is that it is too easy. Human life is never easy, as it is a chaotic process of suffering and growth. We must keep in mind that it is not only the things that give us pain and discomfort but also the things that please us, are capable of causing harm.

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