The Million Dollar Question

It is, in all likeliness, a fact that the reader of this paper has taken it for granted that the writer is a human. It is also quite probable that the reader views him or herself as human. But what, exactly, constitutes being a human? What is the special ingredient required to make a human? One school of thought points to metacognition, or the ability to think about one’s thoughts, while the other focuses on biology as a key factor.

The question of the definition of the word “human” is one that has yet to be fully and universally answered. The quest to discover this definition is the purpose and the bane of many philosophers’ lives. However, as humans (henceforth referred to as Homo sapiens) strive to find this perfect definition, it seems that they forget that the world around them is changing at a rapid rate, and thus they are, too, in order to meet the new demands of life. This is evident when it comes to technological advances in society. As technology becomes a more integral part of Homo sapien lives, the search for the definition of “human” must take a different path, as Homo sapiens are not a sole entity, but now part of a larger machine.

Many pieces of literature, especially in the science fiction genre, offer suggestions as to how Homo sapiens may define their being as technology changes. William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* is a prime example of this. As one reads *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, he or she sees in what ways the current definitions of “human” must change as Homo sapiens become...
physically and mentally dependent on machines, as well as what effects this may have on the future.

As technology advances, Homo sapiens turn to more physical reliability on the technology that surrounds them, to the point where they almost become cyborg instead of Homo sapien. In his book *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence*, author Andy Clark argues that the Homo sapien brain was created for the purpose of connecting with external sources to help accomplish a task. Clark says that Homo sapien minds connect with “nonbiological circuitry,” and thus become more cyborg. It is because of this that they are able to merge our mental tools with their new physical tools (3-6). If as Clark says by expanding their mind Homo sapiens interlink with technology, then they are not wholly biological creatures anymore, which disbands one critical characteristic in the current, unofficial definition of Homo sapien.

The reader can see this in William Gibson’s novel. In *Neuromancer*, the world is completely overrun with technology to the point where the body has become a sort of cage. Gibson says on page 6, “The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh.” The body, without any prosthetics or enhancements, is a cage. It restricts a person from achieving his or her full potential. Without any sort of machine being added to the flesh, a person is incomplete. The advancements, on the other hand, complete a person, bringing out all sides of them and keeping them from being degraded. One of Case’s partners, Molly, has two enhancements: eyewear that dramatically improves her vision and metal claws under her nails. Molly says to Case on page 25,

‘Cept I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it’s just the way I’m wired’ . . . She held
out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four centimeter scape blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails. She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew.

In Molly’s case, her physical enhancements reflect her personality, almost bringing it to completion. It also keeps her from being degraded by her peers. No one is going to mess with her if they know she has the power to do harm to them. The additions to Molly’s flesh free her from the limitations of her natural body.

It is not the point of this paper to argue whether or not it is morally right to enhance one’s body but to argue that the Homo sapien body is becoming less biological and more machine. Thus, Homo sapiens must change one of the ways they define the word “human.” As evident in the documentary *Fixed*, technology such as robotic eyes with cameras and updated prosthetics are becoming more popular in society. Thus, as these things are more accessible to Homo sapiens, in order to include all Homo sapiens in the definition of the word “human,” the definition of the word must move away from a solely biological base.

Homo sapiens are not just becoming physically dependent on machines; they are also becoming mentally dependent. If a person is mentally reliant on technology, he or she is also turning away from a biologically based definition. According to a study conducted by Dr. Susan Moeller and the University of Maryland, college students from ten countries on five continents reported feelings of depression, anxiety, and withdrawal when asked to spend a day without their phones. Many students said that media had become an extension of themselves. Without it, they felt like they had lost an integral part of themselves (Moeller). Technology has evolved into such an important part of society that even if it is not physically connected to the Homo sapien body,
it still seems like an addition to the brain. Without it, Homo sapiens increasingly feel lost and without a sense of direction. In addition, in some instances, such as the aforementioned study, going without media in particular creates a feeling of a loss of purpose.

Case is a prime example of feeling worthless without technology. Case, in *Neuromancer*, is addicted to technology. Although it is the basis of his job, technology has turned into his only sense of purpose. When Case’s former employers strip him of his connection to technology by poisoning him, Case feels withdrawal symptoms. Gibson describes Case’s situation on pages 4 and 5: “. . . and still he’d see the matrix in his sleep . . . he’d cry for it, cry in his sleep . . . trying to reach the console that wasn’t there.” Like an addict, Case craves the ability to jack into the matrix. Even subconsciously in his sleep, his mind is yearning for the matrix. Because his mind relies so heavily on the matrix, it is a part of him. When it is missing, Case is not fully himself. The technology is a part of his mind, even if it is not always physically connected to his body.

Mental reliance on technology is as important to consider as physical dependency when looking at how to define “human.” If a person’s mind is interconnected with media to the point where it cannot operate at its maximum level without it, that person is leaning towards becoming more robotic as someone who is wearing a prosthetic arm. Therefore, as Homo sapiens become more unable to forgo the use of technology, this dependency must be taken into consideration when trying to define “human.”

Whether or not Homo sapiens decide to consciously change and how they decide to change the generally accepted definition of “human” as technology progresses will have a great effect on the future. Valerie Renegar and George Dionisopolous argue in their article “The Dream of a Cyberpunk Future?” that Gibson in *Neuromancer* writes a social critique of the
current world and of the world Homo sapiens might create if they do not change their present course (337). In *Neuromancer*, the word “human” is a degrading, exclusive term because it never evolved as Homo sapiens and technology did. “Human” becomes a bad word because it only applies to biology in a world where most people are in some way dependent on technology. Gibson writes on page 203, “Power, in Case's world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a kind of immortality.” Those who do not have access to such power or enhancements are lesser. It is a repetition of the horrors that can already be seen in the present day. A person’s worth in *Neuromancer* is not reliant on the fact that he or she is a living being but on how much power that person has and whether or not he or she has enhancements.

What makes Gibson’s work powerful is the technique he utilizes. By stretching and evolving the present society, Gibson creates a future that, to the reader, may seem ridiculous or impossible. However, this is meant to make the reader reflect on the present. Even though *Neuromancer* is a “comic perspective” that expands on the current trajectory of society, as Renegar and Dionisopoulos state on page 334 of their article, there is still hope. Homo sapiens have the ability to take a step back and examine the common conceptions about the definition of the term “human,” the rapid pace at which technology is advancing, and how these two factors may affect the future. The future Gibson describes in *Neuromancer* does not have to be the future of humanity. However, a different outcome is only possible if Homo sapiens consciously decide to change their interpretation of “human” to be all inclusive.

Although there is no concrete definition of the word “human,” one school of thought points to the definition having a biological foundation. However, as Homo sapiens advance and
become less biological and more technological, both physically and mentally, they must change their definition of “human.” Otherwise, personkind runs the risk of creating the future the William Gibson depicts in *Neuromancer*, where people who do not have access to technology are seen as lesser beings. In order to avoid this future, Homo sapiens have to accept that they are becoming less Homo sapien as technology becomes more Homo sapien-like. Changing the interpretation of the term “human” would make it more inclusive to all who rely on technology, but also would incorporate those who choose to not depend on technology. While this million dollar question may be the bane of philosophers’ lives, the prospect of the future that Homo sapiens could create makes it worth the struggle.
Works Cited


