

HUMAN, FOREVER

(JAMES POULOS)

November 30, 2021

Digital communications technology is yet mostly a formless thing, still being born, upon which we moderns imprint our fears and our hopes. Some dreamers see it as an unalloyed good, which when grown will let us slip the chains of our humanity. Others, more grounded, see it as a genie best stuffed back into his bottle and dropped down a mineshaft, for otherwise its acid will corrode all that is permanent, melting it into the air. James Poulos takes neither approach; he is the apostle of creating the new way of human flourishing, finding the narrow path that threads between false utopia and catastrophe. “Which way, Western man?”, asks the meme. Poulos has an answer for us.

I won’t lie to you—this is a challenging book, deep, complex, and at points baroque. That’s part of its charm. I’m not even sure what genre this book belongs to; it is largely political philosophy, but also autobiography, spiritual memoir, and history. But it rewards close reading and close attention. Poulos brings it all together successfully; you may not immediately see the link between Paul Klee’s artwork, *Angelus Novus*, and our current times, or all the connections among the multitude of other topics discussed, but you will once Poulos explains it to you.

The author has often talked in recent years of the televisual age, the age of imagination, of the triumph of American narratives, that over the course of the twentieth century made America what it became, for itself and for the world. Poulos believes that the advent of electricity destroyed Europe but supercharged America; digital, in turn, threatens to do to us what electricity did to Europe, and in fact is well on its way to doing so. He wants us to avoid this fate (and he essentially ignores Europe, in its current form and state, presumably as irrelevant to the future, which indeed it is).

Digital has made “communication the ultimate technology and master of the technologies,” the prime synthesizer. Digital technology was thought to be the mechanism for the apotheosis of the American imaginarium—but the “digital swarm” has escaped our plans, our intentions, and threatens to enslave us all, by using our own natures to lead us to desire to be enslaved. It turns out that when we become able

to reify what is in our imaginations, without due thought as to where we are being led, we are not gratified by the result. I don't think this is a surprise, but nonetheless, surprise seems to be the common response. But we should not despair; if we act correctly, "waking dreams of utter doom or godlike totality will be obsolete and inapplicable to the task of living well."

In this scenario, who is friend, and who is enemy? The digital swarm is neither; it simply is, in Poulos's view. The enemy is those men who would use the swarm to remake and control us, erasing our memory and replacing our lived experience with an "infinite simulacrum transcendent enough to catechize both us and the digital entities now tasked with our control." Yet, even so, the very nature of the digital swarm, which is "irreducibly plural," and of machine memory, far superior to human memory, makes the idea of unified authority over the digital swarm inconceivable, by either friend or enemy. This is both threat and opportunity for mankind.

The digital swarm has no soul or intelligence (Poulos, wisely in my opinion, bases nothing on the advent of strong artificial intelligence; this is not a book about Skynet). Yet it acts, and its acts, to the extent they enter the human world, have moral import in their choices. The digital swarm tends to destroy authority, and more broadly, to disenchant all things, most of all God and humanity. Thus "digital catastrophe" has resulted in "hostility against memory and the remembered . . . in the hopes of salvation through fantasy." The machines have not made us better; despite their own capacity for memory, they have made us forget, and they have, too often for too many, replaced love with loss. The path forward thus leads through the recovery of memory, thereby reclaiming and ringfencing our humanity. Erasure of memory is a running theme of this book, perhaps the running theme. The logical response, the logical cure, is to recover, hold close, and elevate that memory—both of the present, and of the past, including the deep past. And to pass it on to the next generation, the one that is most entangled in the digital swarm.

This is where Poulos begins, with a discussion of the "First Generation"—that is, those who are teenagers today, the first generation to be wholly raised up within the digital swarm. Given the premise, the truth of which seems undeniable (but of which more later), that technology is not going away, and the second premise that those who

have come, and are coming, of age in the new era of technology will decide how our society will interact with, and become intertwined with, technology, Poulos's aim is to guide this transition. We, or the First Generation rather, must not abdicate responsibility, but grasp it, in order that we all may continue to lead lives worth living.

I have a great deal of personal interest in this topic of the First Generation. My oldest son, eighteen, has somehow turned into a coding whiz, despite having been granted very little screen time, of any type, growing up. Our younger children have been even more sheltered from screens. But this is the exception, created by rare circumstances and unified will of mother and father. Most children are wholly absorbed in the digital swarm. Poulos asks what men of the older generation can give, and transmit, to this new generation. This is a call to ensure that men realize their responsibility to initiate boys into manhood, to restore continuity in the storm of discontinuity, in the teeth of the digital swarm and the collapse of authority that permeates modernity. The swarm demands the young create new rites of passage.

What those are, Poulos does not really say, though it is clear they must revolve around memory, and are implicit to each man's own culture, not a one-size-fits-all template. But this highlights what I think is an important question—can mankind truly exist mostly in a digital space, or does its unreality simply preclude the adequate transmission of belief and culture? If we are all hanging out in the metaverse, is that merely a translation of man's culture to a new environment, or is it a deracinated, silly imitation, where no real culture can be truly formed, and certainly nothing real can be passed to our children? It seems to me that the latter is closer to the truth, and that no matter how many rites of passage we create, to the extent they revolve around digital, they are inherently fake and alien to mankind. My son is keenly interested in Space, as I am, but not in Space as a digital construct, rather as boots on an asteroid. That, were it to become possible, is a rite of passage. Completing a digital quest—not so much.

But let's leave that aside for now. Poulos asks, if the bots, the swarm, are inevitable, as they seem to be, who will catechize them, such that they will adopt, or act in the interest of, right belief, and transmit that right belief onward? Those who rule us wish to catechize them, in order to better catechize and thereby rule us, and as we see already, the

catechization will inevitably take the form of a social credit system, in which the swarm imposes rewards and debilities upon humans for how, and to the degree, they act in conformity to the pattern in which the bots have been catechized. To do this, they must erase the combination of memory and humanity, the chain of transmission to boys becoming men. If they succeed, the catechists will get their desired New Men—not the new Soviet Man, but the disenchanting, deracinated, New Digital Man, divorced from his past and from his fellow men, eager to consume, to live in the pod, to eat the bugs. They will like that. But we will not.

Poulos next turns to how religion relates to struggles to control the digital swarm. Long before the swarm was born, men such as H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Teilhard de Chardin adopted and pushed a gnostic sensibility, the groundwork for today's digital catechists, "which holds that man's perfection must be attained through the shattering of our natural confinement which alone can free our spirit being to be what it truly is—divine." For a brief time, centered in California, this seemed, to our ruling classes at least, to be America's future—digital technology synthesizing "the great polarities between spirit and matter, imagination and knowledge, essence and existence." Or at least to part of our ruling classes, the "engineers," who believe in, and implement, "limitless technology."

The engineers, over time, spawned their competition—the "ethereals," equally gnostic but more spiritually focused, on "conceiving and executing transformational projects, on selves, others, and society, aimed at the complete unification of consciousness with the cosmos." Ethereals are thus transhumanists, who desire to "queer" humanity (a word I find jarring used here, but probably that's because I think most of these people should be, um, put out of the way). Ethereals adore transhumanism, and anything trans—trannies, certainly, but oh, so much more. The ethereals would have us abandon memory of our humanity to the machines, while we progress to some nirvana, some union with the quasi-divine light. Poulos spends quite a bit of time exploring these strains of thought; we get highly relevant and interesting analysis of everyone from René Girard to Saint Thomas Aquinas to Norbert Wiener to Marshall McLuhan. In particular, we get a lot of McLuhan, whom I've never read and don't really understand, though that's probably a lack in me.

Anyway, Poulos says we should not abandon our role and become mere observers of these two ultimately competing groups. But what is to be done, beyond teaching our children what a human being is and what he should be, something Poulos already prescribed? Poulos predicts that we will not have to wholly reinvent ourselves, because “both America and Christianity will remain powerfully present.” He says, “Three great things have been disclosed by the digital catastrophe throwing their dovetailing projects into doubt: the persistence of America, the persistence of Christianity, and the persistence of digital.” They are “a trinity of stumbling blocks to technical and ethical determinism,” though also a source of scandal in the Girardian sense—that is to say, a source of conflict, which must be resolved. Poulos appears to seek a new synthesis, a path found through the wilderness of mirrors, where on the other side these three support each other in a new culture.

Poulos thus rejects quietist options. Although he doesn't mention it, implicit in everything he says is that Rod Dreher's Benedict Option, where ideally we essentially turn our backs on digital technology and live among the olive groves of Tipi Loschi in quiet communion, cannot be our aim. He also rejects the idea that the digital swarm, singly or in combination with other maladies of modernity, will simply lead to our total collapse, as Paul Kingsnorth preaches.

This is to me the deep heart of the matter. I'll buy Christianity, a renewed Christianity, as surviving and thriving. But I doubt very much America, the nation, the fifty states, is going to make it through the handover to the First Generation in any recognizable state. Not because I blame America for what the world has become, as Poulos notes many do, but simply because times change, and what America was, to itself and the world, is dead and gone, even if many pockets of it survive under the boot and baleful gaze of our rotten ruling classes. On the other hand, maybe I should be more optimistic. There is indeed something unique about America; if we get rid of the excrescences of ideology and people, maybe New America can indeed be part of the future. Poulos, to his credit, takes this topic head-on, refusing to abandon America to the tender mercies of decentralized “monks or pirates or mafiosos” or to suggest America would be better off defeated and destroyed by countries that are still run by real men. Poulos is still a Tocquevillian, seeing much remaining, if not very visible, virtue in the array of folkways

that make up America. The ruling class hates this—but there is little they can do to create uniformity, despite their control of the televisual aspects of digital communication, because that is not enough, and the bots continually escape their attempts at catechization. But Poulos does not tell us how we are going to unleash that virtue, or weaponize it to throw off the chains in which it is bound.

Still, unlike many, Poulos is not worried about digital totalitarianism, even as the American empire shrinks and our ruling classes seek to use digital technology to shape our memories and imaginations, having failed to do so on the greater global stage, where our rainbow flag is used as toilet paper in ever-more areas of the world. He thinks a pluralistic, digital America can be reached and maintained, if those who rule us can realize before it is too late what is best for our society, and that we can “induce understanding” by “building parallel institutions and secure, robust networks of mature and culturally healthy people online and off.” This again strikes me as perhaps too optimistic, for the same reason that I criticize the Benedict Option—it ignores that this cannot be done without fighting, or more precisely, in Poulos’s frame, that those who catechize the digital swarm will try to prevent parallel institutions and networks.

Or perhaps Poulos means our enemies will simply be unable to block the combinations of real humanity that makes digital its servant, rather than its master. Poulos is a strong supporter of blockchain technology; this book is published “on the blockchain” (which I do not really grasp), and was launched on Canonic.xyz, a blockchain publishing platform. (It was first launched as an NFT, a “non-fungible token”; I am the proud buyer of one of the one hundred such.) Maybe as the parallel economy, based on real goods and services and involving uncontrolled authentication and monetary exchange, waxes ever larger, the old ways of doing things, the ruling class methods of control and coercion, will simply wane and disappear. Our ruling classes will evanesce; those who rely on the various forms of fakery on which they base their power will reform their ways and join Team Reality, or starve, or commit suicide, driving themselves into insanity as lonely digital cripples. Rather than chaos, violence, disruption, we will get a gradual transformation and reformation, towards a reborn America.

Maybe, though I'm not hopeful. But let's say that happens. I am a techno-optimist, but it is very true that there is a strong argument that technology is inherently corrosive of the fibers of a society, and I have as yet not been able to resolve this conundrum to my own satisfaction. Poulos quotes Leo Strauss, that the ancients "knew that one cannot be distrustful of political or social change without being distrustful of technological change." Moreover, it is quite clear that what Poulos calls the modern instrumentalist project "has inevitably debased people by trying to satisfy their appetites." Perhaps this is what seeking to improve man's estate always and everywhere comes down to, even though the swarm is sold as a way to re-enchant the world, a means that "can or does deliver the goods of our highest longing." How this First Generation, and the generations thereafter, can escape this fate while still being surrounded by and dependent upon the digital swarm is not clear to me. Poulos says what we can do, most of all, is "remain ourselves." True, but man is a mix of good and bad, virtue and vice, and absent some form of external or internal compulsion, truly remaining ourselves does not tend to look pretty.

One possible solution might be to divide the digital swarm into desirable and undesirable buckets. It does not seem to me that all digital is inevitable. Why should we, for example, permit "dating" apps at all? Their costs very obviously grossly exceed their benefits. Other forms of social media are also dubious, though the net negatives may not be so clear (though I think they're clear enough). Maybe, between some combination of governmental fiat and social pressure, people can be made to simply abandon social media, just like any other vice or sin, and most other forms of ephemeral digital communication. Why not just turn most of it off?

Poulos cites the Roman Catholic theologian Romano Guardini that the successful manifestation, with respect to technology, of a renewal of virtue, is the regaining of human sovereignty, of men who will "subordinate power to the true meaning of human life and works." This is true, and it is equally true that religion is crucial to this project—not Catholicism, but a plurality of religions, all bound to "constraint as a new immanent rule of technology." We don't have to all be Amish, but we can learn a lot from simply noting that we don't have, as a society, to do any particular thing that seems like it's fun or desirable. (I will

note that Eastern Orthodoxy, in its structures that embody constraint and reject novelty, may be especially well-suited to this, something at which Poulos also seems to hint.) Certainly it is true that if we will not restrain ourselves, if we will not exercise self-control in the service of virtue, digital will necessarily consume us. There is no way to prescribe a specific path for this, but it seems to me the path necessarily dovetails with my own project of the Foundationalist state and society, for which the necessary basis is a complete renewal of societal virtue. It seems entirely obvious that the only possible way is a religious revival, and Poulos implies this as well. Yet at the same time he doesn't seem to admit that perhaps large scale hobbling of most uses of digital technology, through some combination of social opprobrium and government action, is one method to help achieve this goal.

Whatever the ultimate denouement, our elites know, they feel in their bones, that despite their best efforts, engineer or ethereal, that they cannot control any of this. The response is half-hearted and half-baked initiatives such as the so-called Great Reset. "What is foisted on us under pretext of reset is in fact half acceleration—from cyborg to posthuman future—and half retardation—setting us back still further from our living memory of human flourishing and the agency it alone catalyzes, and rearing our failed 'elites' back so far as to claim enough runway to launch themselves safely into oblivion." Regime credibility is fatally compromised and the regime is crumbling; there is no way for the regime to use digital to solve this problem, and all efforts make the problem worse. That's the good news.

Yet I'm not as confident as Poulos that there is a desirable future that does not lead through conflict (though to be fair, the subtitle of this book is "The Digital Politics of Spiritual War"). In the words of the Apocalypse of Saint John, true throughout history, merely made manifest differently in each age: "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven." I suspect reaching a future of human flourishing, in which digital is our chained servant and those who would use it to enslave us have been cast down from their thrones of power, will feature a lot more of warfare, both spiritual and physical, than any of us would like to admit is likely.