III. RETHINKING OURSELVES

Philosophical Studies of Virtual Culture: How is a Philosophical Virtual Laboratory Being Made?

Silviya Mineva
(The University of Sofia)

The title "Philosophical Studies of Virtual Culture: How is a Philosophical Virtual Laboratory Being Made?" refers to a series of scientific research projects and innovational educational forms, which were created during the last 5 years (2008-2013), through the initiative of teachers with a specialty in Philosophy at Sofia University and developed with the active participation of their students.

The title reflects a heuristic attempt to combine the analysis of new, current, and still poorly researched philosophical phenomena, with possibilities of education and teaching derived from the virtual world of cyberspace as a place of digital technologies and global communication. The roots of this attempt lie in a Masters program with an interdisciplinary profile/character, entitled "Virtual Culture." It was created in the 2000s by a group of teachers at the Philosophy Faculty of Sofia University. Back then they probably didn't expect that the program would subsequently turn out to be the basis for the development of a new research and educational paradigm with a distinctive accent: the need for and possibility of philosophical reflection upon the modern application of technology. That need and opportunity comes from the fact that the 'boom' of information technologies is not only a technological matter. It changes social relations and culture. After the creation of typography, the steam engine, radio and television, we are today not only observers of yet another

revolution of technique and technology but are also its immediate moving forces. The everyday participation of regular people, of non-specialists such as consumers, is the new and different element in the modern technological and social transformation. This means that today we are not only objects but also subjects of change.

The internet is developing through big technological and economical corporations like Google and Facebook. They create social platforms—scenes where the actors are millions of users. The platforms are constantly improving, opening a new field for the activity of users. The better their creators predict the interests and potential for activity of users, the more successful the platforms are, in a commercial sense. That is why the development of virtual culture is so important and interesting in human terms, as well as from the perspective of individual identity.

Due to electronic networks, especially the Internet, communications channels and boundaries are constantly changing, leading to the emergence of new virtual communities and significant changes in human lifestyles and people's conception of nature, culture and themselves, their coexistence, communication and cooperation. The study of these phenomena and processes requires their own special philosophical research and consideration, supported by logical and fact-based arguments from the history of science, scientific theoretical constructs, and also the modern life and thinking of people influenced by the application of science. Use of these arguments provokes different questions and hypotheses about the tension between humanistic values and cyber perspectives, which allows the shifting and blurring of borders between man and machine, *socium* and technology, to the point of their fusion due to the penetration of cybernetics in social and humanistic fields.

On the other hand, life in a world of machines is an indicator of increased instrumentalisation of human life. This instrumentalisation is determined by technical means of communication For example, computers, especially as "communication prostheses," are assistive artificial organs that expand the scope of human beings and their impact

on the world.[1]

In fact, the idea about a technical "prosthesis" is not a new one. Freud defines man as a "prosthetic God" thanks to technical advances. With such technical devices such as the telegraph, telephone, camera, and even text font, people can "extend" fleeting visual and auditory perception, to overcome time and space barriers, to communicate. And in this way, they immediately compensate for the lack of the presence of the other person. On this basis, Freud predicted the growth of human divinity in the future and at the same time warned that this would not guarantee human happiness. Moreover ensuring pleasure and comfort, technical "prostheses," according to their instrumental context today, involve a specific anthropological perspective.[2]

The unusual instrumentality of new communication technologies, and the networks created by them, derives from the opportunities they provide for new ways of presenting human existence and new definitions of what it means to be human. Their source is not the modern utilitarian attitude of the mechanical age, when machines replaced simple tools, but the fact that over time, due to their massive use and permanent application, "communication prostheses" have accreted organically within daily human life and action. As a result, they begin to play a decisive role in the process of human self-identification as a dynamic virtual process.

The spreading of this process in cyberspace allows us to speak of 'the production of virtual identities,' and of the end of the mechanical and the occurrence of a new, virtual era. The key features of the new era are the popularity of computers and variations within identity, due to inorganic, disembodied presence and participation in the cyber-world of virtual reality. These features, in particular the virtual collectivity of electronic social networks, are a real challenge to the basic categories of

---

[1] Allucquere Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996).

[2] Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Wien: Internationaler Psyhoanalytischer Verlag 1930). Accessed at http://archive.org/details/DasUnbehagenInDerKultur on 01/08/2013.

human existence and activity: work and play, communication and knowledge, time and space, body and personality.

Where virtual collectivity competes most successfully is against the primary communities and traditional institutions of family, neighbourhood and religion in modern cities—metropolises whose scale makes interaction and face-to-face meeting difficult. Virtual collectivity satisfies the need for sharing and a hedonistic attitude to peace of mind, as well as thirst for authenticity, without implying other commitments beyond that of co-residing as consumers within the same cyberspace.

Having been considered, until recently, to be a part of the science fiction realm, the virtual world is now an indisputable fact. Its global extent is growing continuously and allows the 'expanse' necessary to support a variety of activities, preferences and interactions. As a result, cyberspace is turned into an object of rapid cultural exaltation, a kind of metaphor that extends itself far beyond the usual simulations, military experiments and computer-mediated activities that we normally associate with its creation and existence. Its metaphorical character is unquestionable for researchers who see in computers, not only a tool, for communicating, but an opportunity for the emergence and spread of atypical forms of social interactions as well. Forms such as intellectual discussion, argument, even sex, as well as new roads to the creation, distribution and saving of art and knowledge.

Like any culture, cyber-culture has its source and its momentum: the interaction of people and machinery/technics. Interaction takes place under the sign of the intellectualization of fundamental human activities: labor and knowledge. The mechanization and computerization of labor and knowledge leads to the so-called 'intellectual technologies,' which expand people's intellectual rather than the physical capabilities. Thanks to their intellectualization, labour, knowledge and human life acquire a value in modernity, unknown to previous eras. As is said by Oswald Spengler, human life is valuable when labour is the basic word for ethical thought, and when the machine runs and drives people to

cooperate with it.[3]

The introduction of 'intellectual' technologies causes not only alloplastic change to the environment inhabited by human beings, but also autoplastically changes human beings themselves. The anthropological dialectic of this process is that our intellectualization is supposed by technical automatization and vice versa. The link between human and machine is characterised by interdependence. It can be presented aphoristically thus: technology makes the human to the same degree as the human makes technology. Reasons for this formulation can be found both in the macro scale of socio-historical perspective and in the microsphere of the socio-psychological field.

Technique is a fundamental notion seen via the conception of headway as progress and development, as a move from simplicity to complexity, but also as a move from authenticity to the representativeness of human self-reflection, as mediated by the indirect relations and interactions between man and nature and between people as well. In relation to the notion of technique we can, and actually do, describe the history of society as a movement that represents technological progress: the path of humanity from the cannon to the machine, then from the machine to the computer and artificial intelligence. It is not surprising, then, that the process of such consecutive replacements is referred to as 'a revolution.' Revolution connects and separates—in ancient times—stone-, iron- and copper-eras, and—in modernity—the mechanical and virtual eras. Still in relation to 'technique' and its use, and presence in the lives of people, our discourse is about generations, differences, 'reprogramming of the mind' and the emergence of new concepts of the human being influenced by organized knowledge of electronic hypertexts and the new visual culture of computer imaging. These concepts are inspired by the virtually unlimited freedom offered by cyberspace for the shared play of imagination, for imaginary views of others and ourselves under the

[3] Oswald Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes? Erster Band (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1969) Accessed online at Projekt Gutenberg-DE Spiegel, http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/5332/1 on 01/08/2013.

spotlight of our desires and expectations. The main characteristic of this space is that it is defined by an egalitarianism of the various virtual interactions of its members, who are real people of flesh and blood. When everyone has an equal opportunity to present themselves in a space, where all excellences are disembodied, because they are excellences of the mind, imagination, intellect, then the willingness to participate is always available.

The study of these phenomena and processes requires their own special philosophical research and consideration. What exactly is philosophical cyber-anthropology? As was noted earlier, there are enough logical and fact-based arguments in the history of science, scientific theoretical constructs and also in the modern life and thinking of people, who are influenced by the application of science. And this conception provokes different questions and hypotheses about the tension between humanistic values and cyber perspective. The tension is one that allows for the shifting and blurring of borders between man and machine, socium and technology, to the point of their fusion due to the penetration of cybernetics in social and humanistic fields. Today, especially in common, everyday conceptions, cybernetics is associated with the ability to create artificial intelligence by simulating the human processing of information using computer technology. As such, these are the capabilities which provoke the interest of philosophy in cybernetics as a field of science and knowledge.

Combining cybernetics and philosophical anthropology also requires understanding Norbert Wiener's ideas about the nature and necessity of cybernetics as science of comparative research in the frontier areas of science, and the modern identification of cybernetics with the completely new field of computers.[4] Philosophical cyber-anthropology interest is also focused on the human being and a kind of existence referring to cyberspace as a specific ontological reality that permeates through our everyday world (*habitus*)—as techno-social life,

[4] Norbert Wiener, Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine. 2nd Revised Edition (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1961).

stemmed from the implosion of nature and culture. The ideal environment for this implosion is the virtual environment.

Hence, the crucial question for philosophical cyber-anthropology: What could happen to our human capabilities and virtues, if we were able to live most of our lives in cyberspace? In turn, is the vitality of modern publicity a kind of alternative or regression? Are traditional categories such as friendship and love transformed into ‘functions,‘ ‘tools‘ for connecting people only in a simply symbolic space of the virtual systems?

This understanding of philosophical cyber-anthropology, and its questions, is only a part of the research and results that were realized by the participants in our education and research platform, “The Philosophical Virtual Laboratory.” As a result the laboratory has turned into a focus for this type of research and for integrative forms of teaching in the Philosophy Faculty of Sofia University. How that happened can be understood from the history of its creation. However, before outlining that history it is important to know why we named it, “The Philosophical Virtual Laboratory.”

First, of course, the education and research platform was so named because we, the creators, are philosophers.

Second, because as philosophers we are faced with the challenge of the virtual world of the cyberspace today. It can be presented with the rhetorical question: is there something thought of, that exists only as an idea, without being turned into a material object, and to not be virtual?

Third, because our laboratory has turned into a creative workshop for the carving of philosophical concepts to describe and understand heretofore unresearched philosophical phenomena and processes according to their effect on knowledge, communication and the lifestyle of people, provoked by the modern and violent development of computer technologies, global communication and cyber culture. With this we confirmed Gilles Deleuze’s definition of the postmodern mission of philosophy: the art of inventing concepts and that way to fighting

with chaos "an ocean of uniformities."[5]

With its aims and results, the laboratory project became a natural and successful continuation of a series of prior, related scientific research and innovative educational practices, realized during the last few years. Their topics and results allow for discussion of a newly-developing, postmodern tradition in Bulgarian philosophical research and education. It is connected with the highlighting of the problematic sphere and research parameters of the new, postmodern field of philosophical interest today—the virtual world of cyber space and its place, meaning and use in the life of the modern human and society.

In practice, the Philosophical Virtual Laboratory happened long before it got its name. For the short period between 2009 and 2012, diverse information and observations, points of view, analysis and assessments of different phenomena, defined as virtual were collected, systematized and discussed, relating to: the virtual world, virtual reality, virtual control, internet publicity, internet slang, epistemic responsibility in the network and others. A large part of the results of this process is present in the lectures of the Masters program "Virtual Culture" and also in specialized undergraduate philosophical courses. Others form part of the research of our doctoral students.

Of course, as with all laboratories, ours has its own collection of tools. They include different forms of expression, discussion and sharing of content, which the cyber world of cyberspace offers. Our key tool is our e-magazine, *Virtual Culture*. In it are published commentary, analyses, research texts, messages and feedback on academic events, but also presentations of bachelor and masters degree students, as well as graduates. The magazine was created in 2009. Its appearance was preceded by the first Bulgarian philosophical forum at Sofia University, dedicated to the theme of "Day of the Virtual Culture." At that time, we published the first book of the "Philosophical Research into Virtual

[5] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, What is Philosophy? (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Culture," in which the reports of the forum participants were published.[6]

A Facebook page of the magazine was created in 2011.[7] It has become a key 'completing' supplement to the main platform 'place' of virtual culture and the philosophical interest towards it. Two years later, the second book of "The philosophical research into virtual culture" was published with texts drawn from presentations at the conference, "Philosophy and Virtuality." This conference was held during November 2012 in Sofia University, again with the participation of teachers and students from different specialties and universities and scientists from Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (B.A.S.).

Another innovative element in our platform is its experimental internet learning forum, integrated with the magazine. It was created with the active participation of students under my management in a specialized course, "Morals, interaction, communication." Main highlights of the course are studies and analysis of the ethical dimensions of communication and different communicational practices, their historical movement and change from their traditional forms towards modern virtualized and globalized interaction and communication in electronic networks. In the forum the discussion of these processes found expression in a large number of topics, dedicated to bilateral interaction, internet-dependence, virtual love, slang on the net, online confession, alienation in the modern world. As a result the forum and the course became a natural part of our laboratory, thanks to the participation, curiosity and the heuristic spirit of our students. For all of us—the participants in the course—it was interesting, exciting and entertaining to try to talk philosophically online and offline about things that have become a part, sometimes trivial, of our everyday lives and which, for that reason, we often perceive to be obvious and self-explanatory.

The remaining, more delicate, subtle and invisible part of the

---

[6] See the website of Virtual Culture magazine: http://spisanie.virtualna-kultura.com/index.php.

[7] See the Facebook page of *Virtual Culture* magazine: https://www.facebook.com/ESpisanieVirtualnaKultura

laboratory tool-set is the intuition for the virtual that each one of the "Laboratoriest" has, in other words the firsthand knowledge-experience, that offer him his own ideas, nonexistent as material objects. But a lot more attention today, in comparison to any other intuition of the virtual, is deserved by something else. It is the alienating of the virtual from the human via its transformation of the human into artificial surroundings with the help of the new technologies. The alienation consists in the construction of the virtual world and cyberspace with these technologies. In it, the virtual objectification, through the power of mathematical calculations and program models, gets its own autonomous existence and functioning according to the other individual. Still, this objectification allows the simultaneous presence of many individuals in cyberspace—sharing. This circumstance gives grounds for aiming philosophy towards the question of its own future—how does the old philosophy combine with the new technologies?

But on the same principle we can ask the opposite: How do the new technologies combine with the old philosophy?

Our answer is: through modern philosophical education and philosophical research into virtual culture. Because philosophy has existed long before the new technologies and will continue to exist after their replacement with other technologies. Because unlike them, it doesn't have a replacement. We can rely on technologies to ease our lives and replace us in many other things, but they cannot replace us in our thinking and especially in our reflection, because we cannot remain thinking, while expecting something else to think instead of us. Because of this, the relation of philosophy with virtuality is described, probably most accurately, with Zeno's Paradox Achilles and tortoise. The Paradox is a metaphor of that relation—a relation between thought and possibility, an image and its reflection. A famous aphorism says that the fastest thing in the world is thought. Today we tend to give that description mainly to technology. It hurries much like the legendary hero from the Zeno's Paradox, driven by scientific discoveries, but it can never outrun the tortoise of philosophy, because people gather knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.

No matter how 'smart' the technologies are, they cannot replace that wisdom, whose recognition we owe to Steve Jobs, through which philosophy and philosophizing is a unit of measurement and offers criteria for the value and worth of everything that we think of, feel and do, including technologies: "I would trade all of my technology for an afternoon with Socrates."[8]

But the recognition of Jobs also hints at something else: that the care for our authenticity as unique and different creatures is unneeded and meaningless outside of communication, which is necessary for us to share with others like us and different from us. That is why we are unique and different and define ourselves as unique and different through communication. Our uniqueness is a consequence, not an aim of communication, because communication, as pointed out by John Durham Peters, is the name of the practice that compensates for the fact that not one of us can be the other.

And most importantly—without the other, two of the most human of human things, without which the human being wouldn't be human, are impossible: life and freedom.

[8] John Durham Peters, A History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).