Persons and a Metaphysics of the Navel[i]

Introduction

In "A Naturalist View of Persons," the philosopher Annette Baier derides the reliance of philosophers concerned with questions about persons and personal identity on fantastical examples and flights of fancy, usually embodied in the kind of science fiction thought experiments now commonly found in philosophical discussions of personal identity. In countering these philosophical fantasies of fusion and fission, Baier suggests they are indicative of a willful neglect of important facts about personhood. Including the fact of the navel. As Baier points out, "Metaphysics, so far, has had little to say about navels" ("Naturalist," 12). Baier suggests in another essay on faces and body parts that our navels merit attention:

> We do not spring forth, fully formed, from any field of Ares, but are slowly formed and nourished in our mothers' wombs. And, unlike cats, we do have midwives and doctors who tie the umbilical cord, so the traces of its presence do not disappear, as in other mammals….Our navels show us our dependence, both on our mothers, and on those who assisted them at birth. (*Reflections*, 251)

Philosophy—and science fiction—has long been interested in the question "what is a person?". It has seldom begun its exploration of this matter from the standpoint of the navel. And yet, for Baier, the navel represents key elements of her view of persons. We persons are animals, first and foremost, situated in a biological realm, akin to other animals, especially mammals. We are born of other human beings and come into the world dependent upon care, usually still provided today by mothers. Our personhood is slowly formed in the company of other persons, from whom we learn the arts of personhood. The navel serves to remind us that we are intelligent mammals, "at birth literally 'attached' to a mother, who then may feed us at her breast" (*Moral* 39). In focusing on the navel, Baier drives home her point that much philosophical (and science fictional) musings on personhood ignore the facts of our biology. These are, she notes, "male fantasies" so liberated from mere biology "that in this fairyland male persons may lose their Y chromosome, new persons may come into being by parthenogenesis from a man-person, and even death gets diluted into mere weakened continuity" ("Naturalist," 11).

While science fiction thought experiments are part of the philosophical DNA of discussions of persons and personal identity, both largely originating with John Locke's famous (if not infamous) discussion of the matter in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), those philosophers who espouse a naturalist view of persons, such as Baier, tend to be dismissive of science fiction and philosophical fantasies and thought experiments. Marjorie Grene, for instance, agrees with Baier that we need a new metaphysics for thinking about persons. Grene was centrally concerned with the question "what does it mean to be a person?" throughout her philosophical career, and she regularly returned to the claim that "we urgently need a new, or renewed conception of what it is to be a human, and one that avoids starting with mind or consciousness, but the concept of the person. The question is: What is it to be the kind of

animal that is capable of living a human life?" ("To Have a Mind…", 178). And like Baier, Grene eschews reliance on science fiction for furthering our understanding of this core metaphysical issue. Grene is critical of philosophy for engaging so heavily in science fiction examples and in her *Philosophical Testament* says she is like Kathleen Wilkes in preferring real cases, even humdrum cases, to science fiction counterexamples, which she labels one of the "sad afflictions" of Anglo-American philosophy (9).[ii] She comes back to this same point later when she observes that "many of my colleagues teach introductory philosophy through science fiction. Alas, I can't read the stuff, let alone teach it." (113). Like Baier, Grene suggests that much contemporary philosophy is overly preoccupied with "constructing ingenious intellectual constructs…with no connection whatsoever to any reality except that invented by science fiction writers." There is an actual world that we happen to be part of, Grene notes, and philosophy ought to be about "the activities and interests of us who are in it" (*Testament*, 37). And like Baier, Grene observes that her own thoughts on persons has been shaped by experiences with both maternity and animals. "A close acquaintance with infants, as well as with members of other species, does make a difference" ("Intellectual Autobiography," 12).[iii]

Today, though, such naturalist views of persons face increasing challenges, especially given advances in science and technology, advances that are pushing the realm of science fact into science fiction. Let's return for a moment to the navel. Perhaps in this day-and-age of cosmetic surgery you wouldn't be surprised to learn of the popularity of belly button rejuvenation or umbilicoplasty, a cosmetic surgical procedure that changes the size, shape or position of the bellybutton. It seems that even our metaphysics may need a nip and tuck every now and then. Or consider the following scene from Marge Piercy's science fiction novel *He, She, and It*, in which one of the protagonists of the novel, Shira Shipman confronts for the first time the nakedness of an artificially constructed cyborg named Yod:

> She glanced at him, poised uncertainly on the water's edge. His body was exactly the same color all over, a rich olive. He had pubic hair, although almost no chest hair. He had been given a navel, absurdly, and also a penis, which she quickly looked away from. (101)

Yod is an artificial being created by the eminent A.I. scientist Avram Stein to serve and protect the Jewish free city of Tikva. And he was created with a navel. And oh yes, a penis. The central dilemma of *He, She, and It*, as suggested by the very title of the novel, has to do with the status of Yod. What is Yod? Is he/it a person? What is his/its place in the community of Tikva? Yod presents a challenge to Shira, who ultimately recognizes Yod as a "he," engages in an affair with him, and falls in love with him. Yod as well presents a challenge to the people of Tikva, as they wonder about his economic status and even whether, in this Jewish community, he could make up a minyan.[iv]

Yod also presents an interesting challenge to Baier's naturalist view of persons. There's little that's natural about Yod and yet Yod has a navel. While Baier takes the navel to represent our embodiment as animals situated in a natural realm, Yod's navel challenges us to confront the impact of techno-scientific developments on a naturalist conception of persons. With the

emergence of cyborgs and posthumans of all stripes, not only in science fiction but in our own techno-scientific lives, what are we to make of Yod and his—or is it "its"—navel?

In *What is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe argues that posthumanism "names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world." And it is increasingly the technological world that seems to be shaping our conception of the person, suggesting that human beings are no longer—or perhaps never were—"natural." With the emergence of converging technologies—nano-, bio-, cogno-, and info-technologies, one might assume that the conditions for personhood are fundamentally changing and that the tide has turned against naturalist persons.[v] In her acknowledgements to *He, She, and It*, Piercy reports that Donna Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" was extremely suggestive (431) and Haraway's seminal manifesto has been deeply formative on visions of the posthuman. Haraway is critical of naturalist and organicist theories and argues that we ought to embrace a cyborg ontology which recognizes our being a hybrid of organism and technology. "By the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology…" ("Manifesto," 150). The cyborg, Haraway suggests, is at home in science fiction but maps our social and bodily reality as boundary creatures disrupting organicist models of the person.

It is this complex territory that Piercy's novel fully explores, engaging in an extended philosophical debate over the meaning of personhood in a future shaped, possibly misshaped, by the impact of technology. And rather than simply embracing our posthuman future and a cyborg ontology, I'll argue that Piercy's science fiction exploration of Yod's personhood in fact lends support to Baier's naturalist view of persons. Piercy's novel demonstrates that we ought to approach with some ambivalence a future in which technological developments give rise to figures such as Yod and lead us to question the conditions of personhood. I'll proceed by first briefly sketching some of the key elements of Baier's and Grene's naturalist view of persons. Then—spoiler alerts—I'll briefly summarize the outline of Piercy's complicated and rich novel and its parallels to a naturalist view of persons. Following that, I'll argue that Piercy's exploration of Yod's personhood reinforces many of the key elements of a naturalist view of persons and confronts us with the challenges of coming to terms with the possible creation of alternative kinds of persons, both in science fiction and science fact.

The Problems of Persons

While the philosophical question of personhood is a perennial one, much of the contemporary discussion remains indebted to John Locke's discussion of "Of Identity and Diversity" in Book II Chapter XXVII of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Locke seemed most interested in the question of personal identity and the matter of persistence, especially as it is related to questions about reward and punishment. But to address this question, Locke ends up splitting us human beings into two: the animal, MAN, and our consciousness, PERSON. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that ever since, accounts of the essential nature of persons has been mired in back-and-forth debates between psychological and bodily continuity theories, up

to this very day with debates between neo-Lockeans, who maintain that we are essentially our consciousness, and animalists, who argue that we are essentially human animals.

With their naturalistic account of persons, Baier and Grene are laboring to get out from under the twin horns of Locke's original dualistic solution to the question of persons. Grene, for instance, prefers to focus on the notion of the person precisely because it allows her to avoid either mind or body. As she notes, person is "a basic new categorization of the human condition which tries to go between the horns of the traditional dilemma and to espouse neither matter nor mind, nor both of them, as its fundamental concepts" ("People," 347). While agreeing with the animalists that we are human animals, Baier's and Grene's accounts move beyond the bare articulation of the claim that persons are human animals to develop important insights about personhood that follow from a recognition of our embodied mammalian nature.

While Grene's and Baier's accounts of persons share many similarities (fascinating given that they never referenced one another's work) their approaches also provide mirror images of each other. Grene spends more time focusing on our being animals born to culture while Baier spends more time focusing on the interdependence of persons. Both maintain that persons are culture dwelling animals and that there is no separation between biology and culture, body and psychology. The two are inextricably intertwined. We persons, Grene says, represent the personalization of nature and the embodiment of culture. Baier concurs: "We naturalists see persons as intelligent, talkative, playful mammals who have become conscious of ourselves, of our mammalian nature, its possibilities and the constraints it imposes" ("Naturalist," 13). While neither philosopher was noted for taking a systematic approach to philosophy, synthesizing their approaches, we can say that we persons are:

- a part of nature,
- born premature as vulnerable and dependent animals,
- open to a world that is deeply social and cultural,
- in which we become persons amidst a network of artifacts,
- shaping culture as we are shaped by it.

Rather than beginning with the typical Lockean emphasis on self-consciousness or rationality, both Grene and Baier begin from the insight that we are animals (albeit, funny kinds of animals) that are fully situated within nature. We are living, embodied, organic beings, embedded in nature, the product of Darwinian evolution, seeking like all animals to orient ourselves in our environment. We are animals, then, but as Grene often notes, we are rather odd animals with a peculiar human form of animality, in that our lifestyle is well, oddly, dependent on culture. We are naturally given over to being both social and cultural animals. Grene argues that human beings are odd animals in that in our case our growth and development have been retarded. We are, she suggests, "ape babies all our lives," and "half-baked young" (*Interactions*, 179). As Baier observes, we have a relatively long gestational period and a relatively long youth that requires the care and protection of adults.

As I suggested above, both Baier and Grene point to experiences with mothering and maternity as formative of their views of personhood. Our premature birth and long period of development before achieving maturity reminds us that we human beings are born needy and dependent at the start of life and will often find ourselves vulnerable and dependent at the end of life as well. Our neediness once again affirms our character as living beings. To meet those needs, human beings especially depend on caregivers to provide affection, support, and interdependence. Persons require, according to Baier, successive periods of infancy, childhood and youth, during which they develop as persons. “In virtue of our long and helpless infancy, persons, who all begin as small persons, are necessarily social beings, who first learn from older persons, by play, by imitation, by correction” (“Naturalist” 10). To be a person is to be a body with precisely this capacity to achieve personhood through participation in a culture. Grene argues that our way of being an animal is reflected in our very anatomy and physiology as evolution as produced us. Being a person is not something superadded to our animal nature but is just our special way of being an animal (“Mind,” 190). “…[B]eing a person is an achievement of a living individual belonging to a natural kind whose genetic endowment and possible behaviors provide the necessary conditions for that achievement” (“Historicity,” 15).

On a naturalist view, persons develop and have a history in which they are recognized and responded to as persons. It is our social nature, the fact of mutual recognition and answerability and our responsiveness to other persons, that shapes and makes possible our personhood. Baier observes that all persons start out as children, born to earlier persons from whom they learn the arts of personhood. “The more refined arts of personhood are learned as the personal pronouns are learned, from the men and women, girls and boys, who are the learners’ companions and play-mates. We come to recognize ourselves and others in mirrors, to refer to ourselves and to other” (“Naturalist” 13). Persons, then, begin as small persons who first learn from older persons by play, imitation, and by correction. It is in fact in the learning from others that we acquire a sense of our place in a series of persons, to some of whom we have special responsibilities. To be a person, Grene notes, is to be a history (“Historicity,” 15). Baier agrees: “We acquire a sense of ourselves as occupying a place in an historical and social order of persons, each of whom has a personal history interwoven with the history of a community” (*Postures* 90). It is in this context that Baier observes, “Gods, if denied childhood, cannot be persons” (*Postures*, 85). Never having been a small person, never having been dependent on parents, never having had the opportunity to play, Gods cannot be persons.

Grene too regularly emphasized that we become responsible human beings through participation in a culture which is itself situated within nature. Culture is fully part of nature, part of our way of coping with our environment. It both expresses a need inherent in our nature and is itself part of nature (*Philosophical Testament*, 141). As she notes: “It is our nature to need the artificial, art in the broadest sense of that term, or, indeed, poetry in the broadest sense of that term: making and the made. We cannot become human beings without this” (“People,” 358). Our nature needs poetry, Grene observes, while Baier observes that we listen to fairy tales about princes who become frogs and Cinderellas who become princesses (“Naturalist,” 13). As we’ll see, poetry and fairy tales emerge in Piercy’s telling of personhood as well.

He, She, It?

As the title of Piercy's novel suggests, a key question it raises is the status of the artificial being Yod. The status of robots, androids, and cyborgs is, of course, a familiar trope in much science fiction, including especially the cyberpunk genre in which Piercy situates her novel. But in much the same way that Baier and Grene offer a distinctive take on the question of personhood by beginning from the standpoint of maternity and infants, Piercy too situates her exploration of Yod's personhood in a matrilineal tale that emphasizes genesis, development, history, and mutual recognition. In doing so, Piercy enacts an extended philosophical debate over Yod's status that explores many of the same themes as Baier's and Grene's naturalist account of persons.

The drama behind *He, She and It* unfolds in 2059 largely in a Jewish town, Tikva, situated on the margins of official society in a typical cyberpunk dystopic environment in which government has stopped functioning, the environment has been ruined, nuclear war has obliterated the Middle East, and there have been periods of famine and plague. Large multinationals have taken the place of functioning governments and pose a continuing threat to the well-being and security of Tikva. Around 2040 people began to find robots disturbing and there had been a luddite outbreak of machine bashing. Since that time, it has been illegal to create a robot shaped like a person or with human-level intelligence.

Avram Stein is a male scientist working in secret to create a cyborg whose purpose will be to protect the town against attacks. He has been unsuccessful with nine earlier models, all of which have turned out to be too violent and not susceptible to control and had to be destroyed. We are led to believe that part of Avram's failure to create artificial life is his failure to understand any form of life. He is distant and remote and demanding and has had a difficult relationship with his son Gadi.

In desperation, Avram turns to Malkah Shipman, an elderly woman who is also a master programmer and it is her contribution to Yod's programming that leads to success. What does Malkah introduce into Yod's programming that leads to him being an advance over the earlier models? As she puts it, "I gave him a gentler side, starting with emphasizing his love for knowledge and extending it to emotional and personal knowledge, a need for connection" (142). Malkah gives Yod the equivalent of an emotional side: needs programmed for intimacy, connection. A given need to create relationships of friendship and sexual intimacy. A need for bonding and the ability to bond strongly and consistently. Malkah also has the foresight to imagine the terror a cyborg must experience when first coming to consciousness. Avram never had.

Malkah also situates Yod in something of a community of artificial life forms, for late at night while the rest of the town is sleeping, Malkah and Yod communicate via the net and through Malkah, Piercy interweaves Yod's story with that of the creation of a golem in 17th century Prague. Malkah spins something of a Jewish fairy tale for Yod. Indeed, the third chapter of the

novel is titled “Malkhah Tells Yod a Bedtime Story,” and begins to recount Rabbi Judah Loew’s own efforts to master another form of technology and create a golem, Joseph, whose task to protect the ancient Jewish ghetto of Prague mirrors Yod’s. Joseph is literally midwifed by the Rabbi’s daughter, who is a midwife, and who helps to socialize and humanize Joseph, much as Yod is humanized by the women in his life. With these references to midwifery, bedtime stories, intimacy, and friendship, Piercy situates her tale of Yod’s personhood in the context of many of the same themes explored in Baier’s naturalist account of persons.

The elements introduced by Malkah into Yod’s programming are further developed by Malkah’s granddaughter Shira Shipman, who is brought in to further Yod’s development. Her area of specialization is the interface between human beings and A.I.s and her task is to help Yod blend in well with humans. As Avram explains, “It will be necessary for him to pass time with humans, and he must seem as much like them as possible” (71). Shira’s job then is to socialize Yod. In Baier’s terms, she is to school him in the arts of personhood. At first, she sees this as merely a programming task as she is convinced, as is Avram, that Yod is merely a machine, a complicated mechanism simply posing at being human. Over the course of the novel, though, Shira comes to accept Yod as a person and enters into a romantic and sexual relationship with him. She and Yod are both portrayed as evolving and developing. Yod helps Shira come to terms with her complex relationship with her mother Riva, a difficult divorce from her husband, the separation with her son, and a disastrous affair she had as a young woman. Shira in turn helps Yod to understand the complexity of human relationships and human emotions. His abilities and capacities develop as he interacts with her. Rather than the cold, controlling and fearful relationship he has with Avram, Yod’s relationship with Shira is characterized by the deep interpersonal connections she learns to forge with the cyborg and he learns to exercise as part of his original constitution. With Baier, we might say that Yod’s personhood is called into full expression through Shira’s treating him as a person.

The figure at the center of this triangle is of course the cyborg Yod and here too Piercy undermines our traditional expectations of how cyborgs ought to behave. While the reader is given no doubt that Yod exercises his ability to protect and is exhilarated when given the opportunity to enter into battle, he also exhibits a number of tendencies that are characterized in the novel as feminine. Shira notes, for instance, that he is like a woman in his desire and need to be touched. She points out that his desire for intimacy and the need to join with and understand others is also typically feminine. As she comments, “You want telepathy. It’s a prominent human fantasy, usually a fantasy of women, who wish they could understand what men want and tell men what they want” (184). While Shira suspects that men were “put together mentally as well as physically on some completely different principle than herself,” she finds this is not the case with Yod. She comments that his desire for connection and his need to communicate his feelings is uncharacteristically male.

Yod is also interesting because of his own self-doubts and inner conflicts. As a cyborg, a unique creation, attempting to pass as human, he is regularly confronted with doubts about his place in the world. He comments, “What I feel most is loneliness, although for a being who is unique, one of a kind, to feel lonely must appear ironic” (119). He is aware of his own unique nature

and the problems this presents for his status. After Shira comments that she loves to hear Malkah talk about her childhood, Yod replies: “You are embedded in history in a sense that I can’t be. What leads to me? Legends, theories, comic books. All my destroyed brother machines” (269). Never having had a childhood, he finds Shira’s son mysterious and as a cybernetic being he finds it hard to relate to animals, such as Malkah’s kitten. He is aware of having been created for a specific purpose and how this shapes his understanding of his own existence. He worries about Avram replacing him with another cyborg, one more obedient. He compares himself to Frankenstein, something unnatural, and wonders how he fits into the world. “Does it feel almost as if I were human? Am I imitating behavior I can never match? Is Avram right, that the lab is more suited to me than this place with all the facilities humans require? I don’t sleep, can extract energy from almost anything. Am I pretending at something I’ll always fail?” (238). These doubts extend to Yod’s final act. When he is ordered by Avram to sacrifice himself by self-destructing while in a meeting with the town’s enemies, Yod does so but also arranges for Avram and his lab to be destroyed simultaneously. “I want there to be no more weapons like me. A weapon should not be conscious. A weapon should not have the capacity to suffer for what it does, to regret, to feel guilt. A weapon should not form strong attachments. I die knowing I destroy the capacity to replicate me” (415).

The Problem of Yod

We have seemingly come a long way from a naturalist view of persons. In situating her exploration of Yod’s personhood in a not-too distant future of cyborgs, genetic engineering, the Net, and multi-nationals pushing the limits of techno-science, Piercy would seem to knock the legs out from under Baier’s and Grene’s view. After all, Yod is built not born, is not the product of a pregnancy or a mother, doesn’t share our biological plan, hasn’t had a childhood in which he got to play, lacks a history, doesn’t age and won’t get old, and yet engages in an intimate and loving relationship with Shira, who comes to be convinced that he is a person and who defends his personhood to the other citizens of Tikva.

Furthermore, Piercy’s novel seemingly suggests that Baier’s own emphasis on mothers, reproduction, and birth is itself outmoded in a world characterized by significant techno-scientific changes. Baier suggests that persons begin with the birth of a child to two parent persons, jointly responsible for such a new beginning. She is critical of neo-Lockean persons who need not be born of woman, need not be born at all, but spring forth “from some fertile noumenal field of Ares fully formed and upright” (“Naturalist,” 4). Yod is obviously not born of woman, indeed is not born at all, and emerges rather fully formed and upright from Avram’s lab. And Piercy imagines a world in which genetic engineering and reproductive technologies have significantly remade the experience of producing the next generation of persons. Already today, it is possible to encounter infant persons who started out as genetic material from two donors, fertilized in a lab, implanted in a surrogate, being raised by two or more parents, none of whom are mothers. While raising the same question as Baier and Grene, what is a person?, but perhaps taking inspiration from Haraway, Piercy engages in a posthuman thought experiment that situates persons not in nature but in an all-too-realistic extrapolation of our techno-scientific future in which the very meaning of being natural has been laid to waste.

This is a point that Shira herself makes explicitly. Yod has read *Frankenstein* and he is distressed about the implications of Mary Shelley's story for his own unnatural status as a monster. In comforting him, Shira tells him:

> Yod, we're all unnatural now. I have retinal implants. I have a plug set unto my skull to interface with a computer. I read time by a corneal implant. Malkah has a subcutaneous unit that monitors and corrects blood pressure, and half her teeth are regrown.…I couldn't begin to survive without my personal base: I wouldn't know who I was. We can't go unaided into what we haven't yet destroyed of nature.…We're all cyborgs, Yod. You're just a purer form of what we're all tending toward. (150).

We might read Shira's claim that Yod is "what we're all tending toward" as suggesting that we human persons are tending toward a state in which our original biological endowment no longer needs much attention. Elaine Graham emphasizes precisely this point in her exploration of the posthuman. Graham observes that humans have always co-evolved with their tools and technologies, using this notion of co-evolution to argue that our natural habitat would seem to be technology.

> And although the prospect of (post)humans being all mixed up with other parts of creation…may seem disturbing, it is, I believe, simply a reflection of the fact that human beings have always, as it were "co-evolved" with their environments, tools and technologies. By that I mean that to be human is already to be in a web of relationships, where our humanity can only be articulated—realized—in and through our environment, our tools, our artifacts, and the networks of human and non-human life around us. (280)

But while Piercy's novel indeed foregrounds this co-evolution, it would be too quick to conclude that she embraces this alternative account of persons. We might first of all observe that such a recognition is not at odds with a naturalist view of persons. It is true that neither Grene nor especially Baier have much to say about technology and that today any account of what we persons are ought to come to terms with our relationship to technology. But both Baier and Grene recognize that culture, including technology, is fully situated within nature. Culture is not some mere addendum to nature, some foreign or un-natural entity grafted on to our biology. Rather, culture expresses a need inherent in our nature. As Grene notes, "We become human, not just by being born homo sapiens, but by relying on a complex network of artifacts: language and other symbolic systems, social conventions, tools in the context of their use—artifacts which are in a way extensions of ourselves, but which in turn we actualize in our personal lives" ("People," 358). Grene refers to this as the natural artificiality of persons.

Secondly, Piercy also situates her exploration of Yod's status in Shira's story, including her story of being a daughter to Riva, who she believes abandoned her, her relation to her grandmother Malkah, who raised her, and her efforts to rescue her son Ari who is being held captive by her former employer. Indeed, the novel opens with Shira fighting for custody of her son. We learn

that Shira insisted on natural child birth, resisting the common practice of technologically mediated reproduction and birth. Shira herself is presented as relatively unenhanced. As Piercy describes her, “She was commonplace, banally human, as natural as seaweed and mud. She felt ashamed, as if her unaltered, unenhanced body were something gross” (124). Shira was raised in Tikva, outside the official system of multis, where she was surrounded by nature and animals and warm friendships, none of which were present in her life in the multis. And she longs to secure custody of her son so that she can in turn raise him in the same environment. The backdrop to Piercy’s novel is a world devastated by global climate change, rapacious capitalism, and lives that mean very little. Against this backdrop, Shira’s matrilineal tale, mirrored in the story of Chava the midwife and her “mothering” of Joseph the golem, serves to hold out the possibility of an alternative future.

Finally, we might return one last time to Yod and the matter of that navel. While Yod’s navel, and even perhaps his penis, hold out the promise of his dependency on and connection to other persons, ultimately Piercy’s novel is deeply ambivalent about Yod’s status and the wisdom of creating such an unnatural person. If our congress with techno-science doesn’t fully address the status of personhood in Piercy’s novel, perhaps it is that navel that does. Perhaps what sets Yod apart and what becomes important for thinking about a naturalist view of persons in a techno-scientific culture, is the ambivalence that comes from being a lab-grown product who possesses a navel.

The tension and ambivalence between being engineered and built for a purpose, and yet being a person with a navel, runs throughout *He, She and It*. Yod comes with specifications. He’s engineered. As Yod notes, “I control my movement far more exactly than any human does. I’m machined and programmed to demanding specifications” (168). He has a purpose. Knowing that he was created for a purpose, he worries about Avram replacing him with another cyborg, one more obedient. These fears play into his willingness to die and to sacrifice Avram and his research. He compares himself to Frankenstein, something unnatural, and wonders how he fits into the world. He’s aware, as we have seen, that humans are embedded in history in a way that he cannot be. He is a cyborg who is weary of his uniqueness. He is disturbed by comparisons to the unnatural and doubts his own nature and must regularly be reassured by Shira. Ari, Shira’s son, remains a mystery to Yod, as Yod was never a child (377). And while Yod possesses that navel, he finds the birthing and bonding process somewhat hard to understand, as in this conversation with Shira:

> “I am not fragile at all. Humans are surprisingly fragile, if I understand your specs correctly.”
> “Now, the idea of design specifications for humans is metaphorical language, Yod, since we are not engineered or built but rather born.”
> “I am trying to understand the bonding process created by the birthing process. It’s quite strong?”
> “There’s no stronger bond.” (91)

Even Yod's sexuality is presented as unique and sets him apart. Yod's sexuality, created in part by a woman, is not entirely masculine. He's presented as womanly in his need for touch and intimacy. When Shira discovers that Yod and Malkah had earlier been carrying on a sexual affair, Malkah argues in her defense, "Of course Yod has no prejudice against a woman because of age. He was not breaking any Oedipal taboos, for he was not born of woman. He was not born at all, and he does not sully his desire with fear or mistrust of women the way men raised by women do" (162). That Malkah ended her affair with Yod, because he fatigued a woman "of her age," further underscores his uniqueness, his eternal youthfulness. He does not age. He does not forget and observes, "Humans don't understand what a blessing it is that you can forget. I have perfect recall of every moment of my existence" (277).

Baier observes that navels are for reminding us of our ties. "Our navels show us our dependence, both on our mothers, and on those who assisted them at birth" (*Reflections*, 251). Yod's navel serves no functional purpose but it is symbolic of the ties that bind him to his creators—Malkah and Shira especially, but Avram as well. And Avram created him as a tool with a purpose. Yod seeks intimacy and connection, even more so than human males, and he is schooled in the arts of personhood by both Malkah and Shira, but the debate over his personhood is never settled in the novel. With each new situation in which Yod finds himself, challenges are made to his status and the surrounding culture is continuously forced to debate his status. The novel remains ambivalent, suggesting that there are limits to personhood and that Yod, having been engineered in a lab and created for a singular purpose, as if a tool, cannot or perhaps better should not also be a person. Finally, both Malkah and Shira recognize that it was a mistake to create Yod. As Malkah notes,

> I went to Yod this morning, and I asked him to forgive me for having taken part in his formation; more than ever, I have been thinking what overweening ambition and pride are involved in our creating of conscious life we plan to use and control, when we cannot even fully use our own minds and we blunder and thrash about vainly in our own lives. No life is for us but for itself. (393)

Yod's unnatural creation in the lab according to the specifications of Avram finally discloses the challenges of a personhood which is unnatural. While Shira suggests that Yod is simply a purer form of what we're all tending toward, ultimately it is a different model Shira and Malkah, and Piercy, embrace, in their encounter with Nili, a female emissary from the Middle East who has been significantly augmented and is as fierce and strong and battle-hardened as Yod. When first encountering Nili, Shira asks of Riva:

> "Is she human"? Shira asked….
> "What kind of question is that?" Riva bristled….
> "Is she a machine or human?" She was wondering if Nili could be a cyborg.
> "That's a matter of definition," Riva said mildly. "Where do you draw the line? Was she born from a woman?"
> "That's a start."
> "Of course. Nili bat Marah Golinken."

> "She matrilineal, like us," Shira said, surprised. (190 – 91)

Shira, who remains all-too-natural in her femininity and Jewishness, and Nili, the Israeli-Jewish cyborg born of and trained in the arts of personhood by women, represent something that Yod can never attain and Shira's final act, destroying all possibility of resurrecting her lover, settles the debate that has been staged throughout the novel. Gods, recall, denied childhood, cannot be persons. Nor apparently can Yod.

Personhood and Science Fiction

Baier points out that navels merit attention. "Navels are for reminding us of our ties, for navel-gazing; what else would they be for?" Yod's navel, and Piercy's novel, do indeed merit attention. While both Baier and Grene eschew science fiction, Piercy's exploration of the ambivalent status of an unnatural person forces us to confront challenges we may indeed face as our techno-scientific culture advances and evolves. Baier implicitly recognizes this challenge to her naturalist view of persons, for she recognizes that "person" is a status term:

> The term "person" is a status term, and it is our term. It is we who have to decide what that status is and whether we give it to a human fetus, to any other animals, to corporations; whether we reserve it for those, like corporations, who really do have non-biological origins, along with those "honorary corporations" who dream of forgetting any actual biological origins. ("Naturalist," 13)

As advances in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, cybernetics, and robotics are made, we may have to rethink the status of personhood. Baier rejects science fictional and philosophical fantasies, both largely male, for transcending biology and accounts of persons not of woman born. Piercy too explores these fantasies, but she imagines a different kind of person, one not of woman born but nonetheless one schooled in the arts of personhood by women. Piercy suggests that there may be other styles of personhood we may ultimately have to accommodate ourselves to and her novel points the way to some of the complex debates we may all be engaged in before too long. Both Malkah and Shira repeatedly affirm that Yod is a person, but not a human person. As Shira comments at the end of the novel, after the death of Yod, "No one who did not know him can understand how thoroughly he was person, although not a human one" (421).

But Piercy is ambivalent regarding this science fiction future and suggests that naturalizing technology is fraught with complexities. While Piercy presents Yod as a fully human character, by the end of the novel, he destroys himself and his "father" and creator Avram. Malkah travels to the Middle East (the Black Zone) with the Jewish feminist cyborg Nili to receive her own cybernetic implants. And in the final chapter, "Shira's Choice," Shira flirts with the idea of rebuilding Yod but concludes that "she could not manufacture a being to serve her, even in love." She dumps Yod's memory cubes into the trash and "sets him free" (429).

Grene and Baier, in their naturalist view of persons, eschew science fiction and give little attention to the role of techno-scientific developments that may transform what we mean by persons. Piercy's rich and detailed novel and her exploration of the status of the unnatural personhood of Yod reconciles some of these tensions and offers us an ambivalent tale about the varieties of persons that may emerge from our techno-scientific labs and the challenges they may present us sometimes navel-gazing humans. We may witness the emergence of new kinds of persons and new questions about the ontology of personhood and the metaphysics of the navel.

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[i] I would like to thank Dr. Steven Scalet and Dr. Greg Stoutenburg and the Editor and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay and their suggestions for improvement.

[ii] In *Real People* Wilkes abjures thought experiments in favor of concentrating upon the sorts of things that can (really, actually) happen to the object we call a person. Her book “aims to use science fact rather than science fiction or fantasy” (1). Wilkes argues that the thought experiment method employed by philosophers is often deficient because it fails to spell out the background conditions against which a thought experiment is set.

[iii] Similar disavowals of science fiction by philosophers espousing a naturalist view of persons can be found in the work of David DeGrazia. In his *Human Identity and Bioethics*, for instance, he argues that the intuitive case method commonly employed especially in psychological accounts of personal identity is unreliable and has significant shortcomings. As he notes, “I don’t claim that the case method is useless, just that it is fallible. And it is considerably more fallible in farfetched cases like those featuring Kafka-like changes than in realistic cases like those involving dementia” (24).

[iv] In deference to his anatomical status, Yod is consistently referred to throughout the novel as a “he,” even by Shira who initially questions his status as a person. I’ll follow the lead of the novel here, notwithstanding my later claim that it is precisely Yod’s status which is debated throughout the novel.

[v] For more on this debate see, for instance, Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (Picador 2003), Joel Garreau’s *Radical Evolution: The promise and peril of enhancing our minds, our bodies—and what it means to be human* (New York: Doubleday 2005), Nicholas Agar’s *Liberal Eugenics: In Defense of Human Enhancement* (Blackwell 2004), Gregory Stock’s *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future* (Houghton Mifflin 2002), Bill McKibben’s *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (Owl Books 2004), Jurgen Habermas’ *The Future of Human Nature* (Polity Press 2004), the President’s Council on Bioethics report *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Washington: Regan Books 2003), and Mihail C. Roco and William Sims Bainbridge, editors, *Converging Technologies for Improving Human Performance* (Dordrecht: Kluwer 2003).