

Sensory Augmentation Workshop Position Paper

I first became aware of sensory augmentation when it was reported in the New York Times about a year ago. I found the report intriguing, yet at the same time, frustrating. It was merely that the report struggled but ultimately failed to adequately *describe* the experience of using a sensory augmentation device; and yet, because of this, one felt that one did not really have a clear and accurate sense of what sensory augmentation was about.

If given a chance to attend the workshop on sensory augmentation, I would like to focus on the first two of the three questions posed, and work from a perspective that incorporates insights from the disciplines of philosophy and the social sciences. On the one hand, a more richly and accurately described subjective experience in the use of sensory augmentation technologies would aid in building better techniques and tools; in this respect, some of the inquiries already made by philosophy into the nature of human perception and sensation could contribute to the conceptual and expressive language for such an experience.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, experiments in sensory augmentation will be extremely helpful to philosophical studies, not only as empirical verifications or exemplars of their conceptual arguments, but as new conceptual formations that can add to or challenge existing philosophical concepts, or give rise to new ones.

A case in point of how philosophy and sensory augmentation technology may provide mutual illumination is in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), who has brought an entire philosophical tradition from Plato onward to bear on exploration of the interface between sensation, conception, and *techné*.<sup>2</sup> Deleuze focuses on sensation as a pre-reflective experience, as an encounter with “something in the world that forces us to think.” Drawing inspiration from the later phenomenological writing of Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze provides an alternative to a dominant philosophical tradition which, with its roots in Cartesian thought and apotheosized in German Idealism, has spread into different discourses of social science and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> This dominant tradition posits a primordial divide between a human, sensing, cognizing, perceiving, and knowing subject, and the object or phenomenon that is to be grasped. For Deleuze, sensation is an encounter wherein the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Tom Froese and Adam Spiers, “Toward a Phenomenological Pragmatics of Enactive Perception,” CSRP 593, Nov. 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The two most directly relevant works would be *Difference and Repetition*, which is cited here, and *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*.

<sup>3</sup> See Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective”, in *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 22, No. 4, (Nov. 1992), pp.597-618.

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human participates in the 'being *of* the sensible.' Our entire body—including the organs of sense, the central nervous system, etc.—together with what it senses—for instance, the furry blackness of a dachshund's coat—forms one ontological 'block' or 'chunk', if you will. His is a complex vision of the interaction between human and milieu, of which recent work on the action-perception feedback loop and bionic limbs would provide good, if untimely, examples. More importantly, Deleuze proposes new ways of conceiving the relations between consciousness, pre-reflective sensation, memory, and reflective thought, which I think might be helpful for attempts to understand these new fields of scientific work on perception. However, despite the philosophical rigor with which it has been carried out, many questions remain to be posed of Deleuze's work, and I surmise that it is with the new developments in sensory augmentation that we might begin to finally round out his philosophy of sensation.

By participating in this workshop, I hope to be part of the collaborative process that will finally yield a richer account—in experiential, technical, and philosophical terms—of the technology of sensory augmentation. My apprenticeship in the disciplines of Comparative Literature (MA) and Political Theory (ABD) has provided me with an appreciation of and aptitude for cross-disciplinary dialogue, which I believe would help in this workshop. My dissertation on Benedict de Spinoza's (1632-1677) concept of power has brought my attention to the different ways in which human powers are contingent upon the milieu. As a future extension of this current project, I would like to construct a theoretical and historical account of how technology affects human and political power—and vice versa. Sensory augmentation technologies, for instance, are also being developed for military use, and I surmise that a broader philosophical framework, which takes into account the nature of the relations between military, State, and society, should be brought to bear if we are to understand the true political and ethical implications of such a technology.<sup>4</sup> This, however, is a longer term, book-length project, and merely explains the direction in which I hope to take the fruits of my participation in the workshop. A more immediate outcome is the paper I intend to write after the workshop, perhaps a report that deals with what I have learnt at the workshop, or an article for a refereed journal that uses the knowledge gleaned from the workshop to supplement and challenge Deleuze's philosophy of sensation.

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<sup>4</sup> Attempts will be made, however, to avoid reiterations of arguments for or against technological determinism.