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Tech Companies: Public and Private

<u>Introduction</u>

Technology is one of the biggest cultural influences in America today. We are

constantly bombarded with technological stimulation: we use the internet nearly every

day, we carry miniature computers around in our pockets, we can use search engines to

find the answer to almost any question. Technological consumerism and innovation have

become deeply ingrained in the American public consciousness and continue to exert

tremendous influence on American culture. This comes with a whole host of conceivable

sociological issues, many of which are related to the concept of an 'inner story' as

contrasted with an 'outer story'. For example, the outer story promoted by many tech

companies, and perpetuated by many in the general populace, is one of progress and

humanitarian benevolence. Technology icons like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs and

the like are held up by our society as visionaries and pioneers, paving the way for

positive cultural and societal progress. And to some degree, this is true. Modern

technology has massively shifted the informational power dynamic in a more egalitarian

direction, allowing underprivileged groups of people to access information in a way that

was not possible before. It has provided tremendous medical benefits, multiplied our

ability to achieve many projects and endeavors, hugely enhanced comfort and

convenience, and created whole new venues of media and entertainment. However, there

is also a dark side to this level of technological innovation. Sweatshops and increasing

consumption of conflict minerals, privacy breaches and overextension of data collection,

environmental concerns, spying, hacking, worker and customer exploitation - the list goes

on. Oftentimes, companies do their best to hide these facts. However, once in a while they bubble to the surface, lighting the fuse for a public scandal that must be addressed. When this happens, we are forced to reconcile our lofty and aggrandized notions of what a tech company should be as promoted by the companies themselves (the outer story), with the reality that the companies often attempt to hide or minimize (the inner story).

In this essay, I will provide numerous examples of tech companies revealing a dichotomy between their publicly professed goals, standards, and policies, and their underlying motives and actions that are hidden from the public. As we have discussed throughout this course, neither of these stories is necessarily the monolithic 'truth' of the matter. Technology is both a massive and unprecedented force for good in the world, as well as a potential venue for greed and exploitation. The enormous humanitarian efforts undertaken by many tech executives are always commendable and inspiring, but also must be reconciled with the often immoral (and distinctly non-humanitarian) business practices of their companies. In relation to this, I will also analyze the sociological and cultural context behind the rise of tech-celebrity icons through both a Western and a Confucian lens, and will attempt to reconcile the differences between their public and private profiles.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

One of the biggest cultural paradigm shifts involving home technology was the introduction of search engines like Google into the cultural mainstream. These search engines fundamentally changed the way human beings accessed information about the world, and effectively helped usher in the Age of Information. With a few strokes of a keyboard, we are able to access any number of informational resources about any topic

we may have in mind. Nearly any publicly available knowledge we may desire, from the birthday of Queen Elizabeth to complex technical information about quantum physics, can be found in a matter of seconds. Prior to the internet and search engines, information was much more difficult to obtain. While literary and educational resources have always been available, there have also historically been barriers of entry for many people, especially those of lower economic or class status. The internet and search engines helped tear down this structure of privileged access to information, and allowed anyone to access almost any information they desire, provided they have access to the internet. This idea of universalizing access to information is reflected in Google's mission statement:

"To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." [1]

Google in particular is an especially powerful company, and the numbers reflect this. The company brings in over 100 billion dollars a year, and accounts for 91.24 percent of the worldwide Search Engine market share. [2] This makes Google (or rather, its parent company, Alphabet) the second largest corporation on the planet. As a result, Google has a stunningly large user base, and has stored a proportionally immense amount of user data, such as usernames, passwords, emails, searches, web history, etc. Google's cataloguing of this information comes with a number of significant responsibilities. For one, Google must preserve the integrity and privacy of said user data. The way that Google utilizes and cares for this data is generally of great concern to its billions of daily users, and thus Google must maintain the impression that they are utilizing it responsibly and with care for the consumer. Because they must always cultivate the notion that they are doing what is right for the customer, this tone is conveyed throughout their public

statements and documents of intent, such as their privacy policy. Right from the beginning, a transactionary tone is employed in order to make the user feel that they are entering into a fair, contractual trade of services - emphasizing the benefits you receive from sharing your data. As it states, "when you share information with us, for example by creating a Google Account, we can make those services even better – to show you more relevant search results and ads, to help you connect with people or to make sharing with others quicker and easier." [3] One would expect that this document would be completely transparent about what data they collect and how they are using it. This is, unfortunately, not entirely true.

While Google does outwardly express user privacy as a top priority and details a clear structure of data protection and usage, the truth of the matter is a bit more convoluted. Throughout the years, the company has been subject to numerous scandals and lawsuits due to improper collection and handling of user data. For example, in 2011, the Federal Trade Commission found that Google had "misrepresented to users of Apple Inc.'s Safari Internet browser that it would not place tracking "cookies" or serve targeted ads to those users." [4] A 'cookie' is a small data file stored on a user's computer. They are often used to hold information about a user in order to better tailor web content towards their interests. Cookies are a convenient and widely used way of storing information locally on a user's computer, instead of burdening a remote server with tons of user data. In 2011, the FTC discovered that Google was using cookies on the Safari web browser inappropriately. They did this through utilization of DoubleClick, which is a subsidiary of Google that provides ad services for web clients. The websites that partnered with DoubleClick covertly placed cookies on user computers without their knowledge, despite

the privacy policy prohibiting this. As the FTC states in its report, "for several months in 2011 and 2012, Google placed a certain advertising tracking cookie on the computers of Safari users who visited sites within Google's DoubleClick advertising network, although Google had previously told these users they would automatically be opted out of such tracking, as a result of the default settings of the Safari browser used in Macs, iPhones and iPads." [3] Google was made to pay a 22.5 million dollar fine, disable tracking cookies, and explicitly avoid all future misrepresentations of intent. However, when compared to Google's profits, this monetary figure becomes negligible. The money from the fine composed only 0.06 percent of Google's 38 billion-dollar 2011 revenue. [5] In light of this, we can see why Google would choose to flagrantly violate their own privacy policy - because they can easily afford the consequences.

Despite the FTC ruling, the privacy violations did not stop there. In 2016, the progressive nonprofit organizations Consumer Watchdog and Privacy Rights Clearinghouse issued a formal complaint against Google with the FTC for changing their privacy policy unannounced, and acting in a "highly deceptive manner". The organizations "contend that Google did a poor job explaining the changes to its users, causing many to accept changes that undermined their personal privacy without understanding the consequences." [6] The exact details of the policy change are spelled out in the complaint.

> "The change enabled a whole new category of user tracking in ways that could scarcely have been contemplated in 2007. Google can now track users' activity on its Android mobile phones, with an 88% market share of smartphones worldwide, and from any website that uses Google Analytics, hosts YouTube videos, or displays ads served by DoubleClick or AdSense. **In other words, Google has given itself the power to track users across the overwhelming majority of websites in use in the world today,**

many of which appear to users to be entirely unconnected from Google." [7]

As a massive company that must satisfy its shareholders, the only reason that Google would so flagrantly violate these privacy protocols would be for financial gain. The astounding degree to which Google is able to track user activity has clear benefits for their advertising capability. The advertising revenue collected by this 2016 privacy policy change was estimated to be in the billions - already far above the 2011 22.5 million dollar fine, despite that being the "largest penalty the Federal Trade Commission has ever obtained for a violation of Commission order." [4] The fact that Google can make more money than it will be fined by breaking policy is clear economic impetus for the company to do so, despite the fact that it contradicts the publicly professed values and intentions of the company.

Another company that has recently been in the public eye for privacy violations is Facebook. Since its inception, Facebook has completely changed the social landscape in which we exist. It allows people from all walks of life to congregate and socialize on a public forum, while also helping people stay in touch with friends and relatives. It has transformed disaster response through its Safety Check tool, helped create and bolster significant social movements, and is a powerful tool for organizing. And when not marred by scandal, these are the sorts of things that Mark Zuckerberg references when he does his press conferences and public statements. He stresses putting "people first" and "(instilling) a culture of loving the people we serve, as strong as our hacker culture if not stronger." [9] But of course, as with Google, these statements of genuine concern for the consumer do not exactly reflect the reality of the situation. Facebook, like Google, has accumulated a massive amount of user data over the years. This data could potentially be

sold or exposed to a whole variety of organizations, for great profit to Facebook and detriment to the consumer. It is also potent grounds for human social experimentation, as the user's experience can be manipulated beyond their control. Because Facebook recognizes that utilization and manipulation of user experience and data can bring great profit, their privacy policy is intentionally made incredibly lenient. For example, in January 2012, Facebook ran an experiment to study the emotional responses of 689,000 users. For a week, they removed all 'positive' posts from the news feeds of some subjects, and removed all 'negative' posts from the news feeds of others. Adam Kramer, the data scientist who ran the study, says that the intention of the study was to uncover evidence for social media influencing the moods of its users: "These results indicate that emotions expressed by others on Facebook influence our own emotions, constituting experimental evidence for massive-scale contagion via social networks." [10] But although there may have been tangible results produced from this study that could be useful, it is still extremely disconcerting that Facebook is able to flagrantly manipulate the experience of any arbitrary user, completely within the bounds of its data use policy. There was also a scandal in 2007 in which companies were allowed to see the purchases that users made, and then "notify their Facebook friends about what had been bought - many times without any user consent." [11] Beyond this, there was an incident in April 2015 wherein it was discovered that Facebook's API (Application Programming Interface) allowed app creators to harvest the data of people on a user's friends list - so if you signed up for an app, that app received the data of all your friends as well. [10] It was also discovered in January 2018 that Facebook had been illegally collecting the "private information of Belgian users on third-party websites through the use of cookies." [10] These

examples are significant, as they show another side to a company that supposedly puts

users first. Somewhat of a far cry from the genuine care for the user that Mark

Zuckerberg has previously espoused publically. However, their most recent scandal is

probably their most consequential, as it has affected over 50 million Facebook users.

In the past few months or so, Facebook has come under heavy fire from the FTC for

violation of their privacy policy. The violation in question involves a private data

analytics firm called Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica was recently shown to

have purchased huge amounts of user data from a single individual, who harvested it

using a Facebook personality quiz. The quiz then gathered not only data about the user,

but through the aforementioned weaknesses in Facebook's API, data about the user's

friends as well. Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy,

argues that the FTC has not paid close enough attention to privacy rights violations such

as this, and have allowed them to fly under the radar. As he says, "This latest scandal will

be a test case of whether [the FTC] is willing to put the public before the data gathering

industry." [12] Compounding onto this, Chris Hoofnagle, director of the Berkeley Center for

Law & Technology at University of California Berkeley, is of the opinion that Facebook

makes it intentionally easy for companies to harvest user data, and protects itself with an

extremely lenient privacy policy:

> "Chris Hoofnagle … says it isn't clear that Facebook violated the consent
> decree. According to Hoofnagle, the decree says that Facebook is not
> liable when users consent to giving their friends' information to Facebook.
> However, Hoofnagle thinks what is likely is that once the FTC starts
> investigating the social network it will find that it has engaged in other
> illegal practices. Hoofnagle says Facebook attracts developers by making
> it easy to get personal information. He believes that makes it very
> tempting for Facebook to overlook breaches of privacy so that they can
> keep attracting developers." [12]

It is sad to see that the seemingly benevolent Zuckerberg who spoke on a 'culture of love' for the user would also allow private entities to harvest the personal data of millions of users without their consent. But this is the hypocritical reality of these enormous corporations, they publicly express their utmost concern for the user in order to get people to use their platform, while covertly taking advantage of the user for financial gain. This is the way that they must operate, because if they were up front about their intentions nobody would use the platform, but if they did not harvest user data they would not make anywhere near as much money or attract anywhere near the same number of investors and developers. It is a vicious circle, and one that is evident in almost every massive tech company.

Another thing that many billionaires and executives do, which often bolsters their public profile, is donate huge amounts of money to charity. The charitable donations of Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, are probably the most widely known, as he has been a prominent philanthropist for decades. Gates, along with his wife, set up the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation in 2000 in order to reduce global poverty, increase healthcare quality and accessibility in impoverished areas, promote awareness about world issues, and conduct research. On average, the foundation brings in almost 4 billion dollars in charitable donations a year. Bill Gates has personally donated 28 billion dollars of his own money to the foundation and continues to bolster financial and social support for it. However, as you may have guessed, there is more to the story.

Microsoft, as an enormous company that makes tons of hardware, must have a proportionally enormous supply of resources and manufacturers. This is a difficult game for companies to play, as it often results in outsourcing jobs to cheaper markets, such as

China or India. Outsourcing jobs and seeking cheap foreign labor is a common practice among many companies, but when it takes hold in the business of mass manufacturing, it can become even more problematic. In the case of Microsoft, many of their foreign suppliers utilize unsafe working conditions and incredibly unfair pay to exploit their workers - many of whom would not be able to find a better job in the area. For example, one of Microsoft's prominent suppliers is a Chinese manufacturing company called KYE. This company is alleged by the NLC (National Labor Committee) to have "paid workers -- some of them children -- $.65 per hour to work 16.5 hour days." Workers are strictly forbidden from going outside on shift and can be fined more than a week's pay and fired for doing so. From the NLC: "'We are like prisoners,' one worker said. 'It seems like we live only to work. We do not work to live. We do not have a life, only work,' … since the young Chinese workers could never dream of making demands against Microsoft or other corporations, this permits the corporations to tout their codes of conduct while knowing full well that they will never be implemented. It's all just part of the game." [13] The 'game' that is referred to here is the game of public opinion. The codes of conduct referenced are the publically espoused qualities and standards set up by Microsoft that are supposed to apply to their factories, but of course do not in practice.

Another depressing reality of the technology industry is the use of conflict resources. 'Conflict resources' is a term that refers to precious minerals mined in conflict zones, often stockpiled and traded by warlords and war profiteers. The definition proposed by the NGO Global Witness is as follows: "Conflict resources are natural resources whose systematic exploitation and trade in a context of conflict contribute to, benefit from or result in the commission of serious violations of human rights, violations

of international humanitarian law or violations amounting to crimes under international law." [14] Many of these conflict resources are key components in cell phones, laptops, video games, and other gadgets. Nearly all of the world's leading technology manufacturers utilize conflict minerals, including Microsoft. In 2014, Amnesty International wrote a report entitled 'Time to Recharge' about the usage of conflict minerals by major tech companies. In this report, they list Microsoft as one of the worst companies in terms of conflict mineral use: "Microsoft, for example, is among 26 companies that have failed to disclose details of their suppliers, like the companies who smelt and refine the cobalt they use. This means Microsoft is not in compliance with even the basic international standards." [15]

  While it is true that Microsoft is only one of many corporations who utilize sweatshops and conflict minerals in this way, it is notable when compared to the public profile of Bill Gates. Here is a man who is known around the world for his charitable donations and humanitarian efforts, one of the most philanthropic characters of modern history - and he has profited off of mass exploitative labor in third world countries. This contrast is nothing new, as we have seen, but it is saddening all the same. The economic motivations for this are clear. Conflict minerals and sweatshops are cheap and extremely effective means of mass-producing hardware and mass harvesting resources. The fact that the labor force is a disadvantaged and endangered group of people under the reign of oppressive and violent local management does not change this. This is the sort of mentality that promotes the financial growth of a company - and for many companies, especially the ones that come to be worth billions of dollars, profit is the bottom line.

Another tech icon who has recently careened into the public eye is Jeff Bezos, the

CEO and founder of Amazon. He is currently in contention for title of richest man in

history, with Amazon edging towards being the first trillion-dollar company of all time. [16]

With all of this immense wealth, one would expect that Bezos might be a charitable

figure in the vein of Bill Gates. And, to some degree, this is true. For example, he has

donated millions to immunotherapy research, millions to marriage equality causes, and

just this year, spent 33 million dollars to put 1000 Dreamers through college. [17] [18] [19] These

donations undoubtedly have done tremendous good in the world, and obviously should

not be overlooked. However, as you should expect by now, there is more going on behind

the scenes. For example, the donation becomes less significant when compared to the true

scale of Bezos' wealth. In his article "Jeff Bezos, Amazon and Why Charity Is the Wrong

Solution", Ed Burmilla writes:

> "Americans, and certainly the media, reflexively laud charitable acts.
> Giving away money is uncritically lavished with praise. It's nice to see
> people giving back to a system that has rewarded them so grandly, but
> even gentle questioning causes the feel-good bubble to burst. What are the
> consequences of a person worth $105,000,000,000 amassing that kind of
> wealth? Is a person donating 0.03% of his net worth an act deserving of
> the amount of press and praise it receives? The equivalent is a person
> worth $1 million donating $300." [20]

Burmilla also references Amazon's unfair treatment of its workers. He cites the fact that

Amazon hires huge amounts of temporary contracted workers in order to avoid paying

them properly and giving them proper benefits: "The company fills many of its

warehouse positions through temp and staffing agencies. That way, they don't have to

offer the same pay and benefits they offer to Amazon employees. As Amazon proudly

tells its investors, 'we utilize independent contractors and temporary personnel to

supplement our workforce.'" [21] Beyond just worker exploitation, Bezos is also prepared to use extortion and other such immoral business practices to achieve his goals. For example, in 2014 Amazon was widely criticized in the literary world for trying to strongarm publishing giant Hatchette into agreeing to unspecified terms related to e-book pricing. Though the terms set by Amazon have not been publicly disclosed, the methods they used to try and bully Hatchette have been. For example, Amazon subjected a number of books published by Hachette to "artificial purchase delays". [22] What this means is that books that had previously offered next-day delivery ended up taking 2-5 weeks to ship. Some titles also did not come up in Amazon searches properly. Many Hachette books became inexplicably unavailable for pre-order as well. [22] With Amazon having such an enormous monopoly on book retail, they are able to bowl over their competitors and clients, extracting basically any terms they want through simple extortion.

These sorts of practices display the true lengths to which Bezos is willing to go to secure the success of Amazon. In this way, Burmilla compares Bezos to Andrew Carnegie, the American steel magnate who is widely known both for his philanthropic endeavors, and his abuse and mistreatment of employees. Though he gave a tremendous portion of his wealth away and called on other millionaires to do the same, he also used "every legal subterfuge available, as was common during the Robber Baron era, from price-fixing and collusion to bribery and brute force to build his business empire." Not to mention the Homestead Strike of 1892, a conflict between strikers and private security forces hired by Carnegie that resulted in the deaths of nine strikers. As Burmilla states, "Inarguably Carnegie's philanthropy was on a grand scale and his causes worthy ones. At the same time, his wealth was built in no small part on the low pay and shabby treatment

of his workforce for decades." [20] Burmilla argues that Jeff Bezos is of a similar nature. Like Bill Gates, we see a portrait of a man who in his public life is concerned with humanitarian endeavors, but in his business life has allowed for the continuation of ruthless and inhumane company practices.

So, how do we reconcile the privacy violations, sweatshops, conflict minerals, and worker mistreatment of these companies with the apparently philanthropic and empathetic natures of their founders and CEOs? Rather than analyzing the empirical economic factors, the answer may lie in a sociological analysis.

Corporate Sociology

While it does not provide as objective and algorithmic an explanation as something like an economic investigation, sociology can provide valuable insight to help us analyze the driving force behind the seemingly hypocritical actions of these tech companies. As has been discussed above, many tech figures are idolized and venerated by the public. This results in them being held up to standards beyond that of a normal person. Because of this, they must rigidly manage their public personas in order to appeal to the general populace. However, they may have entirely different motives and interests in mind that they cannot present to the public. While not related to technology, this need to hide certain intentions depending on your audience was demonstrated very apparently in the 2016 Presidential Election, when the Hillary Clinton campaign was made the target of a lengthy hacking attack. A number of private emails, contacts, speeches, and similarly sensitive information was released onto Wikileaks. Wikileaks is an online platform which hosts leaked classified government documents, posted anonymously by hackers and whistleblowers. Among these leaked documents was an email supposedly written by a

Clinton staffer detailing a private paid speech that Clinton had given to a number of Wall Street executives. In this speech, she goes over her belief that, as a political figure, it is important to balance the popular public views you espouse to your voter base, and the private views you hold among people that you deal with more intimately. From the Washington Times:

> "If everybody's watching, you know, all of the backroom discussions and the deals, you know, then people get a little nervous, to say the least. **So you need both a public and a private position**," Mrs. Clinton said in an April 2013 address. "You just have to sort of figure out how to — getting back to that word, 'balance' - how to balance the public and the private efforts that are necessary to be successful, politically, and that's not just a comment about today." [23]

While the veracity of these hacked emails has not been confirmed, this idea of a public and private position is still intimately related to the main themes we have been discussing. As a political figure in the public eye, Clinton is subject to the same scrutiny and judgement that most public figures are subject to. It is because of this that she must be very careful about which views and positions she chooses to espouse publically. Since her success as a politician is contingent on whether the general populace feels she is worthy of being voted for, her public statements must focus on ingratiating and pandering to the crowd, in order to secure as much public support as possible. However, there is another element to her life as a politician - one that involves dealings she may prefer the public not to know about. When addressing an audience of Wall Street firms and business executives, Clinton may have to modify her position in order to appeal to their interests. This sort of 'say one thing, do another' attitude is similar to the ways that many technology execs make public statements on things like their dedication to humanitarian

causes, the value they place on security and privacy, their ethical obligations to consumers and the world at large - and then are shown to not be living up to these goals. Like Clinton, these Silicon Valley types must uphold the larger than life image of innovation and progress that has become associated with them, while more discreetly dealing with the more difficult, less pretty realities of the situation.

An important thing to remember is the fact that neither the public nor the private images of these tech icons is the whole truth. Instead, their identities are formed through a complex dialectical relationship between the two. The 20th century Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman had much to say that could relate to this phenomenon of public vs. private opinion. In his 1956 work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman posited that the social selves that we present to the world are continuous acts, and that we put on different masks depending on the contexts we find ourselves in. Our social lives are essentially performances, wherein we naturally edit our character in order to appease the person, or people, we are interacting with. One quote from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that is particularly illuminating is as follows: "We find, then, that when the individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith." [24] Though Goffman was more focused on microsociology, this still has interesting implications for the tech companies we have been discussing. While it is true that these companies are massive conglomerates composed of thousands of people, there is usually some figurehead or official spokesperson who speaks with the voice of the entire company. When these people address a crowd, an interviewer, or any other such person or group of persons, Goffman's analysis comes into play. This 'promissory

character' that he describes can be seen as analogous to the promises made by spokespersons during public statements. Promises generally make up the brunt of the public statements of most companies. These could be benign promises, such as a release date for a new product, or a showcase of new features to be released. On another level, these could be promises about the commitments of the company, such as a dedication to privacy, security, progressive humanitarian efforts, etc. - or a public apology promising to correct a failed course of action. In any case, if there was not something new to assure the audience of, there would be no reason for a company to make a public statement. Thus, these statements often take on a promissory tone. The second part of Goffman's analysis rests on the fact that the audience will intuitively take the promises of the speaker on faith. This is quite possibly no truer than in the tech world. As I have discussed above, tech leaders like Steve Jobs or Elon Musk are venerated and hailed by our society as these larger than life figureheads of innovation. The tech world is obsessed with progress, obsessed with being the best, brightest, biggest, smartest, etc. Because of this unchecked ambition that consumes many in the tech industry, these people oftentimes search for a successful role model to elevate and emulate. This takes the form of the venerated tech leaders mentioned above. Because of their tremendous success, these leaders are assumed to exhibit particularly exemplary or unique character traits. Many members of our society, especially those in the tech sector, are infatuated both with the tangible success of these people, as well as the philosophy of innovative entrepreneurship that they have come to represent. Entrepreneurial aspirations backed up by financial prosperity, combined with the American capitalist ethic that success is in some way equated with

virtue or good character, creates fertile ground for a tech exec to become elevated to the status of a cultural icon, a la Steve Jobs or Elon Musk.

Amanda Schaffer, a columnist for the MIT Technology Review, analyzed this phenomenon in her article *Tech's Enduring Great-Man Myth.* In it, she discusses this western notion that singularly incredible individuals act as the primary vehicle for societal change. As she states in her article: "The idea of 'great men' as engines of change grew popular in the 19th century. In 1840, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle wrote that 'the history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the history of the Great Men who have worked here.'" [25]

This notion of the Great Man shines through in the personas of Silicon Valley tech celebrities. In this article, Schaffer analyzes this notion of the Great Man myth through the lens of tech celebrities and the public view of them. In the case of Elon Musk, the article goes in depth as to how he has cultivated a certain public image in order to garner fame, support, and fans. He utilizes charisma and clever publicity tactics to bolster his public image as a uniquely influential and capable Great Man, despite the fact that he typically has a massive team behind him, guiding him every step of the way. For example, as Schaffer says:

"Musk sells himself as a singular mover of mountains and does not like to share credit for his success. At SpaceX, in particular, the engineers 'flew into a collective rage every time they caught Musk in the press claiming to have designed the Falcon rocket more or less by himself,' Vance writes, referring to one of the company's early models. In fact, Musk depends heavily on people with more technical expertise in rockets and cars, more experience with aeronautics and energy, and perhaps more social grace in managing an organization. Those who survive under Musk tend to be workhorses willing to forgo public acclaim." [25]

Musk disguising the work of his employees in order to bolster his own public image illustrates the problems with the Great Man theory. There are always other people and other factors influencing the rise and success of the great man. As Schaffer discusses in her article, Musk has been significantly supported by government funding and subsidies, as well as the financial support of his shareholders. He has also tangentially benefited from innovations pioneered by other characters, such as new technology in batteries, solar cells, and space travel. [25] Though he may have had to face real adversity on his own many times, Musk has been supported and bolstered by social and societal forces surrounding him his whole career, and the notion that he accomplished everything attributed to him alone is patently false. Schaffer also levies many of the same critiques against Steve Jobs and Apple. As economist Mariana Mazzucato states in Schaffer's article:

> "'There is not a single key technology behind the iPhone that has not been state funded,' says economist Mariana Mazzucato. This includes the wireless networks, 'the Internet, GPS, a touch-screen display, and … the voice-activated personal assistant Siri.' Apple has recombined these technologies impressively. But its achievements rest on many years of public-sector investment. To put it another way, do we really think that if Jobs and Musk had never come along, there would have been no smartphone revolution, no surge of interest in electric vehicles?" [25]

From this we see further evidence for Schaffer's thesis that the Great Man theory does not capture the full picture. In reality, societal change comes from an interwoven system of factors all working together and influencing one another. As the 19th century philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer stated in his 1896 work *The Study of Sociology*, "You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state

into which that race has slowly grown.... Before he can remake his society, his society

must make him." [26]

Thus, we see that this enduring Great Man worldview perpetuated by tech elites is

not accurate to the realities of the world. Not only is it inaccurate, however, Schaffer also

argues that it is dangerous. While Musk and Jobs have undoubtedly been forces for

positive change in the world, the futurist savior aesthetic that they promote has dangerous

numbing potential for our society. If we think there is a powerful, monolithic 'great man'

who is solely responsible for ensuring societal progress and change, why do we have any

responsibility to organize and work towards a better future ourselves? In this way,

excessive idolization of cultural savior figures can pose the danger of leading to apathy

and inaction within the populace. Schaffer also argues that the larger than life status and

venerated character pertaining to Jobs and Musk cause people to look past their various

infractions. As she states, "Musk is known, after all, for humiliating engineers and firing

employees on a whim. In 2014, when his assistant, who had devoted her life to Tesla and

SpaceX for 12 years, asked for a raise, he summarily let her go. Nor can Musk's rough

edges be justified as good for business. Rather, they have the potential to jeopardize

crucial relationships with government agencies, according to a former official

interviewed by Vance: Musk's 'biggest enemy will be himself and the way he treats

people.' Similarly, Jobs was known for entitled behavior and brutishness to employees.

Yet as Walter Isaacson has written in his biography, *Steve Jobs*: 'Nasty was not

necessary. It hindered him more than it helped him.'" [25] Though these anecdotes paint

portraits of flawed and egotistical men misusing and abusing their power, those

infatuated with the tech industry often look past these character flaws in order to craft a

proper 'great man' narrative. If we are to hold the powerful and influential members of our society truly accountable for their actions, we must take care not to let widespread cultural narratives blind us to their imperfections.

Christianity and the West

It is probably to be expected that an idea like the Great Man theory would come out of the West, which has long been deeply intertwined with the Christian intellectual tradition. There is a notable connection between this notion of special, uniquely great individuals being the driving force behind changes in society, and the Christian tradition that has encompassed and influenced so much of the cultural development of the West. George Novack, a 20th century Marxist theoretician, argued this in his 1980 book "Understanding History":

"The straightforward theological view of history is… too much in conflict with civilized enlightenment to persist without criticism or change except among the most ignorant and devout. It has been supplanted by more refined versions of the same type of thinking. Fetishistic worship of the Great Man has come down through the ages from the god-kings of Mesopotamia to the adoration of a Hitler. It has had numerous incarnations according to the values attached at different times by different people to the various domains of social activity…   All these ('Great Men') were put in the place of the Almighty as the prime mover and shaper of human history." [27]

Here Novack is arguing that the notion of the great man is a way to replace the antiquated, religious view of human society, centering around God as the 'prime mover of human history'. As societies become progressively more humanistic and less oriented around religion and dogma, they turn to human icons to replace the role that God once held. Nowadays, the icons that collectively hold this role in our society include many extremely influential and publically known tech executives. Jesus Christ represents the midpoint of this transition from the theological view of history to the modern period of

humanism. He is the God-Man, the perfect synthesis of the transcendent qualities of the divine with the mortal and relatable qualities of the human.

It could be argued that, consciously or subconsciously, all of these tech celebrities are emulating this notion by striving to attain a synthesis between the worldly and the transcendent. Transcendence, in this case, meaning transcendence above the norms and restrictions that govern ordinary society. While the notion of Christ's transcendence implies a metaphysical separation from the mortal realm, transcendence for the tech exec means someone who can affect society from outside the reach of its regulatory power, separate from the limitations and obstacles that govern the lives of ordinary people. They can achieve this because of their tremendous financial power and cultural influence. So, like Christ, who was paradoxically both a transcendent God and a mortal man, tech executives strive to transcend ordinary society through attaining unusually massive levels of power and influence - while still moving and acting within society, contributing to and benefiting from its flourishing, and generally espousing a sense of care and interest in the wellbeing of average people around the globe.

We can see this Western notion of transcending the bounds of society as, in some ways, in opposition to the Chinese intellectual tradition that sees virtue as integration into society and respect for its norms. The question of how to live a virtuous life, and strategies by which to perpetuate virtue throughout society, has been at the core of many Chinese schools of philosophical thought throughout history. One significant Chinese virtue is filial piety. 'Filial piety' is a term that refers to a ritualistic and duty-bound respect for one's elders, especially those in the family, such as parents or ancestors. Even in the modern day, much of Chinese society and culture is influenced by the teachings of

Confucius, and filial piety is an extremely prevalent virtue in Confucian ethics. This is demonstrative of the way Confucian thought places importance primarily on the private life rather than the public life and promotes focus on what lies close at hand in favor of what is far away. There is a reduced focus on the functioning of centralized, bureaucratic institutions, and less concern for how to increase one's power and influence in order to grow into the 'great man' that tech icons strive for. Instead, Confucius argued that if everyone respected their elders, was deferential and filial to their parents, practiced the proper rituals accorded to their station, and generally took care of what was around them, the world would naturally fall into order. The idea of a truly virtuous person - someone who does nothing improper and follows virtue's protocol to the letter - is captured in Chinese by the word *ren*. The sort of person who can effortlessly integrate the rituals associated with their station in life (i.e. filial piety, good behavior, dedication for one's occupation, etc.) is referred to as such. As Confucius says, "Desiring to take his stand, one who is ren helps others to take their stand; wanting to realize himself, he helps others to realize themselves. Being able to take what is near at hand as an example could perhaps be called the method of ren." [28] This quote is effectively arguing that when one perfects what is near at hand and does not place undue focus on what is far, this person has achieved the essence of ren. It is through a focus on the internal cultivation of virtue that order will come about, not through a focus on the external. Consider how far removed from this tradition these tech celebrities are, with their lofty global ambitions, questionable company practices that violate the norms of society, and continual aspirations for power and control.

In the Christian view, humans cannot save themselves, and require divine intervention from a transcendent God to be rescued. In the 21st Century, the West has lost the Christian God as a widely accepted transcendent source of meaning. Instead, we look for new transcendent sources of moral and functional authority to grant us hope for salvation. Thus, we venerate Elon Musk's Tesla line of cars and SpaceX program as bold, progressive steps into the future. We hail Bill Gates as a great man and a powerful force for good in the world because of his charitable foundations. Steve Jobs was a visionary and a pioneer, Larry Page and Sergey Brin the same. We have replaced our one, singular transcendent savior with a whole host of others. This need for a savior blinds us to the not-infrequent structural and ethical failings of these characters, sometimes to great detriment. In contrast, traditional Chinese philosophy does not see Confucius as a 'savior figure' in the Western sense at all, nor do they search for transcendent saviors elsewhere. Confucian thought focuses on the phenomenal and the immediate, and places no undue focus on the transcendent. There is also the fact that Confucius believed humankind was naturally good, a sharp contrast to the notion of original sin within Christianity. People who act malevolently and without empathy are the exception, and even then, can be guided back onto the path of goodness. Thus, people generally require training and remonstration rather than salvation or punishment. With this worldview in mind, a transcendent savior becomes far less necessary. Perhaps this is a contributing factor as to why these publically venerated tech-celebrities are so often Westerners even though China, Japan, and Korea are also major players in the tech industry.

We can also see this great man theory in the history of liberal Western individualism. In the Western individualist tradition, our respect for the agency of another

person is determined by their ability to be independent and autonomous, their critical thinking skills, and their self-reliance. This concept of agency is in sharp contrast to that presented in the Confucian context, wherein one aims to increase interdependence, self-integration, and deference. As discussed above, a society's religious history and cultural history are intimately tied into the development of one another. Thus, the Western notion of agency reflects the active, transcendent God acting upon the world from beyond. We seek to transcend freedom from external influence or constraint, and as such we stress self-reliance and independence as key elements of agency. On the other hand, the Confucian tradition views agency as reflected through aligning oneself with the natural order of things. Thus, one should not seek to isolate and separate themselves from the constraints and norms of society. Instead, one ought to strive for further integration.

As we have seen, the West traditionally espouses liberal individualism while China traditionally promotes the concept of the social self. We can uncover more tangible evidence for this difference by analyzing cultural views on the transition from childhood to maturity. In the West, childhood is seen as a state of debilitating dependence. It must be grown out of through the development of mature qualities, until the point that the child can be respected as a fully autonomous individual. Children are deferential to their parents until they reach maturity, at which point they become independent and are no longer bound to the constraints set by their parents. The whole process of maturing is analogous to this notion of transcendence - children must learn to live independently by growing past their need for intimate parental guidance and reliance on other people. In the Confucian tradition, children never really transcend their place as deferential to their parents, nor do they seek to. One reason for this is the nature of filial piety. As discussed

above, filial piety is a profoundly important virtue in Confucian ethics, and the obligation

to respect and honor one's parents goes far beyond any sense of dependence or

independence. To this day, the family remains one of the core elements of Chinese

society, and children often care for their elders throughout their entire lives.[29] Underneath

this, however, there is the deeper observation that we come into existence already

embedded within a sociocultural and historical context that acts as a mold for the person

we will eventually become. Human beings are inherently social and context-oriented

animals, and the way that we think, behave, and interact with one another is intimately

tied to our teachings, upbringings, and socialization. Thus, growth comes from further

integration into this process of enculturation and socialization.

      As we dig deeper, we can even uncover the possibility that the Western notion of

individualism is, to some degree, a self-deception. To achieve autonomy, one must learn

how to navigate the norms, values, and practices that govern society. This is because we

are reliant on social and cultural structures, institutions, and beliefs in order to constitute

meaning in the world. Thus, the criteria that we use to determine whether a child has

become suitably 'independent' (critical thinking skills, self-reliance, etc.) are based

entirely on mastery of those customs. This mastery of norms and codes effectively makes

the person more integrated into society, *not* more independent from it. The West,

paradoxically, cannot respect its own children as autonomous individuals until they have

learned to mimic its own ways of thinking and behaving.

      As we have seen, the philosophy of American individualism, and the Great Man

theory that spawned from it, are both somewhat problematic schools of thought that do

not accurately account for the roles of cultural conditioning, societal structures, and

external influences that all play into the construction of an individual. Considering these factors, I argue that the Confucian social model is a better one through which to view the Silicon Valley tech icons that are the subject of this essay. For one, it has more grounding in empirical reality. As noted above, we exist within a complex series of interdependent societal forces, all combining to create a landscape of meaningful activity. We require this social context to constitute meaning. Thus, the idea that we can break free from tradition and do something entirely new and original is conceptually flawed. Try as we might to attain pure individuality, everything we do is situated within a societal context that grants meaning and value to our actions - it is a mistake to suggest that meaning is ever generated completely from within. Another more practical consideration is the argument that an excessive focus on the accomplishments of specific individuals without situating them within their proper social and societal context (a la the Great Man theory) holds the danger of not recognizing the external factors that played into the success of that individual, and the sociohistorical context behind their successes. As Amanda Schaffer notes:

> "Musk's success would not have been possible without, among other things, government funding for basic research and subsidies for electric cars and solar panels. Above all, he has benefited from a long series of innovations in batteries, solar cells, and space travel. He no more produced the technological landscape in which he operates than the Russians created the harsh winter that allowed them to vanquish Napoleon. Yet in the press and among venture capitalists, the great-man model of Musk persists, with headlines citing, for instance, 'His Plan to Change the Way the World Uses Energy' and his own claim of 'changing history'... Likewise, Musk's success at Tesla is undergirded by public-sector investment and political support for clean tech. For starters, Tesla relies on lithium-ion batteries pioneered in the late 1980s with major funding from the Department of Energy and the National Science Foundation. Tesla has also benefited significantly from guaranteed loans and state and federal subsidies." [25]

As is shown in detail, Musk's accomplishments are contingent upon many factors. The historical and societal context in which Elon Musk is situated is missing entirely from the Great Man analysis of his career. From this individualist perspective, Musk is a visionary pioneer genius, a modern-day Einstein type who has accomplished things that no man before him has. It should be clear by now that this is a public image cultivated by Musk, who stand to gain by perpetuating it. When we adopt a Confucian perspective, we can see right through this charade even without knowing that Musk is quietly reliant upon federal and state subsidies, prior historical innovations, massive undercredited teams of programmers and engineers, and the like. Without considering the specific empirical facts about the situation, a Confucian would recognize that creation *ex nihilo* is an impossibility, and that there is always a sociohistorical context supporting everything. The notion that Musk is shaping history and society must be grounded in an acknowledgment of the way that history and society have shaped him.

Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a chasm between the way society views our tech icons, and the way they behave and run their companies in private. We have seen the ways that the benevolent public images of these people are often propagated by and for them, and the various ways that they attempt to do this. We have seen this now in multiple cases, and it should be clear at this point that the statements expressed publicly by these tech executives do not always accurately reflect the reality. However, this dishonesty does not mean that people like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, or Mark Zuckerberg should be condemned in the public eye. On the contrary, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has achieved incredible advancements in curbing global poverty, improving medical care, extending

access to clean water in third world countries, and the like. Elon Musk's ventures with Tesla and SpaceX represent bright, tangible visions of a technologically advanced future, free from dependence on the fossil fuel industry. The reason Tesla is being funded so heavily by the government is because they recognize the value of bold, progressive steps into a more 'green' era. What must be recognized is that nothing is black and white, everything is multifaceted. As Erving Goffman showed, our identities are a complex web of interwoven masks that we deploy depending on context. Bill Gates may profit off the labor of mistreated sweatshop workers and conflict minerals, but this does not mean that his philanthropic concern for the plight of malaria victims and starving people is fabricated. Mark Zuckerberg's desire for Facebook to be a user-friendly and benevolent service is not made completely disingenuous just because he has faltered on a number of occasions. We must recognize that the incredible achievements of these people are not negated by their failures. However, we must also take care not to let our veneration for these icons blind us to their faults. The Western notion of the 'great man' has the tendency to do this. This is why a Confucian approach can lead to a more accurate analysis: we can see the many ways in which the successes of these characters have been supported by their social and societal contexts. They are not self-made, lone individuals achieving incredible things without help - rather, they are intimately tied up with the combined efforts of their investors, their lieutenants, their employees, the government, and the like. They are, as Confucius would have recognized, only human.

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