

# The Age of Perversion

Desire and Technology in  
Psychoanalysis and Culture

Danielle Knafo &  
Rebecca Rose



the consequences for the clinical situation when patient and analyst are from different cultures, and on the need for psychoanalysts to accept the degree to which they knowingly satisfy their own wishes during treatment hours, often to the patient's detriment.

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I (Knafo) am very indebted to the patients who gave me permission to tell their stories on the pages of this volume. My deep schooling has always begun in the clinic.

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## Introduction

### The age of perversion

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Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made  
nothing entirely straight can be carved.

— Immanuel Kant

In a moment of naked self-revelation, a patient of Dr. Knafo described his character:

What the hell is it with me? For as long as I can remember, I have this twist. Something crooked, something that wants to turn away from what everyone else turns toward. As a kid I wanted to stay home whenever my family went out and go out whenever they stayed home. They'd all get dressed up, and my mother would yell at me to get dressed, and I wouldn't do it. I'd insist on staying behind. They knew if they dragged me along, I'd make them miserable. So they'd finally go out without me. As my father backed the car out of the driveway, I'd go to the window to watch it pull away, feeling miserable because they'd left me behind. How could they do that? Till this day when I sit down at a holiday dinner, I still have to fight the urge to rip away the tablecloth, sending all the food and dishware crashing to the floor. It's this twist, this urge that is sometimes so powerful it's like a commandment from God. But not a God interested in order, normalcy, or goodness. But one whose delight is to upset order, to destroy it, and bring everything crashing down, to show up order for the sham it is or maybe cause a more honest order, I'm not sure. I just know I'm twisted. Twisted away from everything everyone else wants to be part of. I try to belong, I try to fit in, but I can't believe in what I'm trying

to fit into. It just doesn't work. It's all bullshit, but what I'm doing is bullshit too. No matter what I do to get my life right, I can't because I just have to walk that crooked path, wherever it leads.<sup>1</sup>

What a perfect term to convey an intimation of the perverse: the crooked path. Perversity wants to twist away from the norm, transgress against the law, move the path away from its intended or original course, turn away from truth, whether it is an accepted truth (which, indeed, may be false) or some inner truth, which cannot be faced. It desires control, mastery, even transcendence. It involves dissatisfaction, anger, restlessness, and impudent impulse. It is a railing against the way things are. It rebels. It challenges. It disturbs. It is a friend of both creative inspiration and destructive violation.

Perversity first needs to be understood, as Freud (1953b [1905]) observed, as a universal human characteristic and, as Ernest Becker (1973) noted, at the core of the human plight. It is a basic human orientation (Unger, 2007). Given the right vector of hereditary, personal history, and social forces, perversity can become solidified as a character trait or a compulsive act. Though there is no definitive dividing line between the perverse tendency and perversion per se (and surely it is easier to describe perverse tendencies than to define what constitutes perversion), perversion will manifest after a tendency becomes fixed in character and behavior – as a psychic structure and a set of attendant enactments. The possibility that perversion can overlap with addiction (in its compulsive nature and the pleasure it delivers) and criminality (in the harm it sometimes causes others) complicates matters.

Yet what does it *feel* like – this engagement in perversion? What is the affective nature of its embodiment? Does it feel coolly victorious in the cunning deception that exploits the other to mask the doer's own insecurity and terror, or radiantly passionate in sacrificing the doer and the other to a greater vision? Does it feel like a thrill in breaking the law that protects or a righteous battle against the law that constrains? Does it feel like the excitement of a private sexual or social enactment that liberates, or a repeated compulsion that leads to a psychic or social cul-de-sac? Is it a fine magic, this swelling of Eros, this sharp, intoxicating taste of midnight in a bottle, or is it a failed bid for transcendence? Is it the hardening of the master's will, the softening of the slave's submission, the tireless ritual, the freaky fetish, the scene

that swamps the existential emptiness with raw excitement, the frenzy inside the house that keeps the wolves away from the door? Or is it the inherent need to rail against and rise above limitation; the deeply creative and restless impulse to break some shackle of thought, feeling, and action; the ceaseless revision of the forms through which we live; the shattering that creates us anew (Bersani, 1986, 1995; Saketopoulou, 2014, 2015)? Does it deceive, does it reveal, or does it often walk some fine line between the two? And why is it so much a part of who we are?

A humorous answer to this last question is that the perverse exposes the dominance of the body with its abject exudations, fluids, and waste products, its neediness and mortality, and the wild urges a person may feel regarding its carnal potential. The body as the failed project, the doomed base of all narcissistic operations, is the self's tragic comedy or comedic tragedy. A hilarious and offensive medley of humorous perversion is dished up in Paul Provenza's 2005 documentary film, *The Aristocrats*, about an old and favorite transgressive inside joke among comedians, one that was never shared with the public until the making of the film. The joke always begins with the same introduction: a family and their pet dog walk into a talent scout's office, and the father says, "We have an act we want to show you." The joke always ends with the same punchline, but the middle content is where each comedian adlibs his or her own version of a "filthy" description of the act, which involves every known perversion imaginable: incest, group sex, defecation, necrophilia, bestiality, and other taboo behaviors. In the film, each successive comedian telling the joke renders it more shocking, which results in some members of the audience roaring with laughter and others heading for the nearest exit in outraged and disgusted silence. The movie's relentless ramping up of verbal lawlessness reflects the tendency of perversion to escalate aggression and push against the boundaries of circumscribed values. When asked by the agent for the name of the act, each comedian delivers the dry punchline: "The Aristocrats." Oddly enough, there is something humorous in the wild way perverse fantasy "shits" on everything sacred, if we set aside for a moment the inner turmoil that may give birth to such a fantasy. Out of the frustration of human limitation, a doer excitedly imagines destroying limits.

The family in the joke calls itself *The Aristocrats* (or sometimes *The Sophisticates*), words that belie the content of the family act and the associations with those chosen words. This opposition highlights with

gross humor the human problem of being both an animal body *and* a conscious self, the existential bind where little if any reconciliation exists between the sweating, defecating, grunting, and doomed primate and the majestic ephemeral “I” (The Aristocrats) aspiring to self-worth, meaning, dignity, transcendence, and immortality. Ernest Becker (1973) bluntly noted, “We are simultaneously worms and gods ... gods with anuses” (p. 51). The joke in the film spotlights the absurd abyss between the symbolic order of society – with its systems of meaning that deny death – and the utterly indifferent and determinate order of nature. We laugh at the joke with each creative retelling, because we know that abyss only too well, hovering merely a breath above it; we find catharsis in humor’s temporarily harnessing and mastery of our fear.

The perversions of the family in the joke are social as well as sexual. The Aristocrats want to perform for an audience, which constitutes a social act. Yet they are already imagined performing for an audience through the telling of the joke. It is easy to miss the social aspect of the perversion at work here, since the outrageous sexual transgressions obscure it. Moreover, the string of comedians who tell their own versions of the joke simultaneously narrate versions of themselves. The way they tell the joke covertly reveals their relationship to the perverse and the existential abyss that invites the telling. Finally, the film includes the audience as voyeurs, witnessing a kind of initiation into the world of comedy, a rite of passage that crosses the boundary of all propriety. Yet, it is an “act” inside a “joke,” and this distancing makes the “crooked path” in extremis an object of the audience’s laughter, while disrupting their relationship to the norm and suggesting that they share more with The Aristocrats than they’d like to admit. How could they laugh or even storm out of the theater if they didn’t?

The crooked path is the subject of this volume, especially where the path crosses culture and technology. The authors aim to better clarify the phenomenon of perversion, expanding its theoretical reach beyond the sexual – into the social sphere of life – and show how the rapid growth of technology and its easy availability have facilitated a culture of perversion. This culture of perversion contains both generative and destructive potential.

Interestingly, both perversion and technology aggressively violate normative boundaries in an attempt to lessen existential and personal threat, transcend limitation to create new norms, and open fresh

spaces of possibility. Both respond to the trauma of limit (for the limit kills) and the limits of trauma (which hides a death). In responding to the threat and limitation of the body and the world, perversion and technology bring with them unforeseen discoveries, pathways, and pleasures, as well as some grave dangers.

### **A rose by any other name?**

For a number of reasons, the concept of perversion is central to the arguments made in this book. In 1985, renowned sex researcher Robert Stoller began his book about erotic excitement by defending his use of the term perversion. He admitted that the term was highly charged with “nasty” and pejorative implications, and that many from both within and without the mental health community objected to its usage. In 1980, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) renamed perversion as paraphilia, a term Stoller referred to as a “wet noodle” that conveyed nothing. He argued to retain the term perversion precisely because of its connotative connection with sin. According to Stoller, the excitement in perversion depends on the feeling that one is sinning or going against the norm, and, therefore, the very objection to the term necessarily fuels the fire.

In the 30 years since Stoller wrote his defense of the term perversion, many more have voiced their claims that the term is no longer relevant (Blechner, 2009; Corbett, 2013; de Sousa, 2003; Dimen, 2001; Foucault, 1990 [1976]; Soble, 2006; Žižek, 2003). Particularly convincing is the argument that homosexuality was once labeled a perversion, which proves that times change and what people consider to be aberrant behavior also changes. Why then a book on perversion in the twenty-first century?

After carefully reading arguments on both sides of the issue, we have decided to retain the term perversion. We acknowledge some problematic usages of the term, but we believe the theoretical concept of perversion needs to be preserved simply because it illuminates controversial, atypical, anti-normative, and especially bizarre, dangerous, destructive, and seemingly inexplicable behaviors, as well as their possible underlying psychological structures. We join others (Amir, 2013; Bach, 1994a; Celenza, 2014; Kaplan, 1991a, 1991b; Roudinesco, 2009 [2007]; Saketopoulou, 2012, 2015; Stein, 2005, 2008; Welldon,



2009, 2011) who believe that the term perversion is the best we have to describe these phenomena. This may change in the future. Indeed, we think the concept of perversion is more relevant today than when Stoller defended it back in 1985, especially considering the vast social changes being wrought by the techno-revolution of the twenty-first century.

For this reason primarily, we intend to expand the concept of perversion into the social domain and argue that it is found in any human system whose aim, purpose, or meaning is – by the very operation of that system – reversed, undermined, violated, or destroyed. Further on we examine how many corporations and organizations violate their own principles, debasing the order they support and exploiting the members they purport to serve. Perversion is also found in systems or laws designed or intended to exploit, manipulate, oppress, demean, and dehumanize human beings. The Nuremberg Laws, which institutionalized Nazi anti-Semitism, were passed in September 1935 by the Reichstag and provide a classic example. We might call such laws or systems *perversion on purpose*. We will show how social perversion contains many of the elements identified in psychoanalytic writings on sexual perversion: splitting, disavowal, illusion, means–end reversal, dehumanization, and even delight in exploitation.

On the other hand, a rebellious and transgressive activity originating within a normative framework that undermines and challenges some aspect of that frame may be considered perverse (perhaps even a perversion) and yet work to change things for the better. A classic example of this positive aspect of perversion is found in Galileo's insistence that the earth moved and (horror of all horrors) orbited the sun, meaning that Earth was not the center of the universe. His theory contradicted the medieval cosmology taught by the Roman Church and a papacy believed to be infallible. Galileo was eventually brought to the Vatican, made to kneel and recant his theory, found guilty of heresy and imprisoned. Pope Urban VIII called his scientific discovery "the greatest scandal in Christendom" (Langford, 1992, p. 234). Galileo's transgressive theory helped pave the way for modern science and was the first shattering blow to medieval cosmology and the iron grip the Church exercised over the minds of its followers. Not surprisingly, it took the Church some 350 years to formally forgive Galileo

for his transgression in the name of truth. As with Galileo's discovery, many civil and social rebellions provide examples of perversity (that is, breaking down limits and common belief systems) that have served justice-seeking and life-affirming outcomes: slave rebellions, suffragettes fighting for women's right to vote, women's liberation, the civil rights movement, mass protest against war and civil injustice, non-violent civil disobedience, etc.

We believe, with Freud, that the tendency to perversion is universal, though we see it rooted not only in personal history but also in the existential issues of self-definition, self-preservation, and especially mortality. Accordingly, we expand the idea of trauma as the hidden element driving perverse enactments (Stoller, 1975) from the personal to the existential domain: not merely the threats and insults a person has already faced but those yet to come; those that exist within the very framework of the social order. In other words, threat, insult, and trauma are indigenous to human existence and remain at large in the social frame, which seeks to contain and limit them.

The combination of intelligent self-awareness and knowledge of mortality creates a deeply troubled and anxious animal that must act out against his or her existential situation in any number of ways – some creative, some seemingly strange, and some decidedly destructive. All such animals live within a traumatic context, beset with the trauma already endured and threatened by the trauma yet to come. All such animals are burdened with moral capability, haunted by mortality, and hungry for transcendence. All are capable of turning away from the order described as proper and good. All are potentially dangerous when threatened. And all will have a perverse core and an intractable problem with desire.

Therefore, we wish to be clear at the outset that our position on perversion is not one that is categorically pejorative or morally judgmental, or one that perpetuates an "us versus them" mentality in discussing sexual or social perversion. Muriel Dimen said it best in the title of her 2001 paper, "Perversions Is Us?" – though we choose to dispense with the question mark altogether. We see some perverse manifestations as generative, some as benign though appearing strange, and some as patently dangerous and destructive. One size does not fit all. Furthermore, we consider perversion as having a social dimension,

one that has far more effect than any set of individual sexual practices. We find the concept of perversion especially useful in understanding what is happening in society today, especially regarding the dehumanization of people and/or the humanization of objects. This aspect of perversion is being widely disseminated throughout the social scene via the technological revolution that began around the time the Internet became available to the masses in 1991 (Bryant, 2011).

As the boundary between humanity and the machine erodes, people move easily into virtual relating and fetishistic attachments to their devices that have become indispensable to daily life. The commodification and dehumanization of people, the progressive integration of technology into every aspect of human life, the creation and progression of virtual realities that invite immersion, the reactive regression of fundamentalism that meets the twenty-first-century world with barbaric violence, all point to a culture of perversion. The authors say this with full awareness that some will bristle at the suggestion that people today are living in a perverse culture. Yet it is entirely possible that the term perversion will follow in “queer’s” footsteps – that is, just as *queer* was once used pejoratively against those with same-sex desires, it was reclaimed in the 1970s and 1980s to assert a politicized identity and even became a respected theory (Wortham, 2016). The unconcealed popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the appearance of numerous websites (e.g., Fetlife.com, Literotica.com, Alt.com, and Kink.com welcome many millions of visitors each month) and blogs on the Internet, like the one stating, “We are perverts and we are proud,” indicate that the term is already undergoing a transformation.<sup>2</sup> Nicki Glaser’s popular Comedy Central TV show, *Not Safe*, features episodes about sexting, panty licking, foot fetishism, and more. She ends each show playfully with the words, “Good night pervs!” Indeed, words, like “pervertible,” are entering our vocabulary to designate ordinary objects that are reimagined as tools of perversion, and some products are marketed through their association to perversion, as in “Perversion Mascara” by Urban Decay.

Taking an entrenched position for or against what is occurring is naive and unproductive. Rather, there is a need to examine these developments through honest theoretical rumination that admits ignorance about where these changes may be leading. This subject is complex, problematic, political, and far from politically correct. For all these

reasons, we have taken it on. This is certainly controversial terrain, but only by entering that dangerous ground will it be possible to understand the strange world human beings currently live in and perhaps the stranger world yet to come.

### The age of perversion

In 1947, W. H. Auden published a book-length poem titled “The Age of Anxiety.” The poem’s message clearly struck a nerve in many, as it gave a name to the crippling worry associated with postwar angst. In 1979, American social critic Christopher Lasch claimed in his best-selling book that we were living in a culture of narcissism. He blamed parents for relinquishing childrearing responsibilities to others, thereby interfering with the child’s necessary attachment to the mother and creating a generation of insecure narcissists. In 2001, after the September 11 attacks, some began referring to our time as the age of terror (Talbot & Chanda, 2001; Taylor, 2008), calling attention to increased civilian threats due to worldwide terrorism. In 2006, Michael Eigen wrote that we live in an age of psychopathy, citing the fanatical cultural ruthlessness of winning at any cost: gaining power, money, and position regardless of social consequences. This preceded the financial crisis of 2008, an event precipitated by enormous amounts of corporate lying, cheating, and corruption.

All of these so-called “ages” continue to live within people – anxiety, narcissism, terror, and psychopathy. Forty million adult Americans are currently diagnosed with anxiety disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009). “Selfie,” a photo taken of oneself with a handheld camera and often posted on social network venues, was proclaimed the new word of 2013 (Brumfield, 2013). More recently, selfie sticks, otherwise known as “narcisticks,” have been declared a public nuisance and banned in some public places (Murphy, 2015). Global terrorism continues to be ranked as one of the top five problems facing the world today (European Commission, 2009). Finally, continued corporate and political scandals as well as Ponzi schemes, such as the one that culminated in the Madoff debacle, are indicative of the deeply ingrained greed and corruption in the social and economic structures of society.

Although we agree that anxiety, narcissism, terror, and psychopathy are powerful forces in today’s culture, we see them subsumed in what

we call *the age of perversion*. The current age incorporates the other eras and can be understood as emerging from and coping with existential and social anxiety and terror against a backdrop of endless war, longstanding economic uncertainty, continued corruption within governing and financial bodies, the loss of faith in leadership, the lack of a coherent vision that unites a people, and the increased instability of social bonds. Additionally, enormous advances in communication and computation technology are facilitating a sea change in the expression of social and sexual desires and hastening an era – sometimes labeled posthuman (Hayles, 1999; Fukuyama, 2002) – in which objectification, dehumanization, and disembodiment are becoming the norm. However, current technologies influencing this social trend may also lead to a future that is beyond anyone's current capacity to evaluate, as these technologies reframe what it means to be human. It is difficult to know at this point whether the age of perversion will lead to social and existential dead-ends or to new and better worlds. We will look at both sides of the question.

### Technology and intimacy

Technology, from its very beginnings, walked the crooked path, for it challenged limits, shattered notions about the possible, and transcended constraint – the ultimate constraint, of course, being death itself. Human beings have now entered an era of unprecedented technological development that is progressively eradicating the boundary between plastic and flesh, wire and artery, computer and brain. This explosive time heralds a new kind of life, both intriguing and frightening, in which machines become more like humans and humans more like machines. Robot engineering, artificial intelligence (AI), and computer-assisted technology are among the fastest-growing and most fascinating arenas in science today. The human-machine interface already has been indelibly fixed in our consciousness. Futurist Thomas Frey (2014) has predicted that 50 percent of our current jobs will be performed by robots by the year 2030. Books like *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (Carr, 2013) and *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (Ford, 2015) make similar arguments. Robotic advances are already evident in the areas of cars (the self-driving automobile), warfare (drones and battlebots), education (distance learning), and

medicine (eldercarebots and robotic surgery), to name only a few examples.

In our daily lives, most of us would feel lost or incomplete without our laptops, cell phones, tablets, and iPods. One 13-year-old said, “I would rather not eat for a week than get my phone taken away ... I literally feel like I’m going to die” (Hadad, 2015). Our bodies have already assimilated artificial body parts, such as valves and shunts, replacement hips and knees, prosthetic limbs, brain and cochlear implants, and biometric chips. Scientists like Ray Kurzweil and Erik Baard view the body as a structure to be redesigned, modified, and monitored as a medical and performative object (Baard, 2009). Chip Walter (2006) believes that we will soon morph from *Homo sapiens* to *Cyber sapiens*, creatures that are part digital and part biological. The scientific community is already beginning to think seriously about the consequences of creating conscious machines in the future. “Once you have a machine that’s intelligent enough to improve its own software and hardware,” says Stuart Russell, a professor of computer science and engineering at UC Berkeley, “then there’s no limit to how smart it can become. It can add as much hardware as it wants, it can reprogram itself with much better algorithms, and then it rapidly goes far beyond human comprehension and human abilities” (Wernick, 2014). Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates have warned that advanced AI in the future could pose a serious threat to humanity (Barrat, 2015).

What is becoming clearer by the day is how the perverse partnerships with technology (e.g., cell phones) and new perversions (e.g., cybersex addiction) emerge as general trends in society and, conversely, how society changes to incorporate them in a normative framework. This we call *techno-perversion*, the cultural perversion facilitated by technology that rapidly changes interpersonal and social norms. For instance, the phenomenon of catfishing (see Chapter 6), the creation of fictional online identities for the purposes of seduction and exploitation, would not be possible without the Internet. Interestingly, as we develop technology, we create more technology to help us control our addiction to technology. New apps are developed to help block and control Internet usage to curtail the “data-driven life” (Singer, 2015) and how-to books are counseling ways to stay human in a posthuman world (Lanier, 2011; Carr, 2011; Powers, 2011; Rushkoff,



2010). Not surprisingly, many technological marvels are a response to the universal human need for connection. For example, some people spend hours every day on Facebook, laboring under the illusion that they have hundreds of “friends.” What kind of people are we becoming as we incorporate and develop intimate relationships with machines?

Within the psychoanalytic tradition, the behavioral aspects of perversion are said to result in dehumanization and eroticization of an object (Freud, 1953b [1905], 1961c [1927]; Stoller, 1973; Bach, 1994a; Khan, 1979). From this viewpoint, the current proliferation of technology facilitates perverse relating, since it invites disembodiment and dehumanization; a person can become an object or sexually act on one, even falling in love with the object. Spike Jonze’s film *Her* (Ellison, Jonze, & Landay, 2013) about a man’s romance with his operating system, received rave reviews and was touted as “prophetic” and “profound” (Generation Film, 2013). Similarly, *Ex Machina* (MacDonald, Reich, & Garland, 2015) is a film about a man who very convincingly develops a romantic interest in an android. Person-to-person contact is increasingly being replaced with person-to-machine contact, and as machines become more intelligent and interactive, this trend will become more common. In Japan, many men have already fallen in love with a digital girlfriend made by Nintendo on a dating sim game, *Love Plus*. One even married “her” (Lah, 2009).

D. W. Winnicott (1975 [1951]) was the first to point out the phenomenon of relational objects. He brought attention to the infant who soothes itself and finds comfort in its baby blanket and teddy bear, and to the child who creates an imaginary friend. This occurrence demonstrates that people are hardwired to use objects and imagination in a relational manner. The natural tendency to do so carries over in people’s attachment to their smartphones and car’s navigation system. Dr. Knafo once had a patient whose jealous wife forced him to change the navigator’s voice from female to male. Another patient refused to sell his car because he was deeply attached to its female-voiced guidance system! The only difference between Winnicott’s transitional objects and the technological objects people develop attachments to is that the latter are not meant to be abandoned (Turkle, 2013). Thus, technology is norming relational objects as an acceptable alternative to human-to-human interaction.

Strong evidence already exists revealing the trend of desire’s union with technology, altering the structures of sexual and social life. Consider the following:

- Online dating is a billion-dollar industry, and more than a third of existing marriages in the United States today began online (Cacioppo et al., 2013).
- Phone apps like Grindr, Blindr, and Tinder allow people to locate anonymous sex and social hookups wherever they happen to find themselves. Tinder matches ten million people per day (Wellings & Johnson, 2013).
- A recent survey posted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (2008) revealed the surprising statistic that 20 percent of teenagers have sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves. Thirty-nine percent of teenagers sent or posted sexually suggestive messages. Nearly 50 percent report having received such messages.
- A major British study found that couples report having 20 percent less sex than they did ten years ago (Wellings & Johnson, 2013). Naomi Wolf (2013) blames this phenomenon on Internet pornography. Others say online porn enhances sexuality and decreases violent crimes (Figure I.1).
- Face-to-face contact is rapidly being replaced with electronic connectivity (Turkle, 2015). Our society has incorporated and has been incorporated by the Internet. The Internet provides a subculture for people to find each other, share their lives, escape isolation – and get sex. Forty million adult Americans regularly visit erotic Internet websites. Sixty percent of all visits on the Internet involve sexual purpose, which makes looking for sex the topic most researched online. One in three visitors to sex sites is a woman (MSNBC, 2000; Be Broken Ministries, 2008).
- The use of virtual worlds for entertainment and social networking is growing daily. Many users report that *Second Life*, a 3D virtual world, feels more real than first life, and the website registered 36 million accounts by the year 2013 (Reahard, 2013). That year several people earned more than \$1 million on *Second Life* (Kaku, 2012). Adult users of virtual worlds spend up to 21 hours per week in that realm, while teen users spend up to 25



Figure 1.1 “Angie and Me.”  
Courtesy © Eric Pickersgill and www.removed.social.

hours per week (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011).

- The sex-doll industry is burgeoning, and high-end silicone love dolls are being manufactured in the United States, Japan, and Germany and sold briskly on the Web. There are even sex-doll brothels and escort services (Ferguson, 2010)! Though many people are repelled by the idea of replacing a human sexual partner with a doll or robot, others claim that this trend can help save marriages, and stop the spread of STDs, human sex trafficking, and loneliness (Yeoman & Mars, 2011).
- Japanese roboticist Hiroshi Ishigoro created Geminoid F, a female android that expresses and responds to basic emotions and behaviors (Hofilena, 2013). Likewise, David Hanson is making robots with extremely realistic and subtle human expressions that compel us to engage them in meaningful interaction. His aim is to create



Figure 1.2 Sophia, expressive robot, created by Hanson Robotics.  
Courtesy Hanson Robotics.

“character machines” that not only achieve intelligence, but also wisdom, compassion, and creativity. Such machines, he predicts, will surpass us in their brilliance within a little more than a decade, and help us to solve life’s big problems (Hanson, 2012) (Figure 1.2).

- Engineer Douglas Hines created Roxxy, the first “robot girlfriend” who boasts a personality and conversational ability (Chapman, 2010).
- David Levy, a well-known AI expert, boldly claims that in less than 40 years, marriage to robots will be legal in some states. He states, “I am firmly convinced there will be a huge demand from people who have a void in their lives because they have no one to love, and no one who loves them ... I think that will be a terrific service to mankind” (Schofield, 2009). Many on the vanguard of robotics and AI share his vision of relationships with fully functional robots within that time frame.
- Dolls and robots are already being used for eldercare and to calm those who suffer with Alzheimer’s disease (Kanamori, Suzuki, & Tanaka, 2002; Tamura et al., 2001).

- Humanoid robots, like one named Milo, are being created to socially engage children with autism and teach them about emotions (Lista, 2015).
- American children are called Generation M for their media consumption (da Silva, 2015). Most spend more than 50 hours a week engaged with media; some check their phones 100 times a day (Hadad, 2015).
- China claims over 20 million Internet addicts and is one of the first countries naming the affliction a clinical disorder. In response, it has set up hundreds of camps to treat addicted youth (Williams, 2014). We expect other countries to follow suit.

### Humanization and dehumanization

While these examples may initially seem to be postcards from the fringe, in fact they reveal universal human tendencies. In psychoanalysis, the blurred boundary between object and human has always been present. The Id, our source of drives, literally means “It” in German, and “object relations” allegedly refer to relationships with humans. Social science studies demonstrate that everyone unconsciously attributes human characteristics to inanimate objects. As early as 1944, an experiment by Heider and Simmel showed that humans interpreted moving abstract geometric shapes as purposeful beings. More recently, infant researchers used animated geometric blocks and shapes in experiments that showed infants recognize and respond to agency, goals, and social dominance relations in inanimate objects (Thomsen, Frankenhuys, Ingold-Smith, & Carey, 2011; Saxe, Tzelnic, & Carey, 2006). A new area of research called human-robot interaction (HRI) has emerged and demonstrates the degree to which humans attribute social characteristics, including intelligence and personal agency, to robots. Weizenbaum (1966) created a computer program that employed pattern-matching techniques resulting in a simulation of a Rogerian psychotherapist that delivered surprisingly humanlike interaction. If the “patient” said, “My grandmother hates me,” the “doctor” responded with a question, “Who else in your family hates you?” Named Eliza Doolittle after George Bernard Shaw’s character in *Pygmalion*,

Weizenbaum’s psychotherapist was called a “parody” by its creator, and yet he found his secretary spending long hours confiding her problems to it.

Perhaps even more surprising are studies showing the human tendency to anthropomorphize objects that bear no resemblance to humans. In 2011, Harris and Sharlin had subjects sit in a room with a very simple robot, a long balsa-wood rectangle that was attached to a few gears propelling it to move. The human controlling the movements was out of sight. The vast majority of subjects described the stick as having its own goals and internal thought processes. Together these studies demonstrate the universal need for connection and the ability to humanize anything that can become the object of our fantasies and desires. This ability is likely rooted in human empathy, or the existential experience of another’s plight as if it were happening to oneself (Rifkin, 2010). Probably due to its evolutionary utility in mothering, empathy appears to be stronger in females (Davis, 1996; Derntl et al., 2010; McClure, 2000; Hall, 1984).

On the other hand, many (for example, Bain, Vaes, & Leyens, 2014; Livingstone Smith, 2011) claim that we also possess an inherent tendency to dehumanize, demean, and even kill. Bernard, Ottenberg, and Redl (1971) define dehumanization as “a defense against painful and overwhelming emotions that entails a decrease in a person’s sense of his own individuality and in his perception of the humanness of others” (p. 102). They view dehumanization “not as a wholly new mental mechanism but rather a composite psychological defense which draws selectively on other well-known defenses, including unconscious denial, repression, depersonalization, isolation of affect and compartmentalization” (p. 103). Most writers on the subject (for example, Keen, 1991; Livingstone Smith, 2011) discuss dehumanization in relationship to prejudice and social stereotyping, war, and genocide. They demonstrate that the easiest way to kill others is by divesting them of their individual humanity. The classic case of this phenomenon is the Nazis’ portrayal of Jews as subhuman; they tattooed concentration camp inmates with numbers to render them things rather than people. Some note both adaptive and maladaptive functions of dehumanization, as in the case of the surgeon who uses a form of dehumanization so that she can perform without

emotional involvement. Dehumanization can be directed at the other or self, with each form reinforcing the other.

The evolutionary function of dehumanization as a facilitating function to kill enemies helps explain why males, the traditional warriors, may have an easier time with it. Feminists (Nussbaum, 1995) have long shown how women have been objectified and dehumanized by men, society, and the law. The title of a 2006 book by renowned law professor Catherine MacKinnon is highly suggestive in this respect: *Are Women Human?* Many a male patient has jokingly and seriously confessed to Dr. Knafo over the years to privately sharing in the fantasy of the cult classic, *The Stepford Wives*, in which wives are replaced by their robot duplicates. Naomi Wolf, in her popular book *The Beauty Myth*, states, “The specter of the future is not that women will be slaves, but that we will be robots” (1991, p. 267). Nonetheless, women also engage in dehumanization. Welldon (1988) illustrated the perversion of motherhood with numerous examples of how some mothers treat their children as objects rather than humans.

Clearly, the opposing inclinations within people to humanize and dehumanize is reflected in the ease with which they can be led to interact with their machines and/or hate and demean an out-group. Yet both exist along a continuum. For some, the tendencies are quite subtle and for others rather obvious. For example, Chapter 2 of this volume describes the case of Jack, a man who, profoundly discouraged by relationships with women, opted to live with a doll. This case not only reflects Jack’s dehumanizing perspective on living females, born out of heartbreak and anger; it also illustrates his ability to project his fantasies onto an inanimate doll, thereby humanizing “her” in his mind, and ultimately using “her” to find his way back to women.

Although psychoanalysts have begun to address the impact of technology on patient care, thus far they have mostly limited their discussions to the expanding treatment parameters made available through the telephone and Internet Skyping (Neumann, 2012; Carlino, 2011; Isaacs Russell, 2015; Scharff, 2013). This book takes a broader view, examining how technological access is profoundly altering people’s lives, imparting increasing social and sexual cachet to inanimate

objects and the machine, and exceeding and altering the normative frame. We hope that our analysis will encourage a necessary exploration on this important topic.

### Technology and perversion

Technology is by its very nature a reflection of our human dissatisfaction, restlessness, and hunger for the beyond, a method and a promise to transcend limits, boundaries, and constraining frameworks. It is this struggle against limits and the quest for transcendence that both technology and perversion share. The wheel struggles with friction, the jet with gravity, the scalpel with diseased tissue. Telecommunication transcends the limits of contact, and the computer broadens the limits of thought and place. Like people, technology is not content with the status quo. Through it human beings express desire for more, always more. The hope of the technological enterprise is a human hope: though there was a time when humankind could not do X, there will come a time when they can do it. Technology expresses concretely – in its objects, its methods, and the science that generates it – a desire for transcendence over limitation and a vital, undying fascination with the infinite.

Concern with the infinite is inherent to a consciousness intelligent enough to be acutely aware of itself and, therefore, of the difficulty that accompanies its animal life throughout its short, mortal journey. Furthermore, this journey takes place in a world that exhausts its theories and therefore retains an impenetrable quality. Against mortality and impenetrability, and for the sake of its own benefit, human consciousness wars against the given and remains positioned as its eternal adversary, using science and technology as its premier weapons. Such a troubled consciousness exceeds whatever social systems it lives through, spills over the limits it imposes to order life, and seeks to draw out the infinite from the finitude of existence. Thus, human consciousness shows its irrepressible preference for the perverse. In fact, the perverse is the very grounding of that original ontic impulse, in that it upsets order, displaces norms, violates boundaries, responds to trauma, and puts into play scripts to survive, thrive, and transcend. It is only in the entrapment of this volatile, dangerous, and vitally

creative need to challenge the given, resolve crisis, and break with the past that the perverse requirement becomes the perverted and uninspired repetition. Then, as a combination of unyielding dogma, false certainty, repetition compulsion, malignant denial, vindictive enactment, and psychic blindness, perversion can lead to a malicious and hate-filled consciousness. Here the destructive and evil aspects of perversion surface.

The world in which we now live – the global field of ever-deepening connectivity and entanglement – is both a technological production and a testament to mortal terror. The social body is utterly infused with the technic and is itself a kind of machine made possible by the first and second industrial revolutions and the last few decades of rapid technological growth. Though the term *technic* refers to the application of the science of technology, we are using it in a wider sense to mean a technological order that by its power comes to dominate the social and cultural scene. Thus, technology is not something people merely *do*; rather, it is a radical way of *being in the world*; it is an ontological orientation against limitation, against trauma and the traumatic context, and especially against mortality. It is a human *embodiment* that emphasizes our separation from nature for the purpose of wresting from it an ever-growing measure of transcendence, mastery, and control.

Technology not only changes the way people live and experience the world and each other; it changes who and what they are and what it means to be human. It even changes against the human will. It makes possible both the modern nation state and the global village, the former the behemoth of war and efficient atrocity and the latter the tight network of communication and connection. It establishes sovereignty, since technologically superior societies dominate those with inferior technology. It takes the form of the war humans have waged since they first became self-conscious – their war with impermanence, trauma, mortality, and insignificance. So long as humans age, sicken, and die and the accidents of chance exist, this will remain true. It should be no surprise that Google publicly acknowledged that it is using technology in its attempt to ambitiously “solve” the problem of death (McCracken & Grossman, 2013)! Whether this daring announcement is justifiably bold or the height of hubris, one thing must be admitted: someone finally had

the nerve to say it. The *telos* of technology has finally been proclaimed: *In technics we trust*.

Yet while trying to save the human race, and perhaps eventually doing so, technology may also damn us for two reasons. First, technological implementation often produces unpredictable effects on human life and the environment. The atomic weapon, which destroyed over 200,000 people, drove the arms race that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Hall, 2013). Industrialization produced and continues to produce greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. CFCs have depleted the ozone layer, exposing us to greater levels of dangerous ultraviolet radiation (Flannery, 2005). And as has already been pointed out, AI could spell the end to the human race (Cellan-Jones, 2014). Second, because technology is a way of being in the world, both imaginatively and effectively, it threatens to encapsulate human beings in an ironclad dogma that reduces human life to an *object only* status. The human being then becomes a monitored, manipulatable, and ranked resource and resource-acquiring object in a world that is a vast conveyor-belt system of deliverable consumables. Here again perversion and technology intersect in the commodification of the self. Self-commodification is a logical outgrowth of the idea of the self as consumer; a human thing consuming things and being consumed by them within the socio-political machine that generates both. Sherry Turkle begins her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011) with this sentence: “Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies” (p. 1). She warns of becoming too comfortable with our objects, which can result in learning to relate only to self-objects: “We reduce relationship and come to see this reduction as the norm” (p. 55).

The embodiment of the technic facilitates the trivialization, reification, and dehumanization of the human self as it becomes a socially bodied and constructed object, identified and assessed through measurable attributes – money, fame, status, appearance, demographic, and so forth – registered on a universally conceded scale. In this social framework the heroic possibilities for transcendence must be quite limited; the hero is the sports star, the pop artist, the actor, the celebrity, or the rich person who is “famous for being famous.” “Just do it” means



to simply become, by whatever means necessary, the object desired by all, master of your own destiny (Strenger, 2011). The subject makes of itself a successful thing. "Anything is possible," and if an individual fails, the machine takes no blame. This view, with its emphasis on self-absorption, competition, distraction, and diversion leaves little room for an individual activism that might transform the socio-political context.

The second threat of technology may be the graver danger, for it would alter what it means to be a human being so much that what remains may not be worth saving. Though the current culture has not come to believe that people are machines with the same conviction that medieval people believed they were immortals caught in the war between Heaven and Hell, we think of ourselves more as machines than ever before. Given the growing profusion of new technologies, applications, and machines with which people are interfacing, the perceived gap between us and our technology is rapidly narrowing, and it seems a safe bet that we will eventually become one with our machines.

And yet a counterargument to this dire prediction is, "So what?" The second threat is a danger only if a person believes there is some best way to be human and some best way of getting along with other humans, some unshifting anchorage for a moral and ethical framework by which human judgments might find firmer ground. Once evolution produced the upright, large-brained, *self-conscious* primate who would eventually discover science, it was only a matter of time before that primate would attempt to neutralize nature's capricious and arbitrary approach to "human engineering." Nature is no engineer, so why shouldn't human ingenuity load the dice? Why shouldn't the human race use nature's inviolable and merciless laws for its own benefit, taking control of its own situation or at least taking the risk to attempt control? French multimedia artist Orlan has stated, "The body is obsolete" (Knafo, 2009, p. 162), adding, "I fight against God and DNA" (p. 158). Indeed, once the machine was fashioned, the idea that its creators were separate from it and merely used it for their benefit was destined to become an illusion. So what if we turn ourselves into machines? Wasn't the purpose of building machines the conquest of human difficulty, limitation, and death?

The authors are biased toward the first view, though certainly not dismissive of the second. When David Levy happily declared that people will be marrying robots in a few decades, we did not shrink back in horror, though we did not clap our hands together in gleeful anticipation either. There are two sides to this story. If civilization doesn't end in some natural or humanly made cataclysm (and the idea that civilization could be ended by weapons of mass destruction became possible in the twentieth century), the juggernaut of science and technology will continue to advance and profoundly affect and alter what it means to be human. Though it would be difficult not to have strong feelings about this eventuality, it would be foolish to uniformly praise or damn it. It may be harder for modern humans to imagine the world of the late twenty-first century than it was for medieval scholars to imagine the world of the twentieth century.

Examining the culture through the narratives of perversion can be extremely useful because *perversion is about limitation and the battle against limitation* – a strategy for transcendence. When we say we are living in an age of perversion, we mean the following. On the one hand, the self has become increasingly objectified within the social frame. Connectivity replaces communion, chat rooms replace community, texting replaces talking, tweeting replaces meaning, and virtual worlds replace reality. The ever-present background to all social activity is the computer (the network and the device). There is no place in the culture where the computer is not found, and people have become wholly dependent on it as a nation state and as a people. Dehumanization is no longer only what one human being does to another. Rather, it is what people do to themselves as mechanization and commodification move into them from the outside through the technical shaping of the social surround. The "perversion" of the current culture may be related to the trauma of the twentieth century, perhaps the bloodiest era in history (Ferguson, 2006); it can be tied to the evolution of the nation state and many other historical and social factors. But, clearly, all of these things were made possible by the *technic*. Without the technic there could be no nation state, no capacity to destroy or recreate the world, no worldwide system of anything, no Internet, and no globalization.

What is happening in our culture technologically is unprecedented in the history of humanity. The possibilities of what human beings

may be able to do with their bodies, their minds, and each other are astounding. Even the briefest glimpse at the technic reveals its irresistible social allure. Communication technology via the Internet allows for rapid access to information, other people, organizations, and virtual communities and can also be used to quickly organize national and international movements (for example, the Arab Spring). Leaders are less remote, and are now being followed on Twitter and Facebook. The quicker communication of dating apps allows more people to meet more people; phone apps help us keep track of children, disseminate information and knowledge, stay fit, and run our lives. Rapid access to personal computers helps people manage many details of their lives and augment their intelligence. Augmentation of intelligence by computer will skyrocket as the interface between brain and machine is vastly improved, as when, for instance, the computer can be placed inside the body.

Indeed, such cyborg technology is already being deployed: for example, a Swedish corporation, BioNyfiken, has implanted a radio frequency microchip in the hands of staff, which stores personal information and gives them access to office machinery (Baker, 2015). There seems to be no limit to how such technology might be used – storing medical information, intervening during a medical emergency, providing identification for multiple purposes, moving robotic prosthetic limbs, accessing personal and public technologies, and, of course, surveillance and tracking. Hannes Sjoblad, the Chief Disruption Officer of BioNyfiken, said, “We want to be able to understand this technology before big corporates and big government come to us and say everyone should get chipped – the Tax Authority chip, the Google or Facebook chip” (Baker, 2015). To that claim he added the obvious observation that people are only beginning to understand what this kind of technology will allow them to do. If history carries any predictive value in determining what we might do with such a device, there is at least as much reason for fear as there is for laudatory exclamation. Recently, Germany rejected a patent application from a Saudi inventor for an implantable chip that could be remotely activated to kill its host (Baggett, 2009).

Though the authors view our culture progressively cast in the image of perversion, we cannot say where it will lead or how people

will feel about it down the road. The best that can be done is to use the social, psychological, and moral referents available now to observe and assess what is currently taking place in the culture. Selves are socially constructed, but they all share underlying universal elements: self-consciousness, the need for survival, significance, and bonding, the drive for sex, and the capacities for aggression and adaptation. Yet the meaning of a human being escapes closed definition, not only because self-referential definitions result in paradox, and the complexity of human circumstance is always underdetermined by any theory, but also because the human being is always in a state of becoming. The human ever exceeds defining contexts and social structures, ever pushes against bounded limits, ever escapes into a future that never arrives, except as the present, which is at least as puzzling as the reflection of one's own face in the mirror.

### Summary of chapters

The volume is in two parts. Part I offers a critical review of psychoanalytic theories of perversion and presents three clinical cases. The second part expands the theory of perversion to include social, historical, and evolutionary dimensions and presents cases of social perversion.

Chapter 1 cuts a narrow path through the many psychoanalytic theories of perversion, beginning with Freud's, and identifies elements common to the diverse and often divergent views on the subject. These elements include overcoming trauma, creating illusions, expressing hostility, maintaining control, and breaking through limitations. Because of the malignant, destructive elements on the far side of the perversion spectrum, the authors recommend retaining both the term *perversion* and the theories that illuminate human behavior and motivation that may otherwise seem incomprehensible. However, they expand the scope of this term, identifying its roots not only in personal history but also in existential trauma, and argue for its existence both in the sexual interpersonal domain and the social world. This extension invites a psychoanalytic hermeneutic of society and culture, especially in light of the burgeoning technology revolution.

The next three chapters explore relationships between human beings and dolls. The doll is a perfect psychological exemplar for relationships in a tech-driven society, for a number of reasons. The doll is an inanimate object that humans can easily bond with – and one that speaks to the issues of objectification and dehumanization as well as ingenuity and imagination. People’s interest in dolls highlights the isolation experienced by many in postmodern culture, as well as the poignant need for connection and the creative way in which relational yearnings can be addressed. Finally, realistic dolls for adults, whether they are sex dolls for men or baby dolls for women, are intermediate artifacts between the child’s doll and the functioning robot. In fact, the doll has already become a robot, and one day the robot will become conscious – a living doll – difficult, if not impossible to distinguish from the human. Thus, the doll is a symbol for the human relationship with the object/machine and the desire to bring that mechanism to life for the purposes of comfort, companionship, and security against threat.

Chapter 2 presents detailed clinical material from a case in which a man sought treatment while living with his realistic love doll. Dr. Knafo, in her role as psychoanalyst, functioned as a transitional object for Jack, helping him transition from loving a doll to loving a human woman. Chapter 3 analyzes Davecat, a man who lives with three dolls, one to whom he is married. Davecat declares himself a “techno-sexual.” Knafo interviewed Davecat for seven hours, and her analysis of his life choice is placed within the context of Winnicott’s theory of transitional phenomena. Included in this chapter is an addendum written by Davecat. Chapter 4 examines women’s profound relationship to dolls and includes a window into the world of women who live with and care for realistic baby dolls. This chapter also describes the psychoanalytic treatment of Barbara, a woman who wanted to be a Barbie doll. Knafo describes how she helped Barbara leave her dollhouse and appreciate her human qualities – by overcoming her fear and anger directed against herself and others.

Part II of this book broadens the concept of perversion to include historical, social, and existential dimensions. Chapter 5 briefly traces the historical dimension of perversion and uncovers its existential

roots before locating it within the social framework, specifically in American society. Citing the work of Roberto Unger, Philip Cushman, Carlo Strenger, Susan Long, Robert Whitaker, and Lisa Cosgrove, the authors show how social perversion is facilitated by technology and how it extends to the modern corporation. Indeed, perversion affects all social institutions, including those dedicated to mental health.

Chapter 6 demonstrates how new perversions are either amplified by technology or would not be possible without it. Here the authors highlight the darker side of the perverse spectrum facilitated by the Internet. This chapter illustrates that many perversions – like cybersex addiction, catfishing, and revenge porn – can be quite risky and harmful. Several clinical vignettes illustrate the malignant use of Internet technology for perverse purposes.

Chapter 7 demonstrates the importance of psychological analysis of culture and society by showing how George Orwell’s novel *1984* can be viewed as a model of social perversion – undergirded by the elements of perversion delineated in psychoanalytic theory. Illustrating the perversions of statehood, the novel reveals the technology and social structure of exploitation, domination, and dehumanization found in totalitarian regimes. Nonetheless, these perversions are a danger in any form of government because the psychological dynamic of master and slave is a universal human temptation that springs from the heart of the perverse. Unsettling parallels between the world of *1984* and current government practices of surveillance and police militarization are also discussed.

Chapter 8 summarizes the theoretical viewpoint of the authors. It looks toward the future of technology, including the field of mental health, and offers a platform for the psychoanalytic interrogation of the techno-social scene.

It is our hope that this volume will invite psychoanalytic dialogue about the tech revolution’s impact on the human self and its relational surround. Because our discipline is concerned with unconscious motivations, desires, and impulses, psychoanalysis is uniquely positioned to examine and critique the effect of the rapid techno-social changes taking place around us. The brave new world of the near and distant future is leading us beyond the limits of our humanity in ways that are exhilarating, creative, and dangerous.

### Notes

1. The term “crooked path” is used many times throughout this work. Its meaning is defined in this quote – i.e., as a stepping away from or a rejection of the accepted or normative path. The term has no pejorative connotation. The authors do not believe that there is one (correct) way to be or to live.
2. A few names of Internet blogs include the following: “Am a proud pervert so get over it”; “We are perverts and we are proud”; “The perverted negress”; “I’m a proud pervert”; and “Proud to be a pervert.”

## Part I

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# Theories of perversion and three clinical cases

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