Summary of Bruce Mazlish’s “The Fourth Discontinuity”

By building on the work of Freud, Darwin, and Copernicus, Mazlish explains the fourth discontinuity as a continuum between man and machine. By taking the term “Discontinuity” from Jerome Bruner as an emphasis on breaks. Mazlish’s conceptualization is that humanity is continuous with technology because technology is an extension of human capability. Since technology is manufactured by humans to augment humans, a feedback loop exists between man and machine. This loop is an iterative process that humans influence and in doing so, influences humans in return.

The four discontinuities are further explained as he develops his point. The first discontinuity being that of Copernicus having demystified humans place within the universe. Starting on the argument against anthropocentrism, Copernicus documented that the heavens didn’t revolve around the Earth. Rather, he argued that Earth was but one planet in a system of vast numbers of other planets, and that we revolve around the sun.

The second discontinuity was based on Darwin and his work to argue that humanity was continuous with animals. Man wasn’t a privileged species, but simply a result of nature.

Mazlish added that specifically man was a “tool making animal,” according to Benjamin Franklin.

The third discontinuity was Freud’s argument that psychoanalysis endeavored to prove that man was “not the master in his own house.” Freud made the point that our minds are a tripartite: the id, the ego, and the superego. Freud claimed that these different parts of our mind are what control us.

These themes relate to previous readings from Ong’s “Technology Restructures Thought.”

*Summary by G. James Mitchell*

Mazlish, B. (1967). The forth discontinuity. Technology and Culture, 8(1), 1-15. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3101522