Introduction: Strategy as the Basic Question of Organization?

The practice of strategy has been animated by a question of correlation: how to organize the world into conforming (and hence comforting) forms and rhythms through the continual application of human design. John Donne equates such design to the putting out of nets. Unwilling to travel and roam in the open heavens, humans have, instead, sought to snare the great reaches of the unknown in nets of knowledge and to haul things in, to the point where everything of the world comes ready made by human proportion. Occurrence abides by human time scales and belongs to human spaces. Donne's metaphor of a net is apt, conveying a scene of order and entrapment in which things are taken out of their raw, natural and sometimes awe inducing element and then curtailed in holding patterns, there to await their fate as things to be used by the human, living, spider-like, at the centre. Leonardo da Vinci depicts this centrality as Vitruvian Man (see Figure 0.1) using its inventiveness – especially mathematics and geometry – to reveal the harmony, perspective and beauty by which the cosmos coheres as a meaningful unity.

Keeping to the centre of things does not come easily. To cast nets demands self-control, it is an effort of will epitomized in Donne's rich monosyllable 'spur'. It is far from fatalist, far from meandering speculation, and far from fortuity. It is directed, urgent and feeds off two related forms of knowledge: habituated, practical action and theoretical understanding. The former is a sedimented awareness of how things can be made to work in accord with the agreed interests not just of the species, but of a particular subset happening to enjoy a temporary ascendancy. The latter is enquiry into the patterns of occurrence by which all life is being ordered. Together they filter and distinguish occurrence in basic temporal and spatial order: 'this', then 'that', or 'this', not 'that'. Elaborating on these basic patterns, knowledge becomes a synonym for certainty and the world becomes a synonym for its interest-bearing organization, and nothing more.
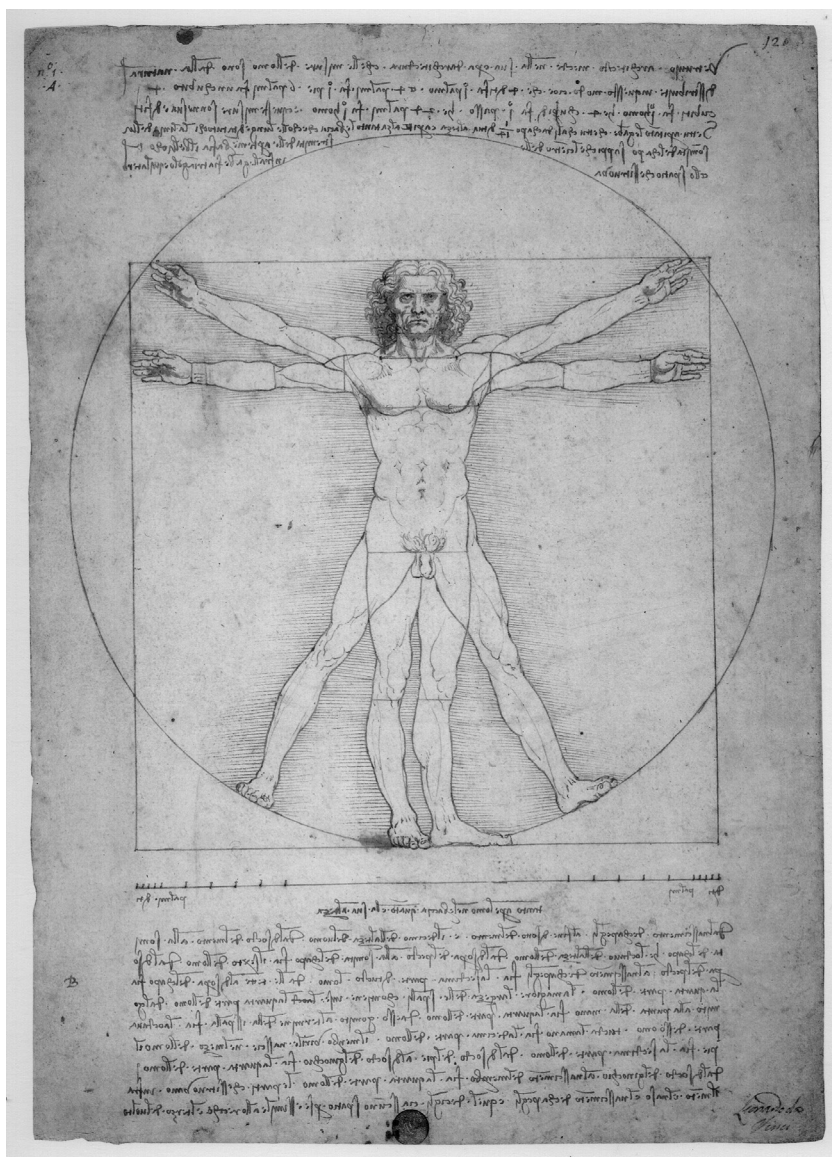
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Figure 0.1 Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man, c. 1487. Wikimedia commons

When Donne was writing *An Anatomy of the World*, this human ambition seemed reasonable, exciting even. Now though, the question arises whether the effort has been worth it. Donne himself was equivocal, ending his observation with an extending question: amid all this casting of nets, can the world keep its own form, indeed does it have any form beyond the one imposed on it from within the 'reigning' mind, and is form itself nothing more than a human convention? These are important questions because there is something mechanical and thoughtless about this casting of nets to rein things in (including reigning over other human beings), and one might ask whether there is another way of organizing, another way of relating to things than attempting to consign the world to the subaltern role of a mute resource being set aside to service a specific set of human interests. Moreover, despite (or even because of) all this knowledgeable reining in and the impressive organizational edifices that have emerged from the effort, the world still seems to slip away, sometimes imperceptibly and slyly, sometimes indifferently, and at other times in lurching, barbaric shocks.

The question for strategists is whether the desired for correlation between the world and human design is even possible? Why not let strategy idle a while, barely ticking over, or just turn it off and enjoin fate? One might respond that to do so would be to relinquish what it is that makes human life distinct: it is life being organized according to a conscious, if sometimes habituated, practical direction and purpose. It is, though, an increasingly dubious response. Dubious because, as Michael Herr mordantly notes, it is largely talk: the detailed and ambitious talk of control, which carries on in its right and righteous way, regardless of events on the rough ground of everyday experience. It is the smoothing talk transcribed into maps and diagrams drawn up as isolating summaries of the past and assertive projections of the future. It is talk of world-class distinction and distinctiveness tainted by unreal ambition. Irrespective of its authority and panache, the world still refuses such strategy talk. The strategic organization of territorial, institutional and market positions has become ever more fleeting and insubstantial and their occupation ever more questionable; and the reputations and commitments by which organizations claim themselves both distinct and admirable have become ever more precarious. And, for the strategists performing strategy, the hierarchies of commitments and entitlements emerging from seasoned reasoning and practical self-control are no longer offering the source of security and confidence they maybe once did when strategy, or at least corporate strategy, was maturing after its first flush. Other more emotional, emergent, ad-hoc and partial ways of apprehending and enlisting the world are enjoying strategic ascendency: rules of thumb,

micro incursions, tactical withdrawals, indirectness, avoidance, partial organization, redundancy or just plain smash and grab. There is now no obvious priority for the considered, iterative, means-end rationality by which practical and theoretical knowledge claimed their pre-eminence in strategy practice. Relatedly, it appears as if the human is losing its once unassailable (if self-appointed) position at the centre of things. It is forging alliances with machinery, notably electronic computing, at a dizzying and bewildering pace, to the point where strategists are increasingly being side-lined by the machinery designed to aid their decision making. The strategists may still sit in the boardroom chair, but only because machines are tireless, and they need no seats. And beyond the technology itself, if such a beyond is now even imaginable, disequilibria are appearing that gainsay the conceits of organization. These imbalances and perturbations are being configured as 'grand challenges', but this is old language trying to wrestle with new disturbances to which there are no edges, no predictability, no preferable alternatives, no overviews. The fires, floods, migrations, market collapses, nervous disorders, computer and biological viruses and factual disorders can spring up anywhere and spread everywhere: they no longer carry the character of an isolated problem to which recovering enquiry can be devoted.

It is within such a condition that we consider the prospects for strategy. We persist throughout in our claim that in asking: 'Who am I?', strategy poses the most basic and yet difficult question for an organization, one which is, at the same time, its most important one. Strategy opens the enquiry into the question and hence questionability of organizational form. Asking who or what one 'is' entails an enquiry into how one presents oneself, both to oneself and to others. It is only in becoming conscious of self-presentation that one can take an active role in the development of the self, a process giving rise to reflection on aims, needs and intentional force, and to what *I am* or *it is* in relation to what *I am not* or *it is not*. Engaging in strategy – that is, asking the question 'What is it, that is existing?' – requires the organizational self to experience itself as both reflecting on itself, and as being reflected upon. In both humans and organizations alike, this mirror play induces a pause whilst this 'doubling' attempts to coincide and cohere. The enquiry cannot yield a definite or settling answer; rather it institutes a relational struggle between the self that 'is' and the self that sees itself 'being' what it is; between the self's own conception of itself and how others see it; and between the self's sense of memorized past and anticipated future, all of which are being brought together in multiple correlations, again and again.

In aligning strategy with this basic enquiry into existence we are both prompted by, and yet run somewhat askance from, much of the

literature and thinking on strategic practice.[1] Indeed, so much of strategic practice and thinking about strategy, at least as it appears to us, has been about finding moments and places of certainty from which the difficult questions of existence abate. As a search for repose, strategy has been engaged in busying questions of organizational settlement. How to produce, align, occupy, exit, corral, dispense and distribute in ways that

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[1] Though often concealed, the question of organizational form is germane to much of the literature on 'strategic management'. Once called 'business policy', strategic management conceptualizes the work of managers in relation to an enterprise in its totality (Dan Schendel and Kenneth Hatten Business policy or strategic management: A broader view for an emerging discipline. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2017, November). Strategic management expanded the scope of managerial decision making to include environmental analysis (in particular, how market structures determine firm performance) and the formulation, evaluation, implementation and control of organizational direction or evolution. In studying this activity, academic scholarship has ranged from agency and transaction cost theories to studies of routines, resources, capabilities and firm relations across boundaries, and much more. Strategic management has also become a lucrative hunting ground for consultancies (Paul L. Drnevich1, Joseph T. Mahoney and Dan Schendel Has strategic management research lost its way? *Strategic Management Review*, 2020, 1: 35–73); and a corporate label justifying exalted hierarchical positions and matching salaries (e.g., David Knights and Glenn Morgan Corporate strategy, organizations and subjectivity: A critique. *Organization Studies*, 1991, 12(2): 251–73), and with so much going on, recurrent questions occur concerning the possible integration of strategic management into a specific 'paradigm', research programme, or even dedicated sets of concern. Here, some detect a danger of 'anything goes' fragmentation (e.g., Rudolphe Durand, Robert Grant and Tammy Madsen The expanding domain of strategic management research and the quest for integration. *Strategic Management Journal*, 2017, 38: 4–19). For others, strategic management has never been about a unified practice, but an attempt to provide practical, interdisciplinary answers for foundational problems, aimed at aiding the effectiveness and efficiency of organizations (e.g., Richard P. Rumelt, Dan Schendel and David J. Teece. *Fundamental Issues in Strategy: A Research Agenda*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1994). Returning to its origins we find strategy scholars concerned with more 'canonical' problems, often expressed in form of simple, clear and profound questions about organizational form. For example, Ronald Coase asked why firms exist; Alfred D. Chandler asked what comes first, strategy or structure; Edith Penrose posed the question of why firms stop growing; Oliver Williamson probed the challenges of vertical integration; and Igor Ansoff asked what firm patterns of behaviour are suited to turbulent environments and what practically useful sets of concepts and procedures a manager can use to manage (Michael J. Leiblein and Jeffrey J. Reuer Foundations and futures of strategic management. *Strategic Management Review*, 2020, 1 (1): 1–33; Paul L. Drnevich, Joseph T. Mahoney and Dan Schendel Has strategic management research lost its way?; David Knights and Glenn Morgan Corporate strategy). Since then, however, the bulk of strategic management publications has been concerned with increasingly tightly defined questions and carefully delineated theoretical approaches, often drawing on advanced mathematical models, and so become subject to criticism not just for losing the practical focus of early strategic management approaches but the concern for fundamental issues about organizational form that drove the early and seminal contributions to the field (Dan Schendel Introduction to the special issue – 'Strategy: Search for New Paradigms' *Strategic Management Journal*, 1994, 15(Summer): 1–4). It is the concern for the nature of organizational form that we seek to advance in this book, and we do so not in relation to commerce alone, but to ethics and aesthetics, to politics, international relations and policy, and above all, to the mediation of technology.

afford the organization a firm sense of historical and environmental settlement. Entangled in these operational questions of resource allocation and logistics, and with the management of daily affairs, the basic question of existence – of 'Who?' or 'What?' – has given way to an overriding concern with measured correlation. Academics speak of 'institutionalization' to explain why so many organizations align in endless cycles of comparing, imitating, competing, innovating, divesting or expanding, followed by more comparing, imitating, competing. There is neither the reason nor respite for the pause through which the questions 'Who am I?' or 'What is it?' can arise.

If they arise at all, they do so as a negative formulation through experiences of alienation, estrangement and boredom in the context of 'being organized'. And with the apparent demise of the unity called 'the organization' whose boundaries are being loosened by the technological encroachment of global logistics and information networks, this negativity has persisted, because organization still persists, only now more as a process, and with this restless machination has come a precariousness to human settlement. Questions of existence arise as an oblivion of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*), expressed by the insecurity, bemusement and impotence felt when encountering technologies whose own form of life is both ever present and yet utterly foreign to human 'users'.

In this book we argue for the explicit restoration of the basic question regarding strategy: how does organization realize form distinct from the forces continually shaping it? We do so not in opposition to technology, but in thinking from within its shadows. The shadows of technology are not just cast by large industrial-military complexes (and the ruins created by their inevitable transformation) but the algorithmic apparatuses that follow, mimic and ultimately reproduce human activities in their own form by automatically receiving, storing and processing the vast sums of data that structure and direct nearly all decision-making processes. Once artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics have come to supplement, supplant and structure human thought and action it is not just that the future being promised by technology has arrived, but that all possible futures have, now, already been organized. Predictive algorithms calculate insurance premiums, stock market interactions, battle movements, consumer behaviour, or innovation patterns; and social media sites vacuum user data, compiling these into commercially relevant recommender systems telling us where to travel, what to buy, which product to invest in, or which customer segment to target. More subtly even, clicks, glances, gestures, steps, access events and all manner of micro engagements now augment human cognition with real-time calculations that seamlessly map, calculate, store, and retrieve information

at speeds and volumes far above or below perceptive thresholds. What goes on in these vast networked circuits is largely only accessible through interfaces generating pre-structured user menus made approachable by often quaint skeuomorphic symbols, comforting us with reminders of a now-lost world, and projecting information in a way that humans can read and understand; but which in no way re-present any of the machine's workings. Even experts cannot know what machine learning algorithms do once they are set loose, and for most others, including those of us working in and charged with the running of organizations, a profound process of replacement is underway in which the coordinates of the human world (maps, postcodes and streets, product names, histories, emotions) are being turned into coordinates that can be read and calculated by machines (GPS locations and continuous tracking, barcodes, RFID tags, social media 'likes' and so on).

In its traditional guise strategy cannot survive in such a technological order. Organizational questions of alignment and settlement will be far more easily and competently posed and answered by machines. But strategy as we try and understand it, that is asking the questions 'Who am I?' and 'What is it?' both individually and organizationally, still offers possibility. It is to the exploration of these questions of self-knowing that our book is devoted. We elaborate what we sense is the grounding importance of strategy as an organizational practice: enacting the struggle to see outside the measured orbits by which organizational understanding is habitually and theoretically confined to a representation.

Following the introduction, we split the book into three parts. Part I opens up to the concept of authenticity and how, at least in ancient Greece, questions of self-development were intimate with an idea of strategy. Part II covers what we call the three epochs of strategy, each detailing a distinct quality in the way humans attempted to know about and control the world through the creation of organizational forms. Each epoch presents humans in an ever more impoverished state in their relations to the world (or earth). Part III picks up the pieces, attempting to find possibility in such poverty.

Part I

Chapter 1 covers the raising of consciousness and conscience and the interplay of authenticity and estrangement through a reading of Hannah Arendt, whose work we have found a profound inspiration throughout the book, notably her re-imagining of the ancient Greek city state of Athens and the *polis* as its political forum. The *polis* is an idealized space in whose relational confines an organized condition of authenticity can

appear. It is a space to which those responsible for martial and administrative leadership of the city, the *strategoi*, belong, but over which they have no authority. Separated from the household (*oikos*, the root term for economics), the *polis* is not primarily concerned with biological necessity, a condition Arendt associates with the labour of sustaining the metabolic persistence of life. Nor is it primarily a matter of *work*, of making and fabricating functional, symbolic and institutional things that last, such as temples, or laws, and that in return let the makers and fabricators 'live on' in reflection of the things they have produced. The *polis* is very specifically dedicated to the common creation of opinions. It is a place of open questions – 'What if's'? and 'So what's?' – informed solely by a concern for the city itself, as opposed to a specific set of interests. Drawing from the structure of the *polis*, we argue in this chapter for the intimacy between strategy and authenticity, one in which the concerns of both labour and work are supplanted by those of action, which for Arendt is characterized by the continual and open-ended generation of new beginnings.

Chapter 2 turns to the role of language in the context of strategy, specifically investigating how rhetoric and persuasion can open and close spaces for the airing of opinions freely amongst speakers. It is in creating and expressing opinion (and not truth) in the *polis* – the space of appearances – that the question of who one is receives its full disclosure. We then turn to the appearance of strategy in ancient Greece, first in the figure of Pericles, then Alcibiades and in particular the latter's skilful performances in the *polis*, and a gifted if contested career blighted, we suggest, by a failure to apprehend the distinction between the *polis* (rhetoric) and *oikos* (sophistry and instrumentality). The failure of Alcibiades also hints at some of the difficulties of language as the means of self-disclosure and so also for Arendt's idealized association of action with talk, for it is in Alcibiades' struggle as a *strategos* that opinion becomes twisted into event: things get done, even if the action is consumed by failure and ruin. The case of Alcibiades takes us from talk to the body, and back to the *polis* in which the everyday is suspended so that action, freed from instrumentality, can occur and recur, each time alive and enlivening. The *polis*, we argue, represents an organizational condition of estrangement that appears far away from the means-ends concerns of much that goes by the name of strategy but which, we conjecture, grounds self-awareness.

Chapter 3 plays out a philosophical engagement with organization and technology following Martin Heidegger's well-known association of industrialization with technological enframing in which the question of self-knowing had been thoroughly and perhaps irredeemably concealed.

Were it possible to ask such a question, then Heidegger identifies an essential un-at-homeness to the being (*Dasein*) able to question its condition of being, its 'thereness', thereby setting in play an uncanny condition of being able, in principle (*qua* being human), to dis-conceal one's essence, and yet continually falling short of ever doing so. It is this uneasy revealing that sets the scene for our investigation of the self in its environment. Borrowing from the biologist von Uexküll, Heidegger's analysis of worldlessness, poverty in world, and world-making structures leads to his discovery of the existential difficulties of breaking out of instrumentality and environmental captivation into an open condition in which being itself can be glimpsed. In the light of this estrangement, we then look back to the *polis* and argue its being akin to a clearing in which the continual conflict between the concealed and dis-concealed finds an organizational expression. From this movement springs the possibility of new beginnings. Heidegger talks of the *polos*, meaning a swirl or the turning things from which one springs again and again (*Ur-sprung*), a constancy of motion that continually presences and absences. It is here, we conjecture, that strategy might start to renew itself. But danger looms in Heidegger's all too ready association of industrialization and mass captivation (as though only he, and spiritually attuned folk such as himself, have spotted the greatest danger of globalized capitalism). It is because of his essentialized association of technology, industrialization and the concealing of being that Heidegger equates the possibility of its being unconcealed with a political movement that pushes back at the global order, and restores a more archaic, human-centred version. The profound and horrific irony was that it was in totalitarian National Socialism that he found such a movement, an enduring affiliation that has been unmoored in detail in his *Black Notebooks*.

Part II

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 build on the grounding discussions in Part I to develop a threefold epochal reading of technology (as *technē*, technology and technogenesis) and we elaborate on the implications of each for the possibility of understanding strategy as self-knowing. We remain wary of epochal thinking and the tendency to find in the present imminent signs of a tipping over, a watershed, as if to monumentalize what is otherwise momentary, and to discount what has gone as somehow no longer worthy of notice. The epochs are our way of organizing our understanding of the intensity of technological mediation in strategic practice: one epoch does not give way to the next so much as constitute a twist of the enframing. Chapter 4 presents the epoch of *technē*, which

is marked by the play of the fickleness of nature, luck (*tuchē*) and the fragility of early human stratagems. *Technē* is both a means of controlling the world, as well as one of violence. Indicated by humble and pre-scientific inventions such as the almanack, *technē* allows little gains to be wrested from an otherwise unforgiving surrounding by knowing when to sow or harvest in accordance with the alignment of experiential, mythical and cosmological clues. The epoch of *technē* is characterized by an intimacy between humans and their surroundings, the term planning itself finding its roots in the way in which seedlings are pushed into the ground by a farmer's foot. But there is also violence; both imposed on the human body, whose shape is bent and twisted, ground down and severed by the acts of labour and the growing numbers of devices that extend human reach; as well as upon nature, which becomes a place in need of taming and cultivating; cutting, splicing, ploughing, killing and using.

Chapter 5 details the emergence of machinery and organizational order through industrialization. No longer mere prostheses that allow humans to reach further, lift higher, hit harder or handle materials that would slice or burn skin, machine complexes and industrial installations supersede the human body's provision of labour force by conjuring immeasurable forces from nature itself. Heidegger's notion of the *Gestell* (enframing) characterizes these changes in terms of a gradual displacement of the human. No longer in control (or even in the picture), existence becomes wrapped up in continuously unfolding cycles of unlocking new resources, extracting, storing, distributing and switching over, in which whatever is made is always and only 'there' in potential service to what is to come: everything is a means for further progress, and progress is nothing more than the tightening and quickening of cycles of unlocking, extracting, storing, distributing and switching over. What is lost in this technological condition is the intimacy of the human being with their world; the care and concern that might be had for things understood as things in and of themselves, not merely input or output variables (and this includes fellow humans and the self). What is being lost is also a sense of control and oversight. When coupled, in this loss of status as a thing in itself and in this loss of influence over life, much is done but all ends disappear. Assembly lines hum, factories churn out products, organizations clash, humans are left to maintain and occasionally repair the assemblages of production and consume, but nothing endures. The questions 'Who am I?' or 'What is it?' lose their meaning when all that matters is the next deadline, update, investment opportunity, or new target, repeated; endlessly and nihilistically.

Chapter 6 reaches the end of our foray into Heidegger's analysis of technology. The chapter identifies a cybernetic fantasy of control in the ghost-written accounts of Sloan's strategic success at General Motors, a fantasy laid bare by an increasing inability to technological systems; and where humans are not even the ordinary fabricators anymore, the earth merely becomes a globe, that is gridded and dug over. The invention of the radio, which for Heidegger heralded an epoch of the nearness of the distant and the Gigantic, soon eclipsed any real nearness to events. The radio was itself soon eclipsed by technologies that rather than communicate things were just communications. With this transformation things and pictures and meaning and desires and ends are giving way to patterns and correlations; the cycles of the *Gestell* become one continual switching (there 'is' nothing as such to extract, unlock, store etc., save for information).

Chapter 7 begins the task of unpacking contemporary information technologies. Taking leave from Shoshana Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism, we suggest a further step beyond anthropocentric ideas of control. We discuss how organizational forms such as platforms and systems like Enterprise Resource Planning products, have come to 'run' organizations, but in ways that also extend, replace and veil human cognition, in often imperceptibly powerful ways. And yet, these widely connected networks, the computational apparatuses, intelligent algorithms and digital media are fundamentally indifferent to what they 'replace'. They no longer bring anything near, moreover there is no-one to whom such pictures and things can be brought. Agency, not just human agency, but all agency, is dissipated into brief small blips.

Chapter 8 broaches the understanding of communication systems and their intimacy with strategic practice. Beginning with the general (strategist) Napoleon's forms of communication-technological warfare and the subsequent reliance on innovation in communication devices, especially those of coding and decoding communications in military conflicts, we consider the workings and implications of electronic, digital computing systems for strategy. Via Alan Turing's imitation game and his universal machine, we introduce the debate on the nature of (machine) intelligence, consciousness and conscience (self-awareness).

Chapter 9 entangles strategy and cybernetics, as well as links between military funding and research development culminating in a discussion of the organizational force of neural nets as part of a programme that erases contingency and with this the increasing inability to ask strategic questions. Understanding the workings of these apparatuses has long become a matter for a limited number of experts, and even those are unable to really know how such nets compute themselves, in speeds and

complexities that far outstretch human cognition. Glitches and errors, as well as idling, faulty codes, offer, we suggest, openings through which we might glimpse the nature of these new realities, yet rather than welcome, these seem to be subject to the continual attention of interface innovation and 'good' design that serve only to further veil access and awareness of the modern human's captivation in technological environments. With this slipping away of consciousness arises a poverty in a world that finally negates the possibility for conscience through self-knowing. The question of existence, and thus the capacity for strategy, have vanished; and there is no possibility of return to a pre-technological life to find a new entry point into the question of existence.

Part III

Chapter 10 offers a way through, not by opposing poverty, but reframing it, taking the metaphor of shadow as might an advocate of John Ruskin's 'Gothic': western epistemology has for far too long been interested in light, lightness, clarity, detail and transparency. What of opacity, hints, voids and niches? Being captivated by the technological environment, marks an impoverishment in world; a regress of humans from *homo faber* to *animal laborans*. But while in the epoch of *technē* the latter still could locate the self within a cosmic and divine order, all such locating is now forfeit. Our second reading of poverty, aided by Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, however, embraces the possibility of glitches, pauses, tunnels and severences that, because they lack obvious, praiseworthy organizational presence, hint at regions in which the potential for the revision of the self emerges.

Chapter 11 returns to the beginning by revising the arguments on negativity made by Adorno and Agamben, as well as George Spencer-Brown's language of distinctions and of the nothing to help formulate this sense of renewed strategic need for both in-forming and un-informing. It is not much that we offer by way of a way out, but that is the point; strategy must remain in an uneasy and slightly impoverished space if it is to survive. It is strategy from the shadows.