A Reflection on the Body Philosophy of “Digital Survival” †

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† Presented at Forum on Information Philosophy—The 6th International Conference of Philosophy of Information, IS4SI Summit 2023, Beijing, China, 14 August 2023.

Abstract: The digital living state brings great convenience to human production, communication, consumption and leisure, and also brings people a lot of new worries. Many scholars discussed human’s sensibility, spiritual and aesthetic issues from the tension between technology and value, science and technology, and humanity. They also noticed the many changes that the body has experienced in the digital ecology. In this paper, referring to the existing theoretical results of the body philosophy of the body, the dual situation of the body in the digital survival was discussed, analyzed, and reflected upon. Not only does it reflect the contemporary value of body philosophy, but it also looks forward to finding effective ways to alleviate physical problems in the digital survival state.

Keywords: digital; digital survival; body; body philosophy

1. Introduction

So far, the history of human survival and development has gone through three important stages of engineering, mechanization, and informatization. Nowadays, digital transformation and intelligent upgrading have provided new opportunities and technical conditions for human survival and development mode. Since Nicolas Negroponte first proposed “being digital”, an empirical and verifiable fact is that digitization has increasingly transformed from specialized technical means in specific production and life fields to a universal way of production and life that must rely on for survival. People are forced to participate in a digital revolution nurtured by informatization. In this field, scholars paid attention to topics from digital production, communication, management, service to digital currency, digital labor, digital refugees, digital divide, and then to related topics such as digital ability, digital learning, digital art, digital aesthetics. On the basis of existing research, this paper, takes the “body” as the gaze point, borrowed the theory of body philosophy to reflect on the survival situation of humans as material being in the digital survival state. Finally, try to analyze the reasons for this state and find positive solutions.

2. Physical Situation in the “Digital Survival” State

From Plato to Descartes, the body has been ignored and underestimated for a long time, and is regarded as the binary opposite of “soul, reason, spirit, consciousness and rationality” [1]. Until Nietzsche and Schopenhauer began, physical problems were gradually valued and raised. “Although the theories are different, the common feature is that the body starts from the inherent materiality of the body to reach a certain level of social practice, combine the body and the society, and take the body as the starting point of the world” [2]. An outstanding representative is Mero Ponti’s embodied theory, which emphasizes the “monistic” characteristics of the body in the source of experience and perception, which triggers the theoretical research paradigm of “integration of body and mind”. However, in the state of digital existence, that is, “the digital existence paradigm and value principle have fully penetrated into the life world of human beings, and have a substantial impact on the economy, politics, culture, social life and people’s way of thinking and spiritual world of human society” [3]. Human existence extends from the physical...
space to the multidimensional information space of “the bits, and the production, storage, propagation, exchange and control” [4]. In this context, there is an unavoidable situation that the body will also face new situations, which will cause people to rethink and reflect on the physical problems.

On the one hand, the repressed, bound body is liberated and free. In the digital living state, the body “gradually evolved from pure natural body form to technical body form, and then was projected into the virtual field as an embodiment” [5]. In this process, people have increasingly achieved a transformation from frontline participation in production to behind the scenes control, which means that their bodies are liberated from heavy physical and mental labor. At the same time, the digital body removed the time and space limitations of the body, and blurred the biological and social characteristics of the human body, such as gender, age, occupation, class, race, country, and a series of information. In this way, the body changed from singular state to complex state, realizing the coexistence of virtual and reality, self and non-self. With the help of digital virtual field and multi-dimensional information space, people can construct a new body anytime and anywhere, freely express, communicate, and seek novelty, and their sensory stimulation, desire for knowledge, and individualized needs are greatly satisfied. In short, in the state of digital existence, the body coexists in various forms to realize the maximum journey of thought and mind, and then returns to the senses, thinking, and cognition that affect the body.

On the other hand, the liberation and freedom of the body is partial and one-sided. There is no denying that in the digital living state, the human body has gained more efficient production, more free communication, more accurate cognition, richer service, and more three-dimensional experience than ever before. However, the human body and mind did not get real rest, but obtained a deeper anxiety and panic. In fact, the liberation of bodies in the way of “being mapped, disassembled, and externalized into various data” [6] means that they “may in turn become tools to bind people, use people, and manipulate people” [7]. Therefore, such liberation and freedom is at the expense of the body’s integrity, organic nature, and deepness, such as: the explosion of feeling, memory dispersion, the imbalance of the senses, the sense of history, the lack of a sense of value, and other problems. The cognition, expression, narrative, and recording of the body are entangled in the “digital determinism, digital worship and other cognitive illusions” [8], further inducing: figure, behavior, trajectory, consumption of digital comparison, digital pleasing, digital catering, and other problems. So much so that people are so hasty in creating data, but in the spiritual atmosphere of “freedom, symbol coding, equality and sharing, the fundamental meaning of their own survival and development is shaken, and the uneasiness and chaos of the subject are also strengthened” [9], and, thus, the body is constructed and deconstructed.

3. Body Analysis in the “Digital Survival” State

Why is the body of the digital living state constructed and deconstructed, free, not free, seemingly liberated, but actually exiled and torn up? What is the reason for such a binary situation? Once we begin asking, the analysis of the body begins. Through the appearance of prosperity and bustle, we find that the physical problems never disappear, but become more hidden and more complex in the process of digital technology transformation and upgrading. In the past, the body was chosen naturally, by society and by industrialization, and now, it is chosen by digital choice. As the main body, human beings participate in the transformation of nature and society with their body, but they have never escaped the fate of being materialized and objectified. In real life, the differences in gender, age, intelligence, physical strength, financial resources, and other aspects do not disappear but are likely to intensify in the digital survival state, and even cause the appearance of a new gap. In the process of improving human intelligence and rationality, digital technology has developed so rapidly, and digital survival is constantly glowing with new vitality. However, what about the holistic, comprehensive, and systematic generation of the body? It is destined to be slow.
Western body philosophy, respectively, discusses the existence of the body as an object in the sense of existence, discusses the status of the body as the object of knowledge in the sense of cognition, discusses the meaning of the body in the sense of value, and discusses the experience of the body in the phenomenological sense [10]. Marxist body philosophy, starting with the practice of the body of human nature, explains the concept of biological and social, physical and spiritual, realistic and historical bodies. It can be seen that the body cannot be simply understood as “biological, social, digital” either. In the digital living state, the connotation and attribute of the body are seriously biased in the relationship between the three, which leads to spiritual, psychological, physiological, or aesthetic problems.

Secondly, “physical strength, mental strength, mental strength” in the gap between the body, because “how individuals express their life, how they are. So what they are, is with their production, with what they produce, with how they produce” [11]. Digital living state, a digital double body, to some extent, replaced the real physical and mental work. However, the potential need requires more specialized physical strength and more professional mental work. However, the pursuit of true, good, and beautiful mind frequently makes concessions in the face of efficiency and interests. In this way, the body accepts oversused organs and complete trunk functions, and the rapid exertion of mental power and exertion. Therefore, the body loses balance between physical, mental, and mental strength.

In real life, survival communication is based on a certain physical experience and cognition, to help people improve their initiative and discrimination. In the digital space, the physical biological information and social information are recombined without constraints, which directly increases the risk of communication, creates trust and privacy crisis, and reverses the real physical experience and cognition. In particular, when the overloaded information and the magnificent sensory bombing in the digital space are in sharp contrast with the real, day after day and 9-to-5 life, the body will inevitably have a sense of loss and weakness. In particular, it is important to note that even the digital body, because it is limited by the knowledge and culture of the real body, may have the state of digital “aphasia” and become a digital refugee.


In the digital living state, the cold digital logic not only benefits human life but also brings new worries to human life. Some scholars believe that “digital survival is accompanied by modernity, and human communication in digital survival has not got rid of the shackles of capital logic and instrumental rationality under the constraint of the reflexive dilemma of modernity [12]”. Indeed, based on the digital survival state, the natural body is constantly quantified, technical, digitized, numerical, digital, and medium. “The interactive practice between quantification technology and the natural body highlights the ethical dilemma of the body, and the logic of data quantification hides the existence of the subject [13]”. The body is superficially displayed, stared at, pondered, scrutinized, and evaluated. It is lost in the dragging process between nature, society, history, and practice, as well as between experience, feeling, psychology, intuition, cognition, thinking, imagination, interest, and curiosity.

Only in “digital survival, sublimate the application of data into data thinking, and transform scientific and technological symbols into cultural symbols, can we truly realize human liberation and human free and comprehensive development” [14]. We believe that behind such a solution is actually the attention of the body value rationality and aesthetic rationality. Because physical practice is not “a simple physical movement or thinking movement, but the linkage between the body and the spirit, natural reaction and rational planning, and is the simultaneous initiation of the flesh and spirit of the body [15]”. Furthermore, that is, “the body is not only the perceptual basis of the narrative, historical and rationality, but also the material basis for the spatial, present and perceptual history [16]”. Based on such consensus, we believe that we should pay attention to the generation and development of human body, establish corresponding digital laws, regulations, moral laws and decrees, and protect and guarantee the digital survival mode and state.
How to restore the value rationality and aesthetic rationality of the body in the digital living state? Once the system, matching laws and regulations, and moral laws are established, it means that the body recovers from the unconscious construction and deconstruction to the autonomy of action and inaction. This is to provide the basis for the recovery of the comprehensiveness and integrity of the body through the digital boundaries, and to retain the experience, understanding, and meaning of the body as material, personal, or root. “The whole Chinese thought is developed from the ‘personal’ body, and takes the genealogy of the generation and evolution of life as its basic method [17]”. Therefore, Du Weiming emphasized body knowledge; Zhang Zailin emphasized body noumenon; Li Zhong, Yan Lianfu, and other scholars emphasize the practice of Chinese and Western body philosophy. The body obtains the meaning of existence and generation in the unity of theory and practice, knowledge, and action. “Only by obtaining the unfolding state of life in one’s own body can we acquire the independent consciousness of being oneself in the flow of experience in reality [18]”. Furthermore, under the speed and breadth of digital survival, the depth of the mind is preserved and the unique charm of the body is maintained.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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