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Cultivating the worshipful self in an algorithmic age: Reflections on an Asadian conclusion

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In a recent book, *Secular Translations: Nation State, Modern State and Calculative Reason,* Talal Asad is concerned with how the language of calculation and abstraction, inaugurated by modernity and accelerated by our current algorithmic reality, erodes the language of cultivated embodiment typical of religious worldviews and the virtues that such embodiment seeks to develop. These languages are predicated upon and cultivate different types of selves that are fundamentally at variance with each other. It is not that that one cannot cultivate the worshipful, virtuous self in our algorithmic reality, but Asad's pessimistic conclusion is that the conditions for such cultivation are being made increasingly difficult as we seemingly hasten towards a posthuman future. Asad here echoes thinkers such as Leon Kass and Michael Sandel who have also expressed disquiet about the loss of cultivated embodiment in such a future, but in an important meta sense, he goes beyond them by interrogating the underlying language we use to frame our discussions in this area. The purpose of this article is to bring an awareness to this Asadian argument, which, I believe, should at the very least give us some pause for thought as technology plunges us into new and unknowing horizons.

Contribution: Despite the many laudable accomplishments of modernity in the techno-scientific sphere, vital questions remain about its ability to bring about overall human flourishing. Among others, the thought of Talal Asad provides a way to think about why the promised potential of modernity in this regard has not been realised and, concomitantly, why traditional, embodied teachings of religion continue to be critical in thinking about the future.

Keywords: Talal Asad; Leon Kass; Michael Sandel; embodiment; abstraction; virtues; tradition; algorithmic reality; Brain Machine interface.

Introduction

In his 2018 book, *Secular Translations: Nation State, Modern Self and Calculative Reason*, anthropologist Talal Asad comes to a rather pessimistic conclusion about the space for the cultivation of the pious self in a reality increasingly dominated by numbers. Such cultivation, according to Asad, is integrally connected to the notion of the embodied subject belonging to a discursive tradition, that is, a tradition that teaches the body how to become a particular self.[1] Cultivated embodiment means seeking to translate into the sensible body the virtues imbied by such a tradition. The mathematising impulse of our global neoliberal, secular context is, on the contrary, underpinned by abstraction. Abstraction means engaging life, not in the sense-driven manner cultivated by tradition, but by abstracting thought from feeling, leaving life to be interpreted through figures and numbers. The two trajectories produce different, often mutually antagonistic, sets of desires, effects and aspirations, with calculative rationality tending to erode the domain of discursive tradition. Thus, for Asad, the rise of our new algorithmic reality, with its attendant possibilities of the cyborg citizen, simply means the intensification of abstraction and the further constriction of cultivated embodiment. In this emerging reality, life is simply to be treated as calculable information, rather than a way of cultivating the self, thus undermining the very sense of discursive tradition.

The purpose of this article is to bring an awareness to this Asadian argument and to assess whether it is justified. After providing some context to the thought of Asad as well as linking his ideas on posthumanism to a broader bioconservative tradition, the article proceeds by further fleshing out his notions of embodiment and abstraction and the languages of which they are part before providing an assessment that shows how Asad's thoughts contribute to that tradition at a

1. Asad (2020a:403ff.) follows Wittgenstein closely here. A way or form of life is one where practices conjoin with particular beliefs, habits and desires to produce the aspired to self. But actual practice (or embodiment) is crucial here because it is only through practice (or participant observation for a researcher) that a form of life can be genuinely grasped and understood, rather than being treated merely as a source of information.

meta-level. My own conclusion is that Asad raises various valid concerns about the language of calculation undergirding our current technological trajectory that should, at the very least, temper our optimism about our future. Far from being a Luddite[2] rant that refuses to acknowledge the inevitable, I believe that Asad's argument brings to the fore important questions that need to be raised about the price we pay (the narrowing scope of traditional forms of embodiment) for our 'progress'.

On Asad, virtue and posthumanism

Asad (1932-), an anthropologist, is well known for his excavation of the Enlightenment concept of 'religion', which helped alert us to the fact that as a concept (as distinct from lived religions), it is of fairly recent historical vintage whose purpose was to help the emerging modern, secular state to organise society in specific ways.[3] The concept of religion was here abstracted from actual religious lives in order to help form such an organising principle. Yet, an equally crucial dimension to his thought is how, especially before the hegemony of abstracted 'religion', selves were and are cultivated by 'religions'. In other words, how are virtuous selves traditionally cultivated? And, how does such a self playoff against the rationalist, calculating self fostered by modernity? These are central themes in Asad's thought.

For Asad, practice is essential to the cultivation of virtue. Like one of his intellectual influences, MacIntyre (1984), Asad was a disaffected Marxist who eventually turned to the examination of virtue within religious traditions. Both of them were in turn influenced by the later Wittgenstein (Asad profoundly so) whose focus was on notions of use and practice (Wittgenstein 1953). Such practice occurs within a form of life (a Wittgensteinian concept), which refers to the way human beings think, behave, speak and interact. Religious traditions are fields in which particular, self-conscious forms of life are cultivated with the goal typically being human flourishing through the development of virtues. Thus, the day-to-day texture of religious life has a reason that comes to the fore through practice. In fact, the formative influence on Asad's thinking was his mother, a Bedouin from Saudi Arabia, whose simple religiosity based on repeated practice inspired him to look at religious life as having its own rationale that was an outcome of such practice, not simply belief based on authority (Asad 2020b). In Asad then, religious practice or embodiment constitutes an alternative *logic* to the logic of calculation and abstraction inaugurated by the modern state. It is against this background that one should view Asad's trepidation about posthumanism –

namely, the technological augmentation of human beings – the algorithmic basis of which further accelerates calculation and abstraction while undermining embodiment as it has traditionally been conceived.[4]

One may ask what justifies Asad to see the modern state as based on calculation and abstraction? After all, we are still talking in terms of modernity about individual human beings living textured lives that cannot be captured by abstraction. This is an important observation, and Asad is not saying that there is no embodiment in such a scenario. On the contrary, there is a secular embodiment as modernity structures new norms, desires, habits and sets of practices. Modernity is also a form of life after all. But this structuring, in contrast to a religious form of life, is not self-consciously cultivated and the setting of particular norms of human flourishing in such a scenario is more fluid and elusive. It is also difficult to realise how we become structured in such a scenario because the secular 'is the water we swim in' (Hirschkind 2010). And what Asad is saying is that this structuring, unlike the structuring that drives religious embodiment, is propelled by the force of calculation and abstraction that is the hallmark of modernity. In this regard, his quotation from Max Weber's 'Science as a vocation' is significant as it resonates with Asad's view of the central role of calculation (and consequently abstraction) in modernity. Asad (2018) quotes Weber as follows regarding the epistemological basis of secularisation:

> [T]he knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it [*knowledge of the world*] at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualisation means. (p. 15)

Thus, secularity is primarily a mindset, the belief that all is calculable, which in turn drives new practices, that is, new types of embodiment that, through its hegemony, attenuates more traditional and religious forms of life. When we speak about abstraction as distinct from cultivated embodiment, we are then talking about embodiment in its secular sense as distinguished from embodiment in its typical religious sense.

The heightened attenuation of a religious embodiment given emerging technological developments regarding human augmentation was already pointed out by scholars such as Michael Sandel and Leon Kass in the early 2000s. Their approach, often called bio-conservative, typically sets itself against the optimism regarding these technologies typical of the so-called techno-progressives.

2.Asad himself is aware that opponents to his position, or other similar positions, may class him as such. Thus, he quotes James Hughes, author of Citizen Cyborg, as labelling those who oppose machine-human mergers as 'bio-Luddites' (Asad 2018:145). But in my reading of Asad, he is not interested in opposing such developments per se; rather, his work is focused on interrogating the framework of thought, sensibilities and, subsequently, acting which naturalises such developments. Attention to this framework may help explain why things are the way they are, what has been gained through this framework and what has been lost through it. Asad's attitude may be more properly described, I think, as one of solicitude rather than vexation.

3.Refer to the work by Asad (1993) and Asad (2003), the first book looking at 'religion' and the second at the 'secular', but making it clear how these concepts are enmeshed with each other.

4.Technically, transhumanism is the augmenting of natural human capabilities through technology (the stage we are at); but there is a straight line from this to a posthuman future (where humans become integrated with machines) (Lamola 2020:6) As Lamola neatly says, the advocates of a posthuman future 'have fetishized technology into a salvific (soteriological) means for the perfection of human ontology' (Lamola 2020:3).

Kass, for example, sets his sights on what was very topical for that time, namely, gene screening and gene therapy, cloning, performance-enhancing substances, stem cell-based regenerative medicine and psychotropic medication. His concern was that these then emerging techniques and powers would produce new, problematic desires and erode older tried and trusted ways of human flourishing, leading to unintended consequences (Kass 2003:9–28). For Kass, the root of the disquiet regarding augmentation is to be found in how we understand human nature, both with regard to the types of ends which foster human flourishing as well as with regard to the means we use in achieving these. These work in tandem: mastery of the means entails knowing what goodness means. Simply to master means, such as in scientific mastery, without thinking through what goodness truly means, is not mastery at all. The ends in this case become, in reality, the whims, impulses and feelings of the controller of the means. Kass writes: 'To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, what looks like man's mastery of nature turns out, in the absence of guiding knowledge, to be nature's mastery of man' (Kass 2003:18).

This is an important point and is echoed by Asad's notion of *cultivated* embodiment typical of religions. In contrast, the *de facto* embodiment inaugurated by the dominance of science does not appear to have specific human flourishing in view other than the broad goal of 'progress' generated purely by our awe of the means, namely, the seeming success of scientific techniques.

What then, for Kass, are the kinds of ends – the guiding knowledge – that challenge a hubristic approach to means? For him, these ends are tied to the recognition that the 'naturalness' of means is integral to an act. Through practice, training or study, the subject senses the connection between the act (of studying, for example) and the resulting improvement. This connection is, in Kass's terms, intelligible and experiential: 'We can see how confronting fearful things might eventually enable us to cope with our fears. We can see how curbing our appetites can produce self-command' (Kass 2003:22). One understands both the content of the means used and their relation to the improvement or ends sought. In contrast, with biomedical interventions, one merely feels their effects on the body 'without understanding their meaning in human terms' (Kass 2003:22). Here again, Kass is echoed by Asad, for whom, following Wittgenstein, learning is crucial to embodiment in a traditional form of life (Asad 2020a). Such learning, for Asad (and Wittgenstein), results in mastery of the 'grammar' of that form, that is, knowing how to practise that tradition with a view to cultivating its aspired to self.

Sandel is likewise animated by advances then made by genetic engineering, with his specific quarry being the ethics of gene therapy, genetic enhancement of memory, human growth hormone treatment and sex selection (Sandel 2004). While Kass may be said to focus on individual human nature, Sandel is more directly concerned with the social implications of advances in biotechnology. He is not so much concerned as to whether emerging technologies would curtail freedom of choice or that they would be available in an unequal measure (although these are important). Rather, his concern is more fundamental and is directed to the social *attitude* taken towards such technology that he believes is a Promethean one where we are free to remake our natures. This Promethean impulse is driven by the conviction that we are in a position, in principle, to master all things. The resonance here with Weber, as quoted by Asad earlier, is clear. Fundamentally, for Sandel, this self-belief in our own capabilities – our own modern form of life as Asad would say – leads to the loss of the virtue of humility, namely, an awareness of our human constraints and an inability to see life and existence as a gift, the latter conception being typical of many traditional forms of life. As we will see, Asad is also centrally concerned with the loss of humility generated by abstraction ('all things in principle are calculable'). Moreover, while for Sandel, the loss of seeing life as a gift leads down a slippery slope to a less compassionate society, Asad worries not only about this, but his whole approach, I think, raises meta-questions as to whether such loss or failure is endemic to the very form of technological life we now live and which, he fears, we appear to pursue headlessly (without 'ends' as Kass would say). That is, he is not only concerned about the loss of cultivated embodiment *per se*, but the philosophical roots of such a loss. Specifically, he sees embodiment and abstraction as the built-in *languages* (in the Wittgensteinian sense) with which we approach life, including our posthuman future. It is to this argument of his that we now turn.

Language, embodiment and abstraction

I see the philosophical roots of Asad's position as lying in the relation between thought and feeling. In cultivated forms of embodiment, the two are conjoined, while in abstraction, they are separated.

To start with embodiment: Asad significantly comments that T.S. Eliot saw metaphysical poets such as John Donne as 'sensuously apprehending thought'. For such poets, according to Eliot, a thought was an 'experience that modified sensibility' (Asad 2018:62–63). This interconnection among thought, experience and feeling – or between practice and realisation as Asad may say – is, I believe at the heart of cultivated embodiment. There is a veritable fusion here between what one is taught in a tradition (the thought and norms of a tradition), what one does within it (practices and the cultivation of the senses) and the experiences and feelings that result through such practices. One can only disconnect between the three by stepping to a hypothetical outside. However, this desire, to 'sterilize' one's feelings, to be on the outside is itself part of a very modern outlook and its own form of life.

Thus for Asad, the practices of a specific religious tradition cannot be 'translated' as they are integral to a particular form of life. Their full sense can only be realised by being part of that way of life. For example, for a Muslim, the purpose of the ritual recitation of the Quran in its original Arabic is to

help cultivate the proper self, namely, one that worships God with the appropriate reverence and awe. While the textual meanings of the Quran can be translated into other languages (and there are, of course, many such translations available), the Quran is not meant to be grasped just intellectually (or even primarily as an appeal to the intellect). Rather, it is through the repeated ritual recitation itself (even often without understanding the formal meaning of the Arabic words) that the aspired to God worshipping self (and consequently attaining the proper meanings of the Quran) is cultivated. This applies to other ritual acts in Islam as well.[5]

Otherwise put, the meaning of the act comes to the fore through its performance or embodiment. The message – the meaning of the act – cannot be separated from the medium, its actual performance. Grasping the proper meanings of the Quran is dependent on this performance and not available simply intellectually, that is, via language.[6] Asad (2018) encapsulates this point as follows:

> [F]or devout Muslims, Qur'anic meanings are not mechanically determined by logical and lexical criteria or even simply by social context.[7] Piety as awe of God (*birr wa taqwa*) is not merely a divine injunction; it is regarded as a necessary presupposition for understanding the meanings of the Quran. (p. 76)

Here, we need to pause and look at the implications of such a position for the notion of language. As mentioned, Asad was profoundly influenced by the later Wittgenstein. In one of his most recent articles, 'Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein' he acknowledges that debt in a substantial manner by reflecting on what Wittgenstein might teach us about how to understand religious phenomena (Asad 2020a). In Asad's interpretation of Wittgenstein, language does not merely describe a form of life. Language is a *part* of that form and is itself inhabited through bodily practices. For Asad, Wittgenstein would justify this position by arguing that what confronts all of us is a fusion of reality – 'life itself' – which we then theoretically compartmentalise as a language, as a practice and so on. Wittgenstein wants to get us back to this pre-recognition, this pre-thought, so as to speak, before our thinking compartmentalises reality. Of course, such compartmentalisation has important functions, but it often obscures what comes before – namely, the form of life itself in which, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, we are all necessarily located. Language functions in various ways as part of a form of life. It provides an overarching guide, a means of learning, a particular mode of life. But, it is also integrated into the practices of life itself, especially when

those practices are being mastered. Simply put, language is essentially practice, given the fusion of thought, experience, feeling and realisation that characterises a particular form of life. It is in this sense that we can speak of cultivated embodiment as a language (Asad 2020a).

As I understand it, practice then for Asad does not only relate to normative practices, as found in say a particular religion. Following Wittgenstein, it refers to the practices of life itself – the ongoingness of life – the practices, whether regulated or haphazard, of which we necessarily find ourselves part and parcel and which we consciously or otherwise do. As indicated, the ongoingness of life's practices in a traditional culture often seeks to shape that culture's ideal of virtue (at least in theory). But what about the ongoingness of modernity's practices, namely, those fostered by the culture of abstraction observed by Weber? Where does this language lead to? This is the worry about abstraction that animates Asad, particularly in secular translations.

If Wittgenstein (in my own understanding of Asad's interpretation of Wittgenstein) is right, then abstraction is not the separation of thought from feeling, but the *attempted* separation of the two. As mentioned, in pre-compartmentalised thought, thought and feeling are fused, so abstraction must constitute a form of life with conjoined norms, practices and effects. But the attempt to separate the two is significant. That attempt itself becomes part of its form of life. Crucially, unlike in cultivated embodiment, in abstraction, the accompanying feeling that may be constitutive of an act is not regarded as central to understanding its meaning. To the modern mindset, as we have already noted, such feelings could be 'sterilized'[8] and the thought, statement or text alone become the object of focus. In modernity, then, reality becomes cognitive, that is, life is to be read as a text (Asad 2018:61). This abstraction from feeling naturally makes it difficult to fully empathise and learn from non-modern or anti-modern forms of life as these forms are now simply texts to be read, not lives to be lived. For example, the controversy around the headscarf ban in France resulted in two opposing viewpoints. For the opponents of the headscarf, it was a sign of religious subjugation. For its proponents, it was a sign of religious identity. But for both groups, it was nevertheless a sign whose meaning, negative or positive, had to be uncovered and interpreted by the secular self. Asad notes that little attention was paid to the fact that for its wearers, it was not primarily an abstract sign of something but a way of inhabiting the body in order to draw closer to God. It was this way of cultivated embodiment that was neglected in the controversy (Asad 2018:53).

This example is indicative of the wide-ranging consequences of the attempt to separate thought from feeling, which for Asad has been constitutive of science, politics and law as we now know them. Thus, for modern science, feelings need to

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5. For example, Asad (2018:84–85) makes the point that that intention, in the classical Islamic tradition, is not the prior cause of a particular action. Rather, it is constitutive of the act itself and needs to be appropriately formulated through repeated learning. Through such repetition, one learns how to intend properly. To this extent, intention is publicly available rather being a purely private phenomenon.

6. Language and text (intellectual meanings), of course, also have an important role, but Asad's point is to emphasise the primacy and transmutable power of ritual.

7. It might be asked as to what makes Asad so certain that the mind of the devout is different in this respect to the non-devout? But as will be seen, Asad's concern is not texts (logical and lexical) but actual practices of people (whether devout or non-devout). It is these practices, whether religious or secular that result in various effects. So the question should not be whether the devout and non-devout think different but rather: what do their respective practices do? What kind of dispositions do they create? What is the logic (reasoning) of such practices? These are the kind of Wittgensteinian question that I think Asad wants us to think about.

8. As Asad (2018:61) reminds us, quoting R.G. Collingwood, such sterilisation was seen as: 'especially characteristic of adult and 'educated' people in what is called modern European civilization'.

be put on the backburner if the pursuit of knowledge is to be regarded as an objective. In science's separation between feelings and thought, the former itself, as well as experience in general, become the objects of the scientific quest and subject to experiment and measurement. Given the hegemony of science, calculative rationality becomes a distinctive feature of secular modernity (Asad 2018:63).

In turn, the calculating force of secularisation and its vision of a rational, knowable world generate its own form of life – desires, thoughts, behaviours and emotions – that represents a fundamental break in the grammar of the concepts it has inherited from pre-modernity.[9] A new sense of self and a new view of the world are crafted. Not beholden by any perceived transcendent authority, the social and natural world can be mapped, manipulated and engineered for ideological purposes. Naturally, politics and law follow in its wake with new, statistical conceptions of equality and justice (Asad 2018:29, 32).

For Asad (2018:126), the modern, post-Machiavellian state is at the heart of such mapping. It needs to direct its citizens in terms of this abstract rationality, but it also needs to exercise control over them to ensure order. Here, mathematics and statistics come to play a central role. The techniques used in these disciplines are employed by the state in managing crime, health, the economy, education and, of course, in its scientific and technological research. Thus, the state entrenches its authority through the language of abstraction.

But to return to the question: where does all this lead to? We know that in cultivated embodiment, there are specific models offered for human flourishing. Whether these models work or not is besides the point here. I simply want to point to the fact of their existence. In contrast, the hegemonic language of abstraction does not offer such a model, except a broad notion of progress. It seems that we all operate in this language in the hope that it will bring the sought for happiness. And any unhappiness it may bring (the alienation produced by modern life, the loss of community bonds, the marginalisation of virtue, etc.) is explained away by the perceived *potential* of the language of abstraction. Asad does not fail to point out the various economic, political and environmental crises that the world has experienced because the onset of modernity is enmeshed with this language. It seems to me, then, that the fundamental question Asad wants us to ask is: is the language of abstraction working? And, by extension, is the price we pay for it, namely, the attenuation of traditional, cultivated forms of embodiment worth it?

To those who share a similar disquiet, these questions acquire an urgency because, if we agree with Asad, the present trajectory of abstraction is only set to intensify because of the emergence and increasing pervasiveness of algorithmic reality. Contrary to prevailing optimistic scenarios, Asad believes that developments in artificial intelligence and genetic engineering will more likely entrench the control of the state.[10] Natural life will be treated as a source of 'information' ('easily accessible, translatable, reproducible – and corruptible') to be fed, via mathematical signs, into robots ('cyborg citizens' as he calls it). Human life, in other words, will simply be the fodder for a posthuman reality, and the whole notion of a cultivated embodied life, now overtaken by one dominated by numbers, will fall away. Asad (2018) writes:

> [*T*]he crucial opposition here will no longer be between hidden intentions and public behaviour [11] but between the living body and the information that articulates it as a self. Once information is obtained from the 'natural' body, there is no reason why it cannot be translated into an indefinite number of interconnected computers. When the particular materiality of the body is treated as accidental to its life – a 'natural' life that is born, that learns, succeeds and fails, shares a form of life with others, feels pain and dies; a life whose trace moves through generations of subsequent living beings – then the very sense of a discursive tradition is undermined. (pp. 144–145)

Towards an assessment

It appears that Asad's brief comments on the future refer specifically to potential developments in brain–machine interface (BMI) technology. Brain–machine interface has been described as a device 'that translates neuronal information into commands capable of controlling external software such as a computer or robotic arm'.[12] Basically, sensors are attached directly or indirectly to the brain that enables it to connect wirelessly to an external device, moving and controlling the latter. This technology forms the basis for cochlear implants (which converts sound into electrical impulses which are sent to, and interpreted by, the brain). However, it is now being extended to assist severely paralysed patients to perform basic functions such as eating, or using a computer, independently.

The direct attachment of sensors to the brain holds significantly more potential for effective BMI than indirect means. Companies such as Elon Musk's Neuralink (2019) are seeking to develop technologies, such as micro-threads, that provide such directness. The implications are considerable. For excited futurists, such an augmented brain will have the ability to wirelessly connect to the internet in turn. This brain will also be able to communicate with similarly augmented brains,

9.For example, Asad (2018:16) says that to claim that the concept of equality as we have it now has its roots in the *imago Dei* (humans created in the image of God) of Christian theology is to ignore a semantic rupture. For medieval Christians, equality without reference to divine grace and otherworldliness would have made little sense.

10.If one is in broad agreement with Asad that the modern state, via surveillance techniques, biometrics and so forth, is indeed entrenching its control in general (though, of course, with individual variances among states), what, one may rightly ask, is the alternative? If liberal democracy and authoritarianism do not seem so different in essence (although differences in temperament and formal rights and duties are important), what else do we turn to? I do not think that Asad is seriously proposing an alternative. Rather he wants us to self-introspect on the 'naturalness' of our current models that we tend to assume will somehow and eventually solve our problems.

11.Modernity's erosion of liturgy and ritual has also led to uncertainty and anxiety. In short, a distinction is made between one's true self and one's conventional public behaviour [mask] because the latter no more falls within a traditionalist ritualistic scheme. The state is uncertain about its citizen's true intentions, and in seeking to control the resulting uncertainty, mathematics and statistics come to play a central role (Asad 2018:126).

12.See 'Brain Machine Interface' at https://www.nature.com/subjects/brain-machine-interface#:~:targetText=Definition,with%20motor%20or%20sensory%20impairments (accessed 06 November 2019).

enabling mind-to-mind communication. Knowledge can be transferred from one brain to another without the need for learning. Similarly, memories and even emotions are said to be similarly transferable. The human beings, according to Steven Hoffman, will no longer be trapped in their bodies and, via similarly sensored human beings and devices, will be able to be anywhere, anytime (TedxTalks 2019). For Asad, as we have seen, such disembodiment (or more precisely, re-embodiment) is the problem – then having reached the point where the 'natural body is translated into an indefinite number of computers', rendering this body dispensable.

The cyborg citizen to which Asad alludes is still to be properly realised. But his aim, of course, is not to focus on this citizen as such but to make the point that given our *current* trajectory of thought, we should not expect the various global crises (environmental, political and economic) that confront us to be solved through any posthuman future. And, as already mentioned, things are likely to get worse because posthumanism appears to be nothing but an intensified form of the abstraction that helped generate and shape these crises in the first place. Any viable approach to these crises – and Asad is very dim about its prospects – must cultivate a non-abstracted or embodied way of talking about them. His discussions on monasticism in 'Genealogies' or on al-Ghazali's potentialities of the soul in 'Secular Translations' are precisely to show that such an alternative language has always existed. Our current reality can learn from their language of the worshipful self, but at the same time, its own language increasingly constricts the spaces for the development of such spaces of tried and tested human flourishing.

In Asad's opinion, the trajectory of secular 'progress' has insufficiently taken into account the notion of failure. The various global crises are often the unpredictable products of our immersion in a numbered reality. Consequently, when they do arise, we do not know how to deal with them and, in fact, our current solutions that are in the same trajectory of abstraction, may exacerbate our problems.[13] Where our secular reality may learn from religious traditions is precisely how to deal with failure. Such embodied traditions teach one what a human being is capable and incapable of doing as well as to be conscious of one's failures and missteps in order to learn from them. On the contrary, the failure of the promoters of 'secularity, science and progress' is in failing:

> [T]o understand the fatal consequences of how one acts, thinks and feels in the world, the arrogance (hubris) in thinking one can act like a god, [in] what classical Greek dramatists saw as the essence of what they called tragedy. (Asad 2018:156)

13. It is worth quoting Haris Durrani (2017:n.p.) at length here: 'In the interview, Asad emphasizes the value of reflection, particularly in turbulent times. He is cautious of the ways that modern states have wrought havoc by jumping to solutions – as in Euro-America's political interferences across the world – and the ways in which emancipatory politics, quick to search out "solutions" in revolutionary struggles, often backfire, as they did during the upheavals in Egypt over the last few years and in decades past. He believes this "get up and go" attitude is particularly tangible in America: I just find it deeply disturbing that we assume that we know what we are doing. I don't think that we have thought enough about where our drive for freedom has brought us. We've come (to use the old cliché) to various crises in the world as a whole. You know the freedom of capitalism has given us not only many good things but also all these fantastic meltdowns. The fact is that we don't know how to deal with this monster that has the world in its grip. I don't see how talk about freedom is going to help us in this crisis. It may even be that many of those grand projects of freedom have contributed to creating this megacrisis'.

As we have seen, he shares this disquiet with scholars such as Kass and Sandel. In comparing Kass, Sandel and Asad, it is evident that their anxieties are informed by a strongly sympathetic reading of insights associated with traditional religion. We have already spoken about Asad's view that such religion teaches us how to deal with failure, something concerning to which the promoters of progress appear to be rather oblivious. Kass speaks about the need to accept finitude and, once this is accepted, to think about human flourishing in terms of such rather than almost quixotically thinking of flourishing as if immortality is given. Sandel introduces traditional concepts such as humility and giftedness, showing that far from applying only to believers, they have implications for those who hold reality to be purely secular. In general, these writers present a challenge to those who believe that traditional religion does not – and often should not – have anything meaningful to say about the trajectory of technology and its ethical direction.

The three are particularly concerned that we now appear to have unrestrained confidence in our scientific abilities without truly thinking through the consequences of what we accomplish. It is significant that all three writers use the term hubris to describe the mood that seems to animate scientific advances.[14] Such an excessive self-confidence appears to be unwilling to learn from what has gone before, from the tried and trusted, from distilled wisdom. It is an attitude that deems it appropriate to simply plunge ahead and make up the rules as one goes along. Against this backdrop, the reflections of these three writers serve as a general warning against our Promethean impulses.

However, as we have seen, they come to this Promethean impulse from different directions. For Kass, it lies in the separation of means from ends, more precisely, when means are pursued without the requisite knowledge of ends. For Sandel, it is in the failure to recognise talents and powers as gifts but as products of one's own doing. For Asad, this impulse lies in an intensifying language of abstraction, unfettered by the constraints of embodiment and tradition. These views are complementary to a certain extent: the conjunction of means and ends requires cultivated embodiment, and embodiment, in turn, is associated with traditions that characteristically accept the giftedness of existence. But there is also a sense in which Asad's focus on language speaks to even deeper foundations than that envisaged by Kass or Sandel. He is not so much interested in a debate about the future, about how past human experience and wisdom should temper and guide our expectations and navigation of progress. This is a concern that drives the reflections of Kass and Sandel, and undoubtedly it would appear that Asad, in so far as he reflects on the same concern, will find some common ground with them in their views. But he is, I think, more

14. Asad (2018:156) writes about 'the arrogance (hubris) in thinking one can act like a god', Kass (2003) excoriates 'the mere playing at being God, the hubris of acting with insufficient wisdom', while Sandel (2004) makes the point that 'The awareness that our talents and abilities are not wholly our own doing restrains our tendency toward hubris'.

interested in the meta-question, namely, about the languages used – in the Wittgensteinian sense of language as practice – to frame the discussion. For if the conjunction of means and ends, and the notion of giftedness, emerge ultimately from the notion of embodiment, then it is the language of the latter that should be our concern, and in particular, its attenuation in the face of an increasingly dominant language of abstraction.

Conclusion

The meta-questions raised by Asad proceed from a seemingly dystopic space where abstraction appears to reign supreme. Asad himself acknowledges that the world abstraction has made possible – typified by the modern nation state, its institutions, its concepts and the types of desires and sensibilities it fosters – is unlikely to change. Yet, I believe that in this very dystopic vision, there is hope. It is precisely in the consciousness of this abstraction that an awareness of genuine alternative ways of thinking, feeling and acting, as found in cultivated embodiment, arises. Consciousness of the meta-languages in which we operate helps us at least to be cognisant that the 'solutions' often proffered to the problems and crises we face may be inscribed in the very language that shaped these crises in the first place. Such consciousness might itself not offer a solution but at least, it provides a healthy self-reflection on our normal patterns of thinking and acting. As always, Asad's aim is not to propose but to unsettle.

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Disclaimer

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