

Letter to the Editor

Disembodiment in Cyberspace Is Not a Myth

NORMAN ALESSI, M.D.

Dear Editor:

After reading the article "Disembodiment is a Cyberspace Myth: Discourse and the Self in Real Space," by Steve Stanley, I was struck by a number of issues.¹ I did not think the author proved conclusively (or in any way) that disembodiment is a cyberspace myth. The techniques and methodology did not prove this point, although he raised a number of interesting questions.

One central issue is, what is disembodiment? The author refers to an article by Sadie Plant, where she "charts the progression of Internet technology and its implications from the perspective of Cyberfeminism." He discusses this only in brief and its relationship to postmodern rhetoric. Unfortunately, the author did not do justice to the concept of postmodernism, posthumanism, or concepts concerning disembodiment in cyberspace. As a consequence, he created a straw man, which he never subsequently dealt with in his paper.

What is disembodiment? I would refer readers to the book *How We Became Posthuman*, by N. Katherine Hales,² who does a wonderful job of explaining posthumanism and the relationship of posthumanism to disembodiment. As Stanley implies, cyberspace, and for that matter, any communication technology, attempts to reembody the interface, whether or not it is e-mail, a letter, beating drums, or playing a musical instrument. There are ways in which we attempt to intone and convey the texture of human relatedness. But the fact is disembodiment is disembodiment. We can see cyberspace as being on a continuum. An e-mail is far removed from face-to-face interactions, as Stan-

ley suggests in his paper. Oddly enough, he never talks about interpersonal space or the role of emotions, affects, and their suggested significance in interpersonal communication. His is an argument based on cognitive constructs and intellectual discourse—not "embodied" communication.

Of further importance in this context is the work of Antonio R. Damasio, a neurologist, who attempts to deal with issues about the human brain and the necessity for human interpersonal relatedness or the embodiment of human communication to foster and clarify decision-making and cognitive processing.³ Damasio has written extensively on this topic, and his work would suggest that anything less than face-to-face interaction is a degraded form of interpersonal communication. Disembodiment impedes decision-making and communication. Discourse without embodiment is ill-fated discourse.

The issues about embodiment, disembodiment, cyberspace, rhetoric, and communication are critical. From my perspective, a reembodiment of human relatedness within cyberspace will occur, because it *has* to. The continuum from word, to emotions and face-to-face encounters will be reestablished through "virtual humans" and embodied communication. People need this level of communication and discourse in order to feel a sense of reality in their communications. Ultimately, virtual humans may become the only embodied communication, but such a transition will be evolutionary. Until then, we remain disembodied.

Despite the weaknesses of Stanley's argument and the lack of proof of his statement, he

opens an interesting area for further discussion. Ultimately, disembodiment in cyberspace may become a myth, but it is not one yet.

REFERENCES

1. Stanley, S. (2001). Disembodiment is a cyberspace myth: discourse and the self in real space. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 4:77–93.
2. Hayles, N.K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
3. Damasio, A.R. (1994). *Descartes' error: emotion, reason, and the human brain*. New York: Avon Books.

Address reprint requests to:
Dr. Norman Alessi
Psychiatric Informatics Program
Department of Psychiatry
University of Michigan
1500 East Medical Center Drive
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

E-mail: nalessi@umich.edu

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