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Prolegomena to a Web-Life-Theory

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Abstract. Human existence is being transformed. Its structure, many thousand years old, seems to be changing: built on the natural and the social, there is a third form of existence: web-life. Man is now the citizen of three worlds and its nature is being formed by the relations of natural, social and web-life. We regard as our main goal the study of web-life, which has developed as the result of Internet use.

Keywords: Internet, web-life, philosophy, cultural, social

1. Methodological Remarks

1. While constructing a theory of web-life which interprets web-life, we will try to present and interpret the most important contexts primarily through philosophical trains of thought, above all the appearance of the Internet, its features, its widespread usage and the consequences of these. Firstly, we will try to reveal the complex *nature* of the Internet, and then we will examine the social and cultural *effects* of Internet use.

2. The two topics are of course closely related. The interpretability of social and cultural effects, to be discussed in the second step, requires a presentation of the nature of the Internet in which effects of this kind are conceivable at all. In certain cases, this involves trying to make use of connections which are uncommon in the task of interpreting the Internet. Thus, for example, we will engage in discussions of philosophy, philosophy of technology, communication theory, epistemology, cognitive science and social and cultural history instead of discussing directly the Internet "itself". We will do all of this hoping that besides a more complete understanding of the Internet, we can prepare for the presentation of its social and cultural consequences as well.

3. On the other hand, it is of course also essential that the nature of the Internet has been developing and is developing not in a "naturally given" way but as a result of conscious decisions, serving certain social and cultural aspirations, following intentions, interests and values. Taking into consideration the social

and cultural factors which *define* as well as participate in the *shaping* of the nature of the Internet obviously helps identifying those social and cultural *effects that occur* in the course of Internet use. Thus, it seems to be useful to include certain social and cultural contexts in the examination of the nature of the Internet.

4. We have developed a complex method for the interpretation of the nature of the Internet, which we have dubbed "*the Aristotelian philosophy of the Internet*". This has two important features:

i) We will try to present – as a philosophical introduction – a philosophical (and not "scientific") description.

ii) In the course of this, we will try to apply the approach of the Aristotelian theory of causation as regards the nature of entities.

5. The *complexity* of the Internet and the extreme *diversity* of our experiences and ideas in connection with the Internet support these methodological assumptions. Among researchers of the Internet, there is a lack of consensus in this matter: according to many, it is not clear whether it is the (scientific) theory of the Internet or its philosophy that is missing for the time being. Scientific theories on the Internet normally apply the specific infrastructure of a scientific discipline (sociology, psychology, political theory, law, political economy, anthropology, theory of networks etc.) to characterize the Internet, as it can be found e.g. in the works of Castells (2001), Barabási (2002), Fuchs (2008), or Lessig (2006). In our view, *philosophical* descriptions can be more fruitful at the beginning: it is not constrained by the approach of any discipline. However, the available philosophical analyses (Dreyfus, 2009; Feenberg and Friesen, 2011) seem to have a very limited philosophical horizon.

6. The "omnipresence" or *ubiquity* of the Internet, that is, the experience that the Internet can be basically found in the whole of the human practice and has effects on it, makes the interpretation of the social and cultural effects of the Internet more difficult. A further difficulty is the essential *simultaneity* of the changes and the analyses. *Analogies* seem to be a useful methodological tool in this situation. We are going to introduce two illuminating analogies:

i) The *analogy of the reformation of knowledge* is based on the comparison of faith in the late Middle Ages and the late modern situation of scientific knowledge.

ii) The *analogy of the shaping of web-life* is based on the comparison of the changes of human nature caused by Internet use with the process of becoming human.

7. In this introduction, the interpretation of the nature of the Internet, the problems of the philosophy of the Internet and the analogies clarifying the effects of Internet use are all presented as theses. My discourse on the philosophy of the Internet puts the theses in a wider context and is available in Hungarian version (Ropolyi 2006) and in a draft English translation (Ropolyi 2014).

2. The Nature of the Internet

1. The tool of interpreting and describing the Internet is the Aristotelian *philosophy of the Internet*. This means that we look at the Internet in *four* – easily distinguishable, but obviously connected – *approaches*: as a system of technology, as a participant in communication, as a cultural medium and as an independent organism.

2. Just as other technologies, the Internet serves human control over given situations. With the use of a technology, man can create and maintain artificial entities, and, as a mater of fact, an artificial world: its own "not naturally given" world and he shapes his own nature through his own activity.

3. The Internet is a specific system of *information* technology. Essentially, it functions in the medium of information and not in a certain macroscopic physical sphere; it works with information. Since information is created through interpretation, a certain kind of hermeneutical practice is a decisive component of information technologies. Consequently, information – and all kinds of information "products" – is virtual by nature; that is, though it seems *as if* it were real, its reality has a certain limited, finite degree.

4. The information technological system of the Internet – in fact, we can talk about a peculiar version of a system, that is, a network – consists of computers which are interconnected and operated in a way which maximally secures the freedom of information of the individuals connected to the network: the control over information about themselves and their own world in space, time and context.

5. Thus, from a technological point of view, the Internet is an artificially created and maintained virtual sphere for the operation of which the functioning of the computers connected into the network and the concrete practices of people's interpretations are equally indispensable.

6. For the characterization of the Internet as a participant of communication, we understand communication as a certain type of technology, the goal of which is to create and maintain communities. Consequently, the technologies of communication used on the Internet are those technologies with the help of which particular – virtual, open, extended, online etc. – communities can be built. The individual relationships to the communities that can be built and the nature of the communities can be completely controlled through technologies of the Internet (e-mail, chat, lists, blogs, podcast, the Facebook, etc.).

7. Communication through the Internet has a network nature (it is realized in a distributive system); it uses different types of media, but it is a technology which follows a basically visual logic.

8. Thus, as regards communication, the Internet is the network of consciously created and maintained extended plural communities, for the functioning of

which the harmonized functioning of computers connected to the network as well as the individual's control over his own communicative situations are needed.

9. From a cultural point of view, the Internet is a medium which can accommodate, present and preserve the wholeness of human culture – both as regards quality and quantity. It can both represent a whole cultural universe and different, infinitely varied cultural universes (worlds).

10. Culture is the system of values present in coexisting communities; it is "the world of" communities. Culture shapes and also expresses the characteristic contents of a given social system. Each social system can be described as the coexistence of human communities and the cultures they develop and follow. Schematically, society = communities + cultures. The individual is determined by his participation in communities and cultures as well as his contribution to them.

11. The Internet accommodates the values of the late modern age, or the "end" of modernity. That is, it houses late modern worlds. Late modern culture contains modern values as well, but it refuses their exclusivity and it favours a plural, postmodern system of values. The way of producing culture is essentially transformed: the dichotomy of experts creating traditional culture and the laymen consuming it are replaced by the "democratic nature" of cyber culture: each individual produces and consumes at the same time.

12. Thus, from a cultural point of view, the Internet is a network of virtual human communities, artificially created by man unsatisfied by the world of modernity; it is a network in which a postmodern system of values based on the individual freedom and independence of cyber culture prevails.

13. From an organizational point of view, the Internet is a relatively independent organism which develops according to the conditions of its existence and the requirements of the age. It is a (super)organism created by the continuous activity of people the existence, identity and integrity of which is unquestionable; systems, networks and worlds penetrating each other are interwoven in it. It has its own, unpredictable evolution: it develops according to the evolutionary logic of creation and man, wishing to control its functioning, is both a part and a creator of the organism.

14. The indispensable vehicles are *the net*, built of physically connected computers, *the web*, stretching upon the links which connect the content of the websites into a virtual network, *the human communities* virtually present on the websites as well as the infinite variations of individual and social *cultural universes* penetrating each other.

15. The worldwide organism of the Internet is loaded with values: its existence and functioning constantly creates and sustains a particular system of values: the network of postmodern values. The non-hierarchically organized value sphere of virtuality, plurality, fragmentation, implied modernity, individuality and opposition to power interconnected through weak bonds penetrates all activity

on the Internet – moreover, it does so independently of our intentions, through mechanisms built into the functioning of the organism.

16. Thus, from the organizational point of view, the Internet is a superorganism organized from systems, networks and cultural universes. Its development is shaped by the desire of late modern man to "create a home", entering into the network of virtual connections impregnated with the postmodern values of cyber culture. For man, the Internet is a new – more homely – sphere of existence; it is the exclusive vehicle of web-life. Web-life is created through the transformation of "traditional" communities of society and the cultures prevailing in the communities. Schematically: web-life = "online" communities + cyber cultures.

17. To sum up: the Internet is the medium of a new form of existence created by the late modern man and it is built on the earlier, (natural and social) spheres of existence, but it is markedly differentiated from them. We call this newly formed existence web-life and we are trying to understand its characteristics.

3. The Reformation of Knowledge

1. For the study of the mostly unknown relations of web-life, it seems to be useful to examine the nature of knowledge which was transformed as a consequence of Internet use, its social status and the consequences of the changes.

2. The unhappy inhabitants of the 15th and 16th centuries and of our age have to face similar challenges: the citizen of the Middle Ages and the modern "web citizen" or "netizen" participate in analogous processes. The crisis of religious fate unfolded in the late Middle Ages and in our age the crisis of rational knowledge can be observed.

3. In those times, after the crisis – with the effective support of reformation movements –, we could experience the rise of rational thinking and the new, scientific worldview; in our times, 500 years later, this scientific worldview itself is eventually in a crisis.

4. The following question emerges today: how can we get liberated from the power of the decontextualized, abstract rationality that rules life? In the emancipation process that leads out of the crisis of our days, *the reformation of knowledge* is happening, using the possibilities offered by the Internet.

5. The reformers diagnose the transformation of the whole human culture: the possibility of an immediate relationship between the individual and knowledge is gradually forcing back the power of the institutional system of abstract knowledge (universities, academies, research centres, hospitals, libraries, publishers) and its official experts (qualified scientists, teachers, doctors, editors).

6. We can observe the birth of the yet again liberated man on the Internet, who, liberated from the medieval rule of abstract emotion, now also wants to rid

himself of the yoke of modernist abstract reason. But his personality, system of values and thinking are still unknown and essentially enigmatic for us.

7. Postmodern thinking was itself created and strengthened by the – more or less conscious – reflection about the circumstances of the crisis, as the eminent version of the philosophy of the crisis. The postmodern point of view clearly perceives the disintegration of the modernist conception based on abstract rationality; what is more, it evaluates it as a necessary and desirable development. But essentially, it does not have anything to say about the possibilities of recovering from the crisis.

8. The Internet developed and became widely prevalent simultaneously with the spreading of the postmodern point of view. It seems that the crisis of modernity created a "tool" which is in accordance with its system of values. It is kept because of this accordance; what is more, people develop it further. However, at the same time, this "tool", the Internet, seems to be useful for pursuing forms of activities which are built on the postmodern world but transcend it and also for the search for the way out of the crisis.

9. The processes unfolding in the social and human system of relationships show a lot of similarities with the change of the status of religious belief in the Middle Ages.

10. The religious worldview lost its earlier stability 500 years ago; people's trust in the contemporary religious institutional system and the official experts of faith wavered. At the same time, it is also obvious that they did not necessarily reject the truths of God but their embeddedness in society and their tendency to legitimize political power; they condemned the system of conditions of the creation and use of truths of faith.

11. Reformation movements of the age appeared as a response to the crisis of faith, as a consequence of which religious faith became pluralized to a significant degree. Reformed faith breaks with the medieval concept of faith, which can be characterized as an abstract emotional state and it fights for the acceptance of the personal versions of the relationship to God. But, of course, its "suggestions to solve the crisis" do not lead out from the world of faith.

12. It is well known that book printing played an important role in the reformation of faith. Books are "tools" which are in accordance with the system of values of the world undergoing modernization. They made it possible to experience and reform faith in a personal manner as a result of the fact that the modern book was capable of accommodating the system of values of the Middle Ages. But the typical usage of the book as a modern "tool" is not this but rather the creation and study of modern narratives in a seemingly infinite number of variations.

13. The scenes of the reformation of religious faith were religious institutions (churches, monasteries, the Bible etc.). Nowadays, the reformation of knowledge is being generated in the institutional system of science: research centres, universities, libraries and publishers.

14. The reformation of religious faith was a development which evolved from the crisis of religious faith. The reformation of knowledge is a series of changes originating from the crisis of rational knowledge.

15. In both cases, the (religious and academic) institutional system and the expert bodies (the structure of the church and the schools and especially universities, research centres, libraries and publishers, as well as priests and researchers, teachers and editors) lose their decisive role in matters of faith and science.

16. The reformation of faith, ignoring the influence of ecclesiastical institutions, aims for developing an immediate relationship between the individual and God. The reformation of knowledge creates an immediate relationship between the individual and scientific knowledge. On the Internet, Ideas can be presented and studied in essence independently of the influence of the academic institutional system. There are no critics and referees on web sites; everyone is responsible for his own ideas.

17. The reformation of faith played a vital role in the development process of the modern individual: harmonizing divine predestination with free will secured the possibility of religious faith, making the development of masses of individuals in a religious framework possible and desirable.

18. However, the modern individual that developed this way, "losing his embeddedness" in a traditional, hierarchical world, finds himself in an environment which is alien, what is more, hostile to him. As a consequence of his fear and his desire for security, the pursuit of absolute power becomes his second nature; the modern individual is selfish.

19. Man, participating in the reformation of knowledge (after the events that happened hundreds of years before) is forced again into yet another process of individuation. Operating his personal relationship to knowledge, a postmodern individual is in the process of becoming. The postmodern personality, liberated from the rule of the institutional system of modern knowledge, finds himself in an uncertain situation: he himself can decide in the question of scientific truth, but he cannot rely on anything for his decisions.

20. This leads to a very uncertain situation from an epistemological point of view. How can we tackle this problem? Back then, the modern individual eventually asked the help of reason and found solutions, e.g. the principle of rational egoism or the idea of the social contract. But what can the postmodern personality do? Should he follow perhaps some sort of post-selfish attitude? But what could be the content of this? Could it be perhaps some kind of plural or virtual egoism? The postmodern personality got rid of the rule of abstract reason, but it still seems that he has not yet found a more recent human capacity the help of which he could use in order to resolve his epistemological uncertainty.

21. From a wider historical perspective, we can see that people in different ages tried to understand their environment and themselves and to continue living by

relying on abstract human capacities that succeeded each other. People in primeval societies based their magical explanation of the world on the human will – and we managed to survive. After the will, the senses were in the mythical centre of ancient culture – and the normal childhood of mankind passed, too. Medieval religious worldview was built by taking into consideration the dominance of emotions – and this ended, too, at some point. In the age of the glorious reason, it was the scientific worldview that served the reign of man – until now.

22. Today, the trust in scientific worldview seems to be teetering; the age of the Internet has come. However, the problem is that we cannot draw on yet another human capacity since we have already tried them all once. Or have we? Do we still have hidden resources? Or can we say goodbye, once and for all, to the usual abstractions, and a new phase of the evolution of mankind is waiting for us, which is happening in the realm of the concrete?

4. The Formation of Web-Life

1. In order to study the mostly unknown context of web-life, it seems to be useful to examine the nature of human existence, transformed through Internet use and the consequences of the changes. Social scientists like Castells (2000), Wellman and Haythornthweait (2002), or Fuchs (2008) often characterize the consequences of the Internet use as pure *social* changes, including all kinds of changes into the social ones, and disregard the significance of more comprehensive changes. We focus on the latter one.

2. While using the Internet, all determining factors and identity-forming relations change which had a role in the evolution of mankind from the animal kingdom and in the process of the development of society. We can identify tool use, language, consciousness, thought as well as social relationships as the most decisive changes in the process of becoming human and in the formation of web-life which has developed as a result of Internet use.

3. The simultaneous transformations of animal tool and language use, animal consciousness and thought as well as social relationships and the series of interwoven changes led to the evolution of humans and to the development of culture and society. Nowadays, the robust changes in the same areas are also simultaneous. They point into one direction, intensifying each other, and induce an interconnected series of changes. The quantity of the changes affecting the circumstances of human existence results yet again in the qualitative transformation of the circumstances of existence: this is the process of the development of web-life.

4. The material circumstances of tool making and tool use lose their significance and the emphasis is now on the most essential part of the process: interpretation.

A crucial part of tool making is the interpretation of an entity in a different context, as different from the given (such as natural entities), and in this "technological situation" its identification as a tool. During Internet usage, individual interpretations play a central role in the process of creating and processing information on different levels and in the information technologies that are becoming dominant. At the same time, the material processes that provide the conditions of interpretation are to a large extent taken care of by machines. Hermeneutics takes the central role of energetics in the necessary human activity of reproducing human relations.

5. The human double (and later multiple) *representation* strategy developed from the simpler strategies of the representation characteristic of wildlife led to language, consciousness, thought and culture. Double representation (I can regard an entity both as "itself" and "something else" at the same time) is a basic procedure in all these processes – and in tool making as well – and an indispensable condition of their occurrence. The use of the Internet radically transforms the circumstances of interpretation. On the one hand, it creates a new medium of representation, in which – as in some sort of global "mind" – the whole world of man is represented repeatedly. On the other hand, after the ages of orality and literacy, it makes possible basically for all people to produce and use in an intended way the visual representation of their own world as well. Virtuality and visuality are determining characteristics of representation. We are living in the process of the transformation of language, speech, reading and writing, memory and thought.

6. "Traditional" human culture is created through the reinterpretation of the relations "*given by nature*", it materializes through their perpetual transformation and it becomes a decisive factor in the prevailing social relations. The cyber-cultural practices of the citizens of the web are now directed at the revaluation of *social* relations, and as a result of their activities a cyber-, web- or Internet-cultural system of relations is formed, which is the decisive factor in the circumstances of *web-life*.

7. The basically naturally given communities of animal partnership were replaced by the human structure of communities which was practically organized as a consequence of the tool-use-based indirect, and language-use-based direct communicative acts. However, the control over communicative situations can be monopolized by various agents: as a result, it is burdened with countless constraints. The nature of the communities that come into existence under these circumstances can become independent from the aspirations of the participants: various forms of alienation and inequality can be generated and reproduced in the communities. The citizen of the web who engages in communication reinterprets and transforms communicative situations; above all, he changes power relations in favour of the individual: the citizen of the web can have full powers over his own communicative situations.

8. Society is a system of relationships which develops from and is built on the natural sphere. Web-life is a system of relationships which develops from and is built on the social sphere. Man now is not the citizen of two worlds but of three: he is the inhabitant of nature, society and web-life.

5. Web-Life in Practice

1. The knowledge presented and conveyed through the Internet valorizes the forms of knowledge which are characteristically situation-dependent, technological and postmodern. The whole modern system of knowledge becomes revaluated and, to a large extent, virtualized; the relationship to knowledge takes a personal, concrete, open and plural shape. The significance of the institutional system of science is diminished. Instead of scientific knowledge, technological knowledge and the technologies of interpreting knowledge are in the forefront.

2. Besides culture, which is created by the communities of society, individual cyber culture plays a more and more important role. The traditional separation of the producers and consumers of culture becomes more and more limited in this process. Supported effectively by information technologies, billions of the worlds of the citizens of web-life join the products of the professional creators of culture. Cyber space is populated by the infinite number of simultaneous variations of our virtual worlds. Aesthetic culture gains ground at the expense of scientific culture and imagination becomes the human capacity that determines cultural activities.

3. Personality becomes postmodern, that is, it becomes fully realized as an individual, virtually extremely extended, and acquires a playful character with ethereal features. A more vulnerable post-selfish web citizen is developed, compelled by a chaotic dynamics. Web citizens are mostly engaged in network tasks, that is, in building and maintaining their personalities and communities.

4. Besides the natural and the social spheres, a sphere of web-life existence is built up. Now man becomes the citizen of three worlds. The human essence moves towards web-life. The freedom of the access to the separate spheres and the relationship of the spheres of existence are gradually transformed in a yet unforeseeable manner.

5. Web-life as a form of existence is the realm of concrete existence. Stepping into web-life, the "real history" of mankind begins yet again; the transition from social existence to web-life existence leads from a realm of life based on abstract capacities to a realm of life built on concrete capacities.

Fellow-netizens of the web! Let's switch on our computers – the age of shaping web-life has come.

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