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The Normativity of (Digital) Sociality: The Rise of Virtual Societies and the Question of Human Distinctiveness in the Changed World

Abstract: In the paper, I investigate the proposition that mutuality is something that coexists with or even precedes human individuation as it can be questioned at the advent of virtualized societies. By critically assessing the fundamental (social) ontology of Jean-Luc Nancy that regards human sociality as fundamental to any human development and provides ontological grounding for his philosophy of mutual bond. Nevertheless, I am also wary of the potential problems due to the normative lack of ontological assessment of mutuality, especially in the light of changes during the time of ever-faster digitalization and the rise of virtual societies.

To better assess both the question of sociality as a key feature of human development and the normative potential in it, I both offer additional theories of mutual bond and expound upon the prospect of yet unrealized metaverse – a virtual society that is being predicted and actively worked on in recent years – that may have the potential to change the way we understand what the premises of human sociality are and how the development of technology may transform the way we see what distinctive features of human existence are.

Keywords: social philosophy, Nancy, Cavell, Tomasello, metaverse, virtual reality

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Normativnost (digitalne) družbenosti: vzpon virtualnih družb in vprašanje človeške specifičnosti v spremenjenem svetu

Izvleček: V članku raziskujem tezo, da je vzajemnost nekaj, kar obstaja sočasno s človeško individuacijo ali jo celo preddoloča, in jo preizprašujem v razmerju do pojava virtualiziranih družb. S kritičnim pregledom fundamentalne (družbene) ontologije Jean-Luca Nancyja, ki obravnava človeško družbenost kot temelj vsakršnega človekovega razvoja in zagotavlja ontološko podlago za njegovo filozofijo medsebojne vezi. Kljub pomembnemu doprinosu njegove filozofije opozarjam na potencialen problem normativnega manka pri Nancyjevem ontološkem videnju vzajemnosti, predvsem v luči sprememb v času vse hitrejše digitalizacije in rojstva virtualnih družb.

Za boljša odgovora tako na vprašanja človekove družbenosti, ki nastopa kot bistvena poteza človeškega razvoja, kot normativnega potenciala, ki jo družbenost nosi, v nadaljevanju raziskujem dodatne teorije družbenosti in medsebojne vezi ter le-te povežem z idejo metaverzuma – virtualne družbe, ki se vse bolj napoveduje in je bila v minulih letih deležna aktivnega razvoja – za katero se zdi, da bi lahko nosila potencial za spremembo pogleda na to, kako podajamo premise človeške družbenosti, in kako lahko razvoj tehnologije spremeni tendence človeškega razvoja.

Ključne besede: socialna filozofija, Nancy, Cavell, Tomasselo, metaverzum, virtualna resničnost

I

In recent years, virtual phenomena have become ubiquitous. With the recent advancements, the evolution of Turing machines-based computing toward self-learning artificial intelligence and Neural Turing machines seems to have been chartered.²

In the state of progressive evolution toward effective virtual reality supporting (societal and ethical-legal) structures need to be seen co-developing along with the technical advancement of systems, including blockchain, virtual currencies, and regional legal subsystems. The new technologies bring along (mostly already mentioned) pressing issues that concern the development of human capacities in isolation from physical contact, the questions of virtual voting and ‘directified’ democracy, the loss of jobs, and the effect of AI on social dynamics, the moral assessment of AI-based agents and the elements of society, and the expansion of legal norms to accommodate the new social and political situation. All these issues might necessitate the development of a social program that intends to directly concern normative justification for the ethical and social norms that encompass the activity of an AI-assisted future.

As the dynamics and the reproduction of the social world are ever more reliant upon AI-based systems (e.g., programs, networks, or stand-alone machines), the challenges that we face in this era necessitate the renewed reflection upon the normative expectations in society and their justifications.

In those settings, it is necessary to recognize the highly subversive character of virtual worlds including the predicted metaverse

² Consider Graves, Wayne, and Danihelka 2014: the neural Turing Machines represent the extension of the capabilities of neural networks that can allow for the end-to-end differentiation of the system due to which they can be optimized with gradient descent.

that may help us understand the sociality at the core of human value horizon and identity formation.

In the attempts to uncover the fundamental sociality behind the new virtual playgrounds, we will however need to recourse to the (hermeneutic) philosophy that attempted to uncover the fundamentals of human existence in its fateful sociality and place at the core of human distinctiveness. The research will however also be informed by the recent developments regarding the way humans attempt interaction and socialization. Especially during and after obligated distanciation during the COVID-19 pandemic in the years 2020–2021, we witnessed a global utilization of digital tools the development of which expedited the already long-term process of digitalization. Alongside the development of artificial intelligence, there has been a simultaneous development of virtual and augmented reality systems all of which made the yet unrealized idea of a fully-fledged metaverse – a virtual society that is set to extend society in the physical world – seemingly possible.

Such a digital society has the potential to profoundly change our everyday and the way we attempt (human) interaction. However, could it also transform the way we consider what is distinctly human?

II

In his 1966 treatise *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor W. Adorno wrote that ‘even to imagine a transcendental subject without society, without the individuals whom it integrates for good or ill, is just as impossible’ (Adorno 2004, 199–200). There seems to be no doubt that human sociality does not only possess normative, but also epistemological qualities. According to some recent research in developmental psychology, children learn human-specific capabilities while they become socialized and participate in communal intention-sharing activities in early childhood. Going further, it

may be possible to state that mutuality (or sociality) is something that precedes human subjectiveness and is formative for the development of distinctively human features. However, it is seemingly difficult to answer whether a fundamental mutual bond already possesses distinctive normative qualities or whether normativity is secondary to the primordial state of sociality due to which humans exhibit ‘unsocial sociability’ (Kant 1991, 44).

The reflection upon the significance of the structure of community as a fundamental concept in the understanding of social existence is not only bound to the practical-philosophical discussions in social, political, and moral philosophy but may also feature in a key role as the topography of the ontology of a social world.³ Avoiding the extremes of the liberal conception of a community as the conglomeration of (self-) conscious individuals, and the communitarian model building upon the primacy of the common good and the substantial ethical values, Jean-Luc Nancy thus charted ontology, founded upon the idea of *singular plural* being, where the existence of a particular being is preceded by the co-existence with the others and therefore characterized by the primordial *togetherness* which is neither a normative claim nor a reference to the specific, substantial community (Nancy 2000, 28–47).

In *La communauté désœuvrée*, published in 1983, Nancy deconstructed the attempts of the project of Western metaphysics to assess the state of origin of society and decried the obsessive

³ It needs to be immediately noted that Nancy’s ontological philosophy of the singular plural Being should not be understood as a kind of second-level *ontology of the society* that would appear as a ‘regional ontology’ in Heidegger’s sense of the term. As he demonstratively states, his intention is to provide ‘an ontology which is not “ontology of society” in the sense of a “regional ontology,” but ontology itself as a “sociality” or an “association” more originary than all “society,” more originary than “individuality” and every “essence of Being.”’ (Nancy 2000, 37–38)

attempts of the Western political and social thought to recover the grasp upon the original, genuine community, featuring as a paramount representation of the social; instead, he would advocate for the understanding of the communal existence in a more rudimentary, de-substantivized manner: a community is the primordial *locus* of the unconcealment of the finite existence of its members that precedes its individualization and can be presented in terms of singularity, irreducibility, and relationality (Nancy 1991, 1–16).⁴

In a further elaboration of his ontology, Nancy turns to Heidegger's understanding of the existence of a being as a being-there [*Dasein*] which is always already thrown into the world; yet rather than to dwell on the authentic experience of a singular *Dasein*, he emphasizes *being with* [*Mitsein*] as a fundamental trait of existence. In other words, the Being of a being is not primarily characterized with care for her own existence, which is only subsequently regarded as coexistence with the others; rather, the Being is fundamentally being with-one-another: '[l]et us take up the matter again, then, not beginning from the Being of being and proceeding to being itself being with-one-another [étant *l'un-avec-l'autre*], but start-

⁴ See also Elliott 2009, 898–900. For Nancy, Heidegger retains an ambiguous persona: on one hand, his philosophical work is a key resource for the post-metaphysical reflection upon the structure of existence and, by recognizing 'that being-with (*Mitsein*, *Miteinandersein*, and *Mitdasein*) is essential to the constitution of *Dasein* itself' (Nancy 2000, 26), inaugurates the possibility to think of codependency and community in a non-substantive, existentially concerned manner; on the other hand, Nancy does not refuse to condemn Heidegger's political affiliation and what could be as the glorification of the genuine community seen as a transgression against his own philosophy. Thus, while he recognizes the importance of Heidegger's fundamental ontology for starting a new era of philosophical thinking, he is vocal in his denunciation of the author's moral and political endeavor (see e.g. his lengthy commentary on the publication of the *Black Books* and the confirmation of Heidegger's anti-Semitism in Jean-Luc Nancy 2017).

ing from being-and all of being-determined in its Being as being with-one-another.' (Nancy 2000, 32) Being is *singular plural*: the singularity of each is coessential with the plurality of many. The crucial insight for the following discussion lies in the acknowledgment that an individual is not first and foremost an autonomous subject that would only later enter the domain of intersubjective relationships – before the particular identity of a person could be constructed one already exists as a being-in a world *with* the others.⁵

The particular merit of Nancy's refiguration of Heidegger's fundamental ontology in the social and political dimensions lies in the ontological prioritization of the mode of being-with, which, by emphasizing the *with* as the originary trait of the shared space and time, enables the understanding of a human as a being that is fundamentally determined by the primordial interdependency with others, or, more specifically, by the ontological disposition *with* as an existential given that is not founded on the basis of the rational construction or the *telos* of the solidary political community. Despite that such an ontological approach to the question of the *fateful* co-existence of human beings contributes valuable insights regarding the topic of the present discussion, the role of Nancy's philosophy for the present paper is however somewhat limited due to the two divisive features.

Firstly, while Nancy accentuates the *with* to be the foundational preposition of human existence and thus underlines one's essential codependency with another, he shies away from imputing such a constitutive co-existentiality with a possibility of exerting

⁵ As Nancy warns, such a conception of the *with* cannot be easily translated into more familiar terms like 'relation' or 'bond', especially when these are thought as retroactive determinations of the pre-existing relata. On the other hand, the *with* is contemporaneous with the 'terms upon which it relies'; better yet, 'it is, in fact, their contemporaneity.' (Nancy 2000, 34-35)

moral or political directives that would be resounding enough to provide the resources for the opposition against the detrimental effects of power and ideology and be able to discern the normative standards that could help to orient collective political action.⁶ Given Nancy's deconstructivist and ontological approach and his hermeneutic and post-structuralist philosophical background, such a concern could appear misguided and be accused of an undesirable teleological motive. In light of this, we must take a glance at Nancy's understanding of the correlation between the ontological and the ethical. Nancy believes that ontology *needs* to point to ethics, which can only be exposed on a horizon of ontology. In a way, ontology and ethics are two sides of the same coin, even though it is only the ontological disposition of the Being that opens the possibility of meaningful ethics as such.⁷ Nancy urges us to think of a community in a different, more fundamental way; still, since his notion of community is stripped of its core of substantial values and restated in terms of irreducibility and transcendence, and his philosophy leads to the specific depotentiation of the political, the concrete principles, guiding social action towards the engaged politics that spurred Nancy's undertaking of the problem of community in the first place, are normatively impoverished in the face of the dangers associated with immanent self-representation of a community.⁸ For Nancy, relationality that precedes the existence of singular beings and their differentiation is a non-discriminating

⁶ See e.g. Elliott 2009, 902; Nancy 2000.

⁷ Nancy 2000, 21, 99. Nancy later develops the ethical implications of Heidegger's fundamental ontology in a more engaged manner in *L' 'éthique originaire' de Heidegger* (2001).

⁸ Compare with Critchley's (1999, 214-219) critique of 'the reduction of *la politique* to *le politique*', the disavowal of the empirical, contingent, and conflictual field of politics in Nancy's and Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstruction of the political in light of the danger of totalitarianism.

‘realm of the plurality of origins’ (Nancy 2000, 82) that conditions every aspect of human *praxis*. As such, it is an ontological constant, and while this insight is highly important, *pro tanto* that the research aims to discern the possible normative advantages of a mutual relationship we will need to look at the alternative philosophical sources.

The second, perhaps even more important drawback for the aims of the present paper lies in an inadequate acknowledgment of the rich field of particular inclinations and actions of a singular being that one could recognize as being fully his own and consequently take the appropriate responsibility towards the potentially suffering other. As we have seen, for Nancy the alterity is an irreducible trait of a community and the possibility of an individual of being own to oneself hinges on the acknowledgment of the primordial relationality. Surely, I do not claim that Nancy does not consider the possibility of human individuality as such – after all, he maintains that to exist means to dwell in a singular *and* plural coexistence, being both unique to himself and, in one’s very singularity, equal to the others. However, while his critique of the idea of a self-enclosed, non-differentiated subject that would maintain a stable identity in isolation from the community is well-founded, the lack of focus on the development of the authentic ethical selfhood of the individual correlates with the insufficient representation of the ethics of a mutual relationship. For even if the Being of a being is irreducibly singular-plural, if even in one’s own relation to her own death the *with* continues to ceaselessly partake in the ordeal (Nancy 2000, 90–91), the possibility of the experience of a genuine singularity of a human being still entails the important normative considerations that necessitate a further elaboration upon the development of one’s ethical selfhood and individual moral persona.

Since in Nancy's analyses of the social and the political, the investigation of the perspectives of relationality is mostly reduced to the purely conceptual representation of the objective qualities of the social relations, alterity, and difference, the particularity of the other as the empirical human being with unique characteristics and concerns does not lead to a renewed conceptualization of the constitutive social bond. In epistemological terms, Nancy's perception of the irreducible, structural relationality of beings has a definite moral-sociological advantage over the constructivist theories of selfhood and society due to the specific *prohibition* of representing a human being in terms of a self-sufficient, disinterested monad. We might wonder, however, does such a view adequately represents the psychological and normative considerations of interpersonal codependency? Could it not be so that, in Levinasian terms, the *fully* authentic relationship towards the other originates in the *response* from distance to the appeal of the radically asymmetrical other?⁹ A productive primary relationship with the other may not only encompass the disclosure of an originary structure of co-existentiality but can also be regarded as an ever-singular ethical event that requires us to decide and take action upon the calling of the other. The key to this possibility is a notion of a fully

⁹ However, Levinas' ethics nevertheless remains somewhat susceptible to the (only superficially similar) charge of insufficient representation of the full extent of the singular responsibility of a human being and the normativity of a mutual bond. It is also worthwhile to note Nancy's own critique of Levinas' ethics as the first philosophy and his conceptualization of alterity for failing to recognize the fundamentally shattered nature of Being that is plural even before being unified and at-itself (see e.g. his take on the Levinas conception of love in Nancy 2003, 269-270). This problem will be raised again later; here, it is important to note that the fragmentation of the self may not necessarily lead to the impossibility of registering a distinct moral distance towards the other.

recognized individual that not only *exists* as a singular human being in the plurality of the many, but also decides on and *attributes* normative qualities to the relationships in which he inheres.¹⁰ Revising the premises of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, Nancy might rightfully protest that the Being is fundamentally fragmented and that even the (radically) singular factual being cannot be thought in terms of a subject, *conceptually* fully differentiated from the world he inhabits and the primordial relationality with the others; still, since in his ontological vision the alterity remains to be predominantly thought in the purview of plurality (being unique *due to* being singular) rather than singularity (being unique *in spite of* being equal as *species*), his philosophy may not be able to do the full justice to the issue of the individual ethical motivation for the practical engagement with the others and the emergence of a singular ethical responsibility that accompanies one's authentic relationship towards the another.

While remaining valuable, there is thus an ambiguity at the core of Nancy's contribution to the question of the normative and epistemological status of mutuality. In a tendency to avoid Heidegger's prioritization of an authentic individual and the problematic promotion of an *immanent*, original community he may have been too radical: on one hand, Nancy's idea of community that is de-substantialized and disconnected from teleology, rooted in the self-presence and the claims to originality, and which at the same time refuses to follow the steps of the modern conception of the society of self-enclosed individuals, where the notion of commu-

¹⁰ Which does not necessitate the preceding (psychological) unity and self-identity of an *ego*; in fact, I adhere to the view that the structural integrity of the self is fundamentally impaired by the ever-present potential of fragmentation. The above notion does, however, imply a requirement of possessing a certain *moral* autonomy as the basis of ethical judgment.

nity is normatively stripped to the bare particulars, offers a highly original and important take on the nature of the social world; however, due to its generality and inclusivity it is susceptible to be less relevant in the discussions on the normative transformations of the actual societies and in the reflection upon the possible existence of internal resources in society that would provide the resistance against the more complex or dissimulated instances of injustice.¹¹ On the side of the question of selfhood, his ontological representation of an individual in society, based upon the idea of the singular plurality of the Being, marks an important turn in understanding of the social by emphasizing a fundamental and irreducible co-existentiality of beings but may not cover enough ground to sufficiently explain the process, leading to responsible ethical choices of the authentic individual in terms of the theory of action, and envision a full normative uptake of the social bond. *Mit-dasein* nevertheless remains *Dasein* as well: the decision that I make about reaching out to help is *my* decision; the hand that reaches towards the other is *my* hand. None of this is alien to Nancy's philosophy yet we might need additional analyses that would incorporate a thorough investigation of individual agency in not

¹¹ One might be tempted to say that – much like in his discussion about the political – the strength of Nancy's philosophy of co-existence lies in its opening of new horizons for the *understanding* of human relationality but offers less in the manner of the instructions for *acting* differently. This classical charge against deconstructivist or hermeneutical philosophy may be somewhat disingenuous, however, and might misrepresent its aspirations and understate the extent to which it contributes to the enhanced recognition and representation of the existential, political, and moral issues in contemporary society. Nonetheless, that is not to say that there are no certain limitations to these approaches along with the internal impediments to the greater resonance of moral issues that can be especially problematic in times of greater global challenges.

only recognizing but also maintaining and reflecting upon healthy personal relations and the possibility of self-development in mutual recognition with the other. While being together may be our fateful destiny, Nancy's ontology might have come too close to an ascription of a kind of *mythic* quality to the notion of mutuality to be ethically conclusive.¹²

The criticism of normative relativity of Nancy's conception of primordial mutuality should be read in acknowledgment of a possible cognition-enabling content of normative claims, and the dangers of asymmetric power distribution and its effects which can be even more problematic in the time of virtual societies.

III

Instead of following the premises of fundamental ontology, we may perhaps follow a different take on the question of the fundamentality of the human bond. It may be worth reflecting upon the relation between the *acknowledgment* and the general ability to

¹² Here, a short intervention may be worthwhile: *originary ethics*, devised in different forms by authors such as Nancy, Levinas, or Cavell and influenced, among others, by the philosophical work of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and/or Emerson, generally has a common feature in that it intends to explicate the conditions of the authentic experience of the phenomenon of the ethical and thus extrapolate the *clearing* where the basic sense of responsibility can be encountered. It, therefore, aims to investigate the fundamental stance of a finite being that needs to be assessed for genuine moral judgments to be possible rather than to provide specific instructions for appropriate actions (see e.g. Cavell 1990). For Nancy, Heidegger's ontology still has something to say to us regarding the encounter with the authentic human experience of practical existence; however, such an experiential stance that advocates the self-disclosure of human *praxis* and wagers on providing the *clearing* for the development of the capacity for ethical understanding may represent only a part of the solution, which, while important, is not without inherent issues.

understand the emotional state of the other and to provide an adequate response to the other based on the writings of Stanley Cavell (Honneth 2008, 47–52). In his refutation of the pertinence of skeptic's demand for certainty, Cavell stresses the need for acknowledgment which 'goes beyond knowledge' (Cavell 1976, 257): it is a cornerstone of human (intersubjective) interaction as it stands as a primary requirement for the understanding of the other. Rather than expressing an epistemic attitude, acknowledging represents a behavioral stance that emphasizes responsibility and one's capacity to emotionally connect to the other being as it encompasses both self-understanding and recognition of a certain situation.

Now, while there are obvious similarities with Axel Honneth's notion of antecedent recognition outlined in Honneth 2008 as his final (and not uniformly well-received) attempt at laying the ontological foundations to his theory of recognition, it should be noted that, unlike Honneth's understanding of elementary recognition, Cavell's notion of acknowledgment is a simpler stance less laden with claims of ontological priority and demands for the *proper* sympathetic response (see Honneth 2008, 10–11, 109) – while acknowledgment is based upon the capacity for sympathy, the negative or merely indifferent responses also present a manner of acknowledgment without necessary being related with the (potentially thick-valued) socially-induced premises of social recognition. Instead, the acknowledging attitude may indicate a possibility of charting an individual responsibility-based ethic based on situational awareness of affected agents.

Such an attitude is also not far removed from Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic consciousness characterized by the openness for the address of the other, the capacity for trustfulness and trustworthiness, and the primacy of questions before answers (Gadamer 2004, 341–371); however, Cavell's criticism of skeptic's position in no way

touches upon devising a more complex framework of values that could be susceptible to the previously considered normative issues. Rather, it emphasizes the immense role that responsive gesture may have for any kind of (pre-)cognitive assessment of another being.

While Cavell's notion of acknowledgment presents a possibility to think of a certain primacy of recognition before knowledge, there is another, less speculative research that might be relevant to the present discussion. In an attempt to ground his theory of antecedent recognition in developmental psychology, Honneth relates his assessment of elementary recognition (and the negative consequences of its denial) with the research of Tomasello and Hobson which indicates a necessity of children's successful (emotional) attachment and role-acknowledgment of their attachment figures for the rise of symbolic understanding and the development of cognitive abilities (Honneth 2008, 43-44).

In his work *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* psychologist and linguist Michael Tomasello takes on the question of human distinctiveness and identifies the specific human features that are believed to allow for the difference between non-human primates. It is believed that distinctively human abilities develop in early childhood and include sharing attention with others; recognition of intentionality of others and their emotional responsiveness; and complex imitation of actions and intentions of others. In research that is of particular interest for both Honneth's account of antecedent recognition and for the present discussion, Tomasello regards children with autism as generally incapable of taking on the perspectives of others, thus precluding significant attachments (Tomasello 2001). While autistic people can to some degree understand the conception of intentionality, they do not participate in an intention-sharing activity and lack the skills that enhance distinctively human cultural learning (Tomasello et al. 2005).

It follows that it is very likely that cognitive states supervene on pre-cognitive requirements including successful (inter)personal attachments and the capacity for acknowledgment of another's mental states. While the children with severe autism spectrum disorder that were the focus of Tomasello's research may present a rather drastic case of emotional disconnection with attachment figures, there might be a slight parallel to the development of autistic children in the (possible) state of digital agents in metaverse to which I will return in the final chapter.

Finally, a potential avenue of research regarding Honneth's account of recognition must at least be indicated. In his writings before *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, Honneth, for the most part, insisted on regarding the (productive) recognitive relations as symmetric and reciprocal; that was criticized by some commentators as inappropriate, especially regarding the parent-child relations which are the focal point of primary recognitive sphere of love and primary needs. It has been doubted that parent-child relations could – and even should – be seen as symmetrical, regardless of the possible stretching of the term (Young 2007). Rather, there is a certain value in the *expected* asymmetry of a relation that might still be enabling and productive.

In his 1995 article, *The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism* Honneth juxtaposes Levinas' (and, by extension, Derrida's) asymmetrical ethics of obligation based on radical care and responsibility with Habermas' impartial morality-based discourse ethics. Especially in primary, pre-institutional settings, the ethics of care championed by Levinas and Derrida showcase specific advantages against ethics based on Kantian universalism and cognitivism since they allow for the notion of unlimited responsibility and special concern for the particularity of the singular other. Despite Levinas' acknowledgment of the realm

of justice and politics which is announced by the arrival of the third, the ethics of care, however, show limitations in settings that require symmetrical obligations (Honneth 2007, 113-121). Here, a possibility of a productive marriage between the ethical positions of Habermas and Derrida might arise, with singular-based ethics of (radical) care being supplemented with justice-inducing universalist morality (Critchley 1999, 267-269).

Honneth never really followed this line of possibility, and never fully explored the potential advantages of asymmetric recognition. That is not surprising as such a conception might compromise the carefully crafted system of progressive recognitive stages which share similar internal mechanisms and complicate the formation of a formal conception of ethics. However, a further consideration of asymmetric types of recognition or acknowledgment might help enhance a network of possible responses to the contemporary ethical challenges; especially, since those challenges feature the systems that were considered by and demand a certain amount of imagination. The advent of imaginary (virtual) worlds may however lead to a rethinking of the foundations of human sociality and require a complex set of normatively charged tools to account for the changes in human conduct and the possibility of a new, non-traditional society that may be function as a discontinuation of the more the historical (reproduction of) society.

IV

In the digital era, the accounts of the fundamental sociability of humans are founded upon ontology or psychology, they need to consider the specifics of the changing landscapes of human and transhuman development.

While there has been an increased understanding, demand for, and development of processes and components (including the ele-

ments of virtual reality and augmented reality) that enhance digital experience, digitalization has already been a long-term process that has profoundly changed human individual and societal existence.

It is especially the latter that might soon be subject to the particularly radical transformations; while the internet existed since the 1980s and popular messaging services and social networks already started to appear in the late 1990s, the most complex contributions to the creation of what might be called *digital society* came after the development of virtual reality systems and beginning of the implementation of the idea of the metaverse, first in relatively limited settings of massively multiplayer online video games or persistent-universe games. Currently, the metaverse is becoming increasingly seen as an internet extension that has the potential to revolutionize humans' virtual experience and at the same time, everyday existence (Hussain 2023).

The term metaverse – along with the premises of virtual reality and digital avatars – was used for the first time in a 1992 science fiction novel *Snow Crash* where metaverse is depicted as a fully virtual world that offers a welcome respite from dystopian everyday (Stephenson 2003). The current model metaverse is considered as an interactive virtual world that either imitates, is modeled after, or appears as similar to the real world and uses complex security technologies such as blockchain, virtual currencies, and the benefits of the development of self-learning artificial intelligence. The obliged distanciation during COVID-19 pandemic (likely) contributed to the greater interest in the development of metaverse (Dwivedi et al. 2022).

While metaverse (or virtual society as such) is still some ways off before being used more than in a figurative sense and in a limited role in specialized settings for the interested parties, it is worthwhile reflecting upon its possible future impact, especially in the

context of the present paper. Leaving aside the otherwise important discussion of the ontological status of the metaverse, the potential virtual universe retains its importance for the discussion as it has serious implications for the expounding upon foundational sociality of humans.

Firstly, one needs to acknowledge the specific nature of virtual platforms which are designed with a concern for ease of access, interactivity, and most importantly, with the structural peculiarities of *play*. Here, one might liken the structure of play in virtual interactive realms to the hermeneutic understanding of play proposed by Gadamer in his discussion on the ontology of the works of art. In the research which prominently features as a preparation for the more foundational discussion on the nature of hermeneutic experience, Gadamer uses the metaphor of play to account for the primacy of community action that works of art provoke over theories that emphasize the subjective experience of aesthetic consciousness (e.g., in Kant-inspired aesthetic theories). To play the game, participants must agree to its specific rules while they allow themselves to be educated and transformed by the specific truth that the artwork that is being played discloses for them. Importantly, the artwork is necessarily performative and is expressed as a communicative and communal event rather than being a mere object (Gadamer 2004, 102-119).

In a current vision of the metaverse, the latter is considered as a virtual playground that can extend upon the physical world and accommodate several of its features including banking, shopping, and interacting with others, even if in the form of digital avatars.

Metaverse can only successfully function based on the interaction of its participants as it conceptually depends on the willing participation of digital(ized) agents in its digital world and according to its inherent rules; here, the metaverse can be considered as

both a digital landscape that accommodates adherent actions, and the whole system of virtual activities, digital agents, and patterns of interaction which are bound by the specific rules and structural elements that are reminiscent of the performance of *play*. Relevantly, the metaverse might be considered as a pre-structured persistent universe that develops in adherence to the internal learning propelled by the participants in its activities; the dynamics of change should depend upon the cooperative and communal efforts of the willing participants of the system.

Now, while one might find more traditional examples of a society ordered by the principles, the speculated digital society of metaverse seems as good an example as any due to its emphasis on interaction, its highly (pre)structured character, and the voluntary framework of participation due to which it allows for easier regulation and coordination of participants.¹³

Following the trajectory of the previous research, it is sensible to consider that the participants in the virtual societies exhibit some qualities corresponding to Nancy's recognition of the fundamental sociality of humans though sometimes with digital avatars *in lieu* rather than alongside physical connections, namely due to nature of internal dependency of agents and the non-teleological community building potential within digital societies.

The second consideration that points toward the hermeneutic answer to the challenge of virtual society is related to the imaginary and imaginative status of the metaverse. While there is little

¹³ The more troubling implications of the given analogy of play however show when we consider that while digital societies depend upon interaction and mutual efforts of participants, they are engaged in a *play like* activity that has certain originator which set the basic rules; that brings up significant ethical and legal questions which are however beyond the scope of the article.

doubt that the creation of the *artificial* society requires a certain deal of imagination, imaginative in that sense also relates to the procedural and even conceptual openness of the multiverse that is yet to be realized and internally developed.

An important thing to consider is that even organic societies may be set on the premises of radical imaginary that allows for the creation of non-inherited imaginary significations of society that fill in the historical and conceptual gaps (Castoriadis 1997, 44). In further elaboration, imaginary appropriation of historical practices through ideology has been known to have immense effects on human social experience. Rather than a reproduction of historical and conceptual continuity, many social institutions – including several problematic practices – can be seen as outcomes of the productive imagination of both societies at large and their agents.

In a predicated artificial virtual society, imaginary may come as a consequence of yet un concluded and internally self-adapting technology supporting the virtual universe. Such a disposition may demand a complex hermeneutic insight that would allow for a clearer recognition of its features and the interplay between productive and reproductive imagination that may be needed in the construction of virtual world spaces.¹⁴

Finally, given the above-mentioned overview of features, a digital society might not only have inherent normativity but the latter may be ingrained in its core to the level of being a structural element of the system of *play*. In playing, participants implicitly agree to the rules of the play or shared universe; in self-generating world spaces, the development could be tied to the cooperative abilities and coordination of the metaverse agents. Here, a notion

¹⁴ See particularly Ricoeur's (1986) assessment of the interplay between utopia and ideology and between the strains of (more) productive and reproductive imagination.

of acknowledgment may be needed to explain the foundations of possible cooperation, even if digital agents may operate differently in comparison to their physical counterparts whereas emotions and intentions cannot be as easily conveyed.

However, it is just as important to recognize not only cooperative and communal (normative) features but also potential dangers of (potentially well-disguised) ruleset ideological implications that may be forced upon the participants and could have far-reaching ethical and legal consequences. While many normative concerns could be relegated to security issues, some of them can be regarded as a feature of dominating ideology. As such, a critical-theoretic perspective that combines both explanatory and evaluative approaches while being attentive to the underlying issues may be needed in place of a satisfactory social philosophy.

V

Recently, the Western social and political sphere was disturbed by a series of shocks that visibly changed the core dynamics of society, including the COVID-19 pandemic, migration crisis, and economic crisis due to the high inflation that showcased the systemic issues in the heart of the modern economy, social conduct, and politics. Nevertheless, perhaps the most radical changes to the way society functions that have the potential to drastically alter the way humans cooperate and engage in politics have been related to the rapid progression in general digitalization, artificial intelligence, and virtual and augmented reality. The metaverse based upon virtual reality and enhanced AI features has the potential to both disrupt entrenched (traditional) power relations and their supporting structures and offer the possibility of a cooperative society set upon discontinuous imaginary that shuns national, political, and legal borders; re-

calling Walter Benjamin's proposal in his controversial *Critique of Violence* and adapting its plight for the digital future, there may be a potential for moral cooperation and justice that avoids the traps of the traditional legal systems and offers a different take on the social coordination.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the new digital reality will also present us with several new and complex challenges and issues to which we will need to progressively give more and more attention. Aside from the frequently discussed issues of internet violence and ethics, the ethical status of artificial intelligence and social and economic changes due to digitalization, the questions of the future alongside automated weaponry, and the possible new political dynamics should at least be indicated here.

As the recent Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the (still ongoing) Russian invasion of Ukraine have shown, advanced weaponry such as AI-assisted missiles and drones may add an additional layer of concern in depressurizing the global tensions as they come along with a range of new ethical and political challenges.

Regarding politics, digital changes may lead toward anything but the rather hopeful, if not necessarily optimistic picture painted above. The recent developments in Slovenian politics (and in several other states) indicate that we may be witnessing a formation of more radical politics with a significant following and political success – that can be to a high degree attributed to some (or combination) of economic, communicative, demographic, and health-related factors but also heavily relies upon technological changes and the alternations in standards of communication. Even the seem-

¹⁵ Compare the potential (of) control and coordinative structure of the metaverse with the adapted idea of divine justice in Benjamin (1996, 236–252).

ingly non-partisan and syncretic (populist) political parties borne by the idea of the new popular autonomy of the digitalized society such as the Italian Five Star Movement may have been subject to unforeseen ideological drift due to the complex dynamics of the digitally informed contemporary political world.

Even if the potential of a fully virtual society is never fulfilled, the process of digitalization already instigated major changes in society including the way we conduct human interactions, politics, and the economy. The advent of self-learning artificial intelligence that allows for ever more *human-like* interaction¹⁶ necessitates rethinking about what defines a distinctively human society and whether intentionality and intention-sharing are exclusively human qualities – while at the same time demanding the reflection upon the possibility of a society that not only co-exists but is fundamentally interwoven with the digital structures and AI-directed virtuality.

The main issue here is whether mutuality is something that is by itself normative and has a specific direction or whether normative concerns come after the acknowledgment of a mutual bond in the others – and how can be seen in a social space that is becoming less and less exclusively human. In such space, normative frameworks based upon the hermeneutically informed inquires onto human sociality and normative reproduction grounded in recognition of others' value may be seen as invaluable tools that may be at the disposal of the human and non-human inhabitants of the shared virtual world – though they may be passed upon much like in the physical world which many want to escape in the promised virtual future.

¹⁶ As for example, ChatGPT and similar types of recently developed AI.

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