THE TRIUMPH OF VIRTUAL REALITY

AND IT'S IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILOSOPHY

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I am here talking to you tonight because of a radio program. In the second half of 2009 I was in my car listening to the Jon Faine Show on ABC 774. Faine was having a special Conversation Hour on the subject of internet addiction. His main guest was Science Show host Robyn Williams. The Radio National Science Show was taking on the problem of internet addiction as an ongoing issue of scientific importance. This was largely motivated by the release of a new book from celebrity neuro-scientist and Baroness, Susan Greenfield. Greenfield's book was titled, *ID: The Quest for Identity in the 21st Century*. Greenfield has for some time been trying to educate us about the relatively recent scientific discoveries of neuro-plasticity and neuro-genesis in which neural connections were shown to be capable of being strengthened or weakened in relation to stimulus and how in some areas of the brain new neurons emerge and old ones die. These discoveries are turning much understanding in neuro-science on its head. In *ID*, her argument is that our increasing interactions with digital information technologies will likely change our brains, particularly the way we create our sense of self. She urges that we investigate these changes more deeply so that we might be able to make choices about what sorts of selves we want to be before it is too late; but more about that later.

Like much that I hear, view or read in the media these days, Faine's show irritated me. To discuss the problem of internet addication, he brought out the usual suspects considered legitimate to engage in such a public discourse. There was the media, represented by Faine and Williams, the sciences, loosely represented by a psychologist and a radical, hip, cool dude, gamer with a degree in media representing the world of new media. As is the norm these

days, there was no representative from philosophy, probably because those present did not consider such social problems as being relevant to philosophy or because they weren't aware that any philosophers still existed. As I listened to the discussion I became increasingly frustrated. For Williams, this was another new exciting challenge for science and great fodder for insatiable media organizations. For the new media guru this was an over-reaction to a minor glitch on the path towards an 'it's-all-good', post-human, Brave New World. For the psychologist, this was another chance to support the status quo by blaming the problem on a handful of deviant individuals in need of some cognitive therapy to make them better conform and thus, happier. As for Faine, it was another case of him playing the devil's advocate and not making his own position explicit.

I guess I should know better than to listen to and get upset about such media events, but at the time I had a particular interest in the subject. In the second semester, each year, I teach a course at Swinburne called Philosophy, Media and Culture. The course was devised and constructed by fellow Process Philosopher, Associate Professor Arran Gare and looks at the historical evolution of information technology and its role in the development of abstract thought. The course was designed over a decade ago to help students understand and deal with the sorts of problems that are now emerging with the accelerating development and application of information technologies. The course helps students to develop a strong sense of self in the face of rapid change by revealing to them the true nature of reality and there lies the source of my frustration. It is apparent to me that the problem of internet addiction is not primarily one for science, technology and superficial media; it is a deep philosophical problem concerning the nature of reality. It is a problem primarily for philosophers, at least those ones who are interested in questions of reality.

Out of frustration I emailed Jon Faine and said just what I've said to you. Quite unexpectedly I received an instant reply from both Faine and Robyn Williams. Williams asked me to write an Ockham's Razor piece based on my email and in

early 2010 it was broadcast. I received several encouraging responses to my talk including a letter from David asking me if I would be interested in talking to The Existentialist Society and so here I am. What intrigued me about David's letter is that he asked me to discuss my position that the internet negates philosophy. My initial response to this was; Is that what I'm arguing? After a little thought I realized that yes that was what I was arguing. So let's get on with my argument, shall we?

DEFINITIONS

My argument is broader than the internet is negating philosophy. What I want to argue is that philosophy and civilization is suffering from what I call the triumph of virtual reality. To argue this I need to start with some definitions of what I think reality is, what virtual reality is and what philosophy and civilization are.

REALITY

Let's start with reality. I have to start with reality because my conception of reality has a bearing on my understanding of definitions. I'm a holistic, Process Philosopher in the tradition of Alfred North Whitehead but mainly influenced by the re-interpretation of Whitehead's metaphysics by Arran Gare. Process Philosophers can be distinguished by contrasting them with analytical philosophers, as the relationship between Whitehead and his good friend Bertrand Russell reveals. Where analytical philosophers start with static parts or completed objects which they try to fit together into static wholes, Process Philosophers begin with a dynamic whole from within which dynamic parts distinguish themselves. In Gare's conception, drawing on Whitehead and German philosopher, Friedrich Schelling, all that exists is vibrational activity of differing frequencies and amplitudes, or spacetimes, and structure emerges through the constraining or limiting of activity. The concept of a completed object is an abstraction from this activity.

Those who regard themselves as existentialists should have an intuitive understanding of Process Philosophy. Our tradition is strongly influenced by phenomenology, which, building on Kant's Copernican Revolution, argues that understanding the role of active, intentional consciousness is necessary to understanding reality. Like Sartre, we also affirm the reality and importance of creativity, freedom and imagination and rebut those views which see our universe as essentially inert, lifeless and deterministic. Process Philosophy also reveals much in common with Buddhist philosophies seeing realities being continually created in processes of co-dependent origination. Where we differ with those more extreme views in existentialism is in our arguments against the concept of positive freedom. It is the action of constraints that are the conditions for creativity, freedom and imagination to emerge, particularly natural constraints including the constraints of being primarily social creatures rather than individuals.

Where Sartre argues that existence precedes essence, Process Philosophers similarly argue that practice precedes theory. The implications of this are huge because it rejects all of those traditions which argue the opposite; that our universe and life within it are conditioned by atemporal, universal and immutable concepts such as the Will of God, mathematics and free-market economics. In process thought, all in the universe can be understood as emergent and evolving, including spacetime itself and causation. You cannot understand our universe through reference to fixed points outside of it but through processes of indwelling involving historical and dialectical approaches. Using Friedrich Schelling's terms, analytical thinkers see the universe as products whereas process philosophers hear the universe as productivity.

Because Process Philosophy takes time seriously, for me it makes life and a cosmos in which everything is oscillating in relation to everything else, intelligible. Process Philosophy, however, has long been found lacking and dismissed by those who are seeking certainty and closure in their arguments. Take definitions as an example. Since Aristotle, analytical logic has been

focused on deducing certain truths which can serve as the foundations for fixing definitions which themselves become fixed foundations for knowledge. As many of us would know, the legitimacy of this approach was blown out of the water by Bertrand Russell and Kurt Godel in the early 20thC and was later further demolished by complexity theories, but universities continue to be filled with people who keep doing it anyway. This inability to escape time through fixed definitions is taken seriously by Process Philosophers because we don't believe anything is fixed or fully independent. Definitions are contingent and always open to new interpretations.

One implication of this is that rather than trying to achieve the impossible and reduce a definition down to one fixed meaning Process Philosophers aim to broaden the meaning of a term to encompass greater wholes, creating further relationships. With this in mind I will attempt to define virtual reality.

VIRTUAL REALITY

To develop a broad definition of virtual reality, it is not enough to simply associate it with the definition emerging around 1960 when the potential to create graphic simulations of reality using computers emerged. The history of art reveals examples going back thousands of years of verisimilitude, deception and illusion. Histories of virtual reality often make mention of Roman historian, Pliny the Elder. In the 1st century CE, Pliny, tells the story of a competition between Zeuxis, a Greek painter born around 464 BC, and Parrhasius, his contemporary. The pair held a contest to decide which of them, was the better painter. Apparently, Zeuxis' painting of grapes was so life-like that birds flew in to nibble on them. When Zeuxis asked Parrhasius to pull back his curtain and reveal his work of art, Parrhasius was able to inform his friend that there was no curtain; *the painting was of a curtain*. Zeuxis is quoted as saying: "I have deceived the birds, but Parrhasius has deceived Zeuxis." http://heritage-key.com/blogs/lyn/optical-illusions-exhibition-trompe-l%E2%80%99%C5%93il-coming-florence-and-paris

The Ancient Greeks, therefore, were active in creating virtual realities but these were perhaps best understood as forms of *mimesis*, imitations of nature created to reveal the relationship between the ideal and the real, being and becoming. We can perhaps see some of the origins of virtual reality in the concept of *mimesis*. Aristotle argued that we are mimetic beings with an urge to create cultural products which reflect and represent reality. Aristotle also argued that when viewing these products, such as Greek tragedies, it was important to both identify and empathize with the portrayal as well as maintaining some distance. The value of mimesis lay in being able to recognize it as not being real. As Michael Davis argues:

> At first glance, mimesis seems to be a stylizing of reality in which the ordinary features of our world are brought into focus by a certain exaggeration, the relationship of the imitation to the object it imitates being something like the relationship of dancing to walking. Imitation always involves selecting something from the continuum of experience, thus giving boundaries to what really has no beginning or end. *Mimêsis* involves a framing of reality that announces that what is contained within the frame is not simply real. Thus the more "real" the imitation the more fraudulent it becomes.

For Aristotle, *mimesis* was about ethics. It was a medium for exploring the nature of *Arete*, or virtue. The etymology of the word virtual reveals that the adjective, virtual, comes from the noun, virtue and that this has some significance. Virtue comes from *virtus*, the name of the Roman God of masculine strengths such as valor, excellence, courage and character. *Virtus,* was itself derived from the Ancient Greek deity, *Arete*, which is generally associated with Aristotle's concepts of virtue achieved through *Paideia,* education in the virtues. The word virtual appears in the 14thC relating to the capability, or power, to influence by virtues but it is not until the 17thC that the word comes to mean something in essence but not in name, something nearly as good as reality. This sense of appearing to be but not having the essence was then appropriated by the emerging science of optics such that the image in a mirror came to be called a virtual image as distinct from that which casts the reflection.

This scientific definition of virtual image, however, gives no place to active consciousness and the role of what Sartre argued was the condition for knowing reality from illusion at all, imagination. *Mimesis*, on the other hand suggests that reflections and simulations of reality are idealized. For example, while the Ancient Greeks based their concepts of virtue on the observed behaviour of some actual members of the Polis, (practice precedes theory), these practices were then conceived by philosophers as ideals to which all should aspire so that theory then comes to precede practice. This means, I argue, that those philosophers engaged in conceiving of worlds in which all, or at least most, behave virtuously, are creating virtual realities which are idealizations of reality and not just simple copies. Virtual realities are therefore distinct realities in that they are the products of human imagination; idealizations of worlds that are virtual utopias. Virtual realities are not just utopian, however. They can also be idealizations of dystopias in which virtue fails to flourish. From a process perspective, therefore, virtual realities can be thought of as the imaginative playing out of possible scenarios of possible worlds.

From this perspective, the creation of virtual realities can be understood broadly as mimetic processes by which humans are able to anticipate uncertainty; continually create and maintain integrity against a constantly changing background. They are processes involving analogical thought which enable us to distinguish and evaluate events in our worlds. Within our process metaphysical categories, we understand living organisms to be autopoietic organizations, drawing on Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's concepts. Humans are semi-autonomous organizations which act to self-create their organization maintaining themselves as distinct entities. We do this by drawing on past experience to create multiple possible anticipations of the future in each moment of the present. This allows us to be goal oriented but not locked in to one, particular, anticipation. In other words, we are capable of change while maintaining order. This condition of life is what complexity theorists have called, 'the edge of chaos'. A commonly used

example of this is the human heart and theories of neuro-plasticity give this further support.

What I am suggesting here is that the creation of virtual realities is a condition for life and the primary means for understanding the universe and our place in it, for philosophers. It is the condition for philosophers engaging in what Paul Ricoeur calls, the ongoing dialectic between utopia and ideology. It is therefore not logic which is most important for philosophers but imagination and it is great imagination which distinguishes great philosophers. So, if creating virtual realities as understood through *mimesis* is what good philosophy is all about, why do I have problem with how it is currently understood?

VITUAL REALITY: THE PROBLEM

To answer this we need to look at a more specific definition of virtual reality related to today's digital information technology, what Katherine Hayles calls, 'virtuality'. In her book, *How we Became Posthuman,* Hayles defines virtuality in the following: 'Virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns.' In other words, everything in our universe can be reduced to bits of information, information being the primary level of existence. This belief is challenged, however, by the view that like everything else, information is not pre-existent but has a history, one that is deeply interrelated with the history of *mimesis*. I agree with the argument of Michael Hobart and Zachary Schiffman in their book, *Information Ages,* that information is emergent. Information is the informing of thought, the ongoing human project to extend memory externally through technologies which allow thought to be preserved in more stable forms. The purpose of this project is to overcome the limits to our embodied memories which too often deceive us The project, therefore, is to destroy illusion and find true reality. Within this emergent project, information emerged and developed with technologies such as writing, printing and electronic data storage. Abstracted from these

technologies the concept of information becomes meaningless. Hayles'
definition suggests, however, that this meaningless idea that abstract,
disembodied information exists and is primary has become part of today's
cultural perception.

Ironically, this belief that what is primary in our universe is information, has
been developed from many of the theories which have underpinned the
development of modern Process Philosophy such as, cybernetics, autopoeisis
and emergence. However, while Process Philosophers see these theories as
justifying the existence of multiple levels of reality, all moving, interrelated and
co-evolving with each other, analytic thinkers see them as reducing our
universe to just one level of reality, that of information. For them, information
has therefore been reified and has become the Platonic Form of our time
(although one that doesn't have any form) leaving emergent structures such as
living organisms as mere epiphenomena, a lesser form of reality if at all
(essence precedes existence). For Process thinkers this is an example of
committing what Alfred North Whitehead calls, 'the fallacy of misplaced
concreteness', where you mistake abstract products for primary reality.

Of course, saying that information has become a Platonic Form, albeit a
formless one suggests that this is not a new problem. As I've already argued,
philosophers since ancient times have created virtual realities in their
imaginings and many have mistaken them for the primary level, the
foundational level, Descartes, one of the fathers of analytical philosophy being
perhaps one of our best examples. Some of you might ask; but aren't Process
Philosophers doing the same thing, taking process as primary? In a sense, yes,
because as phenomenologists know, all living organisms have to simplify the
vast complexity of our universe somewhat in order to act at all. The difference
is, however, that analytic thinkers, like Descartes, believe that they have
identified primary reality as something clear and distinct. On the other hand,
Process Philosophers can only speak of primary reality in vague terms. We all
have a sense of the processual nature of reality, like when we watch our
children grow or admire a work of art but can't work out why we like it when

the person next to us hates it, but we understand that the more we try to determine the exact nature of reality the more elusive it becomes. It is this vagueness that frustrates and antagonizes non-process thinkers but I believe it is something we must come to terms with if we are to better understand the true nature of reality. Otherwise, we have something as vague as information being treated as a clear, distinct object.

What I am suggesting is that those who have come to believe in the primary reality of abstract, disembodied information have lost touch with reality. They are uncritically inhabiting virtual realities, theirs or others imaginative creations. This does not mean that virtual reality is not real in some sense. Process thinkers are neither idealists nor materialists. Because, both material structures and ideas are the products of processes, both are as real as each other and have what is called a downwardly causative effect, or act as constraints. A table causes you to have to go around it, constraining your movements and an idea can constrain a whole culture, causing it to flourish or disintegrate. The problem emerges when a particular, relatively simple idea, such as information, is reified and becomes the basis of reality for a culture. The culture then becomes primarily constrained by virtual reality which means being constrained by a misconception of what primary reality is. What is the nature of this misconception that Hayles' argues constrains our culture?

Since the invention of writing from accounting practices, information has always had the advantage of appearing seemingly more clearly definable and measurable, qualities most valued by analytical thinkers. Today, the digital technologies which generate our virtual worlds use binary logic which is mathematically expressed and measured. Haven't you noticed that when a social problem emerges these days we try to fix it by generating more information and we try to measure exactly how much information we need. What is most valued by those who believe in the primacy of information, is quantity. For them, more quantity is the basis of quality; the more information you have the more likely it is that quality will emerge, such as Google's belief that artificial intelligence will emerge when they manage to digitize everything.

Others, such as Nicholas Negroponte, in his book, *Being Digital*, argue that a new decentralized, global harmony will emerge from a totally digitally networked world; quantity produces quality. Those of us, however, who understand the history of philosophy, will know that this way of thinking is deluded. Quality does not emerge from quantity; it emerges from constraints. Take the quality of truth for instance. You only have to look at the story of Socrates to understand that in most societies only a handful of people are even interested in truth. For many, truth is, as Al Gore argues, inconvenient and for most it is assumed. Truth will not emerge from a growing and fully networked population, who, aren't interested. Those few who are committed to truth are that way because they have constrained themselves to be authentic; they have valued quality over quantity.

What is being ignored by those who value quantity and the products of logic and mathematics which measure everything, is that these products themselves are generated by processes which are more complex and difficult to define. Using our counting machines though has become so much easier than having to deal with these vagaries or qualities, particularly the emergent complex processes in the form of living organisms. What is perhaps most troubling though is that along with the misconception that information is primary and more is better comes the misconception that information, like God, is immutable and immortal. This then helps it act as a foundation for the illusion of total control over natural processes. By manipulating abstract, disembodied information, for example, we can, like engineers, attempt to dampen or flatten oscillating systems such as day and night, summer and winter, youth and maturity and life and death. We do this, I argue, to create a world in the image of information; a world that is immortal, immutable and totally predictable. This probably sounds familiar to those who have studied the history of religion and its logical conclusion would be similar too; the destruction of conditions for the flourishing of life.

For fundamentalist info-worshippers, it seems that we can now ignore finite organisms and their vibratory nature and simply spend our time measuring and

manipulating perfect and infinite information, that is, of course, until the reality of process asserts itself. But in order to recognize when it does you need, as I have tried to argue, an understanding of the process nature of reality which will then reveal the nature of virtual reality.

THE INTERNET

This then brings us to the internet, the virtual product of this misconception in which more and more of us spend our time manipulating, abstract, disembodied information. The internet emerged from its military applications to become a civilian network thanks to a strange collaboration between Modernism and Postmodernism. James Harkin, in his book, *Cyburbia*, relates the fascinating story of how disaffected hippies embraced the philosophical musings of Marshal McLuhan, a fundamentalist Christian, to create an information technology that for the hippies would subvert the status quo of global communications and for McLuhan, would lead us to a global spiritual unity. Ironically, all of this of was enabled through the abstract mathematical products of reductive analytical thinkers. The internet, therefore, is a mish mash of ideas which turns Modernists into nihilists and Postmodernists into evangelical proponents of a grand narrative of posthumanism.

Amongst this mish mash are those cyber-utopians such as Nicholas Negroponte and Google and their faith in quantity. According to Evgeny Morozov in his book, *The Net Delusion,* cyber-utopianism is flourishing and now even dominates US foreign policy. According to him, Hilary Clinton's office has become more interested in spreading and freeing up the internet than in the old-fashioned work of deeply understanding the complex, socio-political history of other cultures. The assumption is again that the more digitally networked the world will become the more autocracies will spontaneously combust. The phenomenon of demonstrators twittering is seen as evidence of this. However, the cracks are starting to appear in this virtual construct as the reality of process asserts itself. A growing critical discourse

has emerged making strong arguments suggesting that the subversive and spiritually unifying potential of the internet is not being realized. Morozov, for example, highlights many deliberately fragmenting uses of the internet by anti-democratic forces. More disturbingly, however, it is being argued that the internet is destroying our capacity for critical thought. But isn't critical thought necessary for doing philosophy? If it is then the internet is putting philosophy in peril. But this may depend for some of you on how we define philosophy.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

To be consistent I must define Philosophy as broadly as possible. I think the Ancient Greeks were pretty right in the name they applied meaning love of wisdom. What though is wisdom? I think the Ancient Greeks were right again in stressing that wisdom is not purely abstract but practical wisdom, *Phronesis*. Intellectually understanding the nature of things is pointless unless it leads to living the good life. The good life is a virtuous one, a life of integrity, an authentic life distinguished by individuals and societies who have come to understand the difference between reality and illusion. Such a good life however is acknowledged by process thinkers as never being capable of being fully realized. *Phronesis* is sought through an ongoing process of *paideia* where questions of what we are, what we know and what we value continue to be posed by new generations within changing contexts. The rules are never fixed; they are always up for review. That is why, from a process perspective, epistemology is primarily dialectical. Practical wisdom develops from encountering obstacles, asking questions and transcending levels of understanding. Philosophy is therefore a process from which abstract concepts emerge from dialectical activity. Existence precedes essence.

Unfortunately, the internet is not dialectical because dialectical reasoning is a form of constraint, a way of creating order from chaos. Cyber-utopians, or post-humans, however, see the ultimate conclusion of digital networks as total freedom from constraint. If you imagine this as like being in the matter

transporter in Star Trek, you can see that their ultimate goal is to not be embodied at the start or finish of the de-materialization process, but trapped somewhere in the middle as disembodied data. This reveals a gross misconception of complex evolutionary processes. From a process perspective, evolution is a process in which, a proliferation of potentialities are constrained into particular trajectories to create order from chaos. It is these trajectories, or constraints, that provide the levels of freedom that we have. For example, a strong skeleton and musculature allows us to resist gravity and move within its resistance. Without such limits or boundaries, no order can exist. Of course relative freedom is lost when systems become over-constrained or dis-ordered. This then introduces the problem of thermodynamics, or entropy. A recent comment on the role of the internet in Egypt's political uprisings suggested that internet access acted as an accelerant. However, living organisms are energy dissipating systems, like controlled self-organizing fires. Too much accelerant provides a quick hit while hastening us towards extinction.

As well as these larger-scale misconceptions, the critical discourse I referred to earlier, much of it coming from those at the forefront of the internet's development, are revealing it to be a means for integrating the world into what French Philosopher Guy Debord called, 'the society of the spectacle'. The society of the spectacle is one in which all of reality is reduced to simulations, where all become integrated into a virtual world where all is controlled, all is measurable and all is for sale. A recent TV Ad for Visa, for example, describes the internet as the world's largest store. So what Debord was describing back in the 1960's is actually our virtual world. Our virtual world is the product of neo-liberal ideology which re-defines nation states as economies, obliterates boundaries and reduces all relationships to market relationships (freedom from constraint), supply-side economics which creates consumer demand rather than responds to it, flooding our world with useless crap and destroying natural environments in the process and of course, a deep-seated belief that life is mechanical and information is primary. It is a world where critical thought and the search for meaning is replaced by mindless work, trivial entertainments, alienation and commodity fetishism. It is a world where there

is no need for questions because all resistance has been removed. It is a world devoid of Philosophy

How is the internet facilitating this? To answer this let's consider what Umberto Eco referred to as the difference between the integrated and the apocalyptic. Drawing on these themes, French Philosopher and Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, argues that the neo-liberalism underpinning our society of the spectacle thrives thanks to mindless support from integrated intellectuals, what he calls 'Doxosophers', borrowing from Plato. It is important to point out that this sense of being integrated does not mean having integrity, or wholeness, as will be revealed. One of Bourdieu's points, I argue, is to suggest that a condition for critical thought is to be at least somewhat apocalyptic. You must have developed a sense that something is wrong or could be better in your world. This sense is usually developed through suffering existential and epistemological crises as we grapple with the inherent indeterminacy and unpredictability of life. Against this background we learn to project and construct possible futures, virtual realities as I discussed before, but we do so knowing that there is no guarantee of achievement. We become critical thinkers through the knowledge that the past can be re-interpreted and future events changed.

This is not the case for the integrated. If you are integrated, in this sense, there is no point to critical thought; no point to examining the past or developing utopian or dystopian visions of the future. Like the Postmodernist characterized by Frederick Jameson, the integrated are like schizophrenics locked in to a constant present. This constant present can be continually generated by artificial environments in which there is no change, such as consumer malls, or through a deluded perception that all is pre-determined. Paradoxically, this constant present is a world of fragments, or perhaps, bits of data; a world in which coherent narratives break down and we become disoriented and lose integrity. This is then the condition for the integrated to be unable to act other than how they have been conditioned to act. It is perhaps a case of hypercoherence or autism, where rigid behaviours develop

in response to information overload. Those who do sense problems and raise questions in such an environment, however, are regarded as the crazy ones. The world of the integrated is only interested in what is, not what was or what could be.

The conditions for a world of the integrated, a world devoid of critical thought, are being created using digital information technologies to outsource imagination. Paradoxically, this is becoming clear thanks to the new literature of critical thought I mentioned which is emerging to challenge the utopian claims of internet and social network creators. What is emerging is a new understanding that these technologies, rather than enhancing our humanity, are enhancing the belief that we are machines comprised of bits of information. The problem here, however, is that as I stress to my students, human beings are not machines and not information processors; we are organic interpreters and creators of meaning.

This is argued by virtual reality technology pioneer, Jaron Lanier, in his book, *You Are Not a Gadget*. According to him, when we engage in social networks and refer to Facebook nodes as friends, we are devaluing the meaning of the term, friend, reducing it to the machine level. We are also devaluing individuals. The anonymity emerging and desired by those creating the internet 'Cloud', such as in Wikipedia, produces billions of bits of data abstracted from the authors. This potentially obliterates critical thought because ultimately there will be no one representing a view; no one to argue against; no resistance. This anonymity also abstracts internet content from experience making internet information appear as ahistorical, conforming to info-worshippers beliefs. This will eventually transform the internet into a world of static Platonic Forms with no one capable of or interested in changing anything.

James Harkin, in his book, *Cyburbia,* argues similarly that the cybernetic theories underpinning the technologies of social networks are nowhere near adequate to define human nature. These technologies are actually acting to limit our potential, over-constrain it, rather than expanding it as their promoters claim. Becoming uncritically integrated into a particular constructed system of networks limits our ability to think creatively outside of them as Harkin points out in regard to failed military applications of cybernetics in the Gulf Wars.

Perhaps the strongest critique comes from Nicholas Carr in his book, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing our Brains.* Carr argues that many of us have become ashamed that we are born instead of made. Like Susan Greenfield who I mentioned earlier, he is concerned that digital information technologies are creating, an, 'ecology of distractedness'. Continual engagement with the internet changes our brains in such a way that we become less able to focus on deep concept formation which requires exercising our long term memory. Instead, we revert to become little more than hunter/gatherers, or data processors, expertly alert to continual fragments of information but unable to make sense of them or contextualize them. This is also what Susan Greenfield identifies as the problem for developing a coherent sense of self. Developing a coherent sense of self requires that we are able to situate ourselves within narratives. It is narratives that reveal to us continuities between past and future events expressing our temporal nature. Because of this, Process Philosophers regard narrative knowing as ontologically primary. In a ecology of distractedness, however, the ability to create coherent narratives is deeply compromised.

Finally, in regard to long term memory and a coherent sense of self, Viktor Mayer-Schonberger, in his book, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in a Digital Age*, argues that the efficient digital outsourcing of memory is altering the natural balance which has always elevated forgetting over remembering. The ability for our computers to cheaply and accurately store information is creating a tension between relatively unchanging computer memory and the

plastic, interpretative nature of human remembering that sees us creatively constructing the past in the present. Also, he highlights a danger for critical thought in the ability for third parties to store masses of decontextualized information about us. This, he argues, is having the effect of making us more cautious about challenging the status quo rather than encouraging us. The media's effect in destroying the quality of our political debates in Australia is perhaps a good example of this.

So, in summary, if we accept that Philosophy is a dialectical process requiring deep thought and concentration, that it requires us to overcome obstacles and transcend immature stages of development, that it is about us learning to understand what is required to live a good life and create conditions for others to live good lives, that it is about quality as well as quantity, that it is about creating a coherent sense of self through situating ourselves within historical narratives, that it is about creating memories rather than retrieving them, then the internet has become an anti-philosophy technology. Philosophy requires deep reading and concentration on deep concept formation which the internet discourages. Philosophy requires encountering resistance either from natural environments or in the form of other's counter positions which the internet does not encourage. Philosophy requires openness to new possibilities and the creation of potential which the internet does not encourage. Philosophy requires an apocalyptic approach to the status quo, in other words, critical thought, which the internet does not encourage. Philosophy requires transcendence to higher stages of cognitive development, which the internet clearly does not encourage and philosophy requires that we strive to live an authentic and virtuous life recognizable through the stories we create, which the internet does not encourage. What the internet does encourage us to do is to uncritically integrate into mindless consumption of spectacles. In other words, lose all sense of reality.

CIVILIZATION

There is another problem that I need to discuss, however. The ecology of distractedness that is the internet creates uncivilized human beings. Civilization is created by those who are able to engage in deep conceptual thought in response to challenges, people who engage in all of those activities which I have associated with philosophy. The French Republic, the US Constitution, the Communist Manifesto and Australia's Federation were not created by internet junkies. Civilization emerged to create the conditions for self-creation of civilization, autopoeisis. This semi-autonomous semiotic process, however, is being corrupted by a growing population of barbarians, or idiots, people unable even to appreciate the historical conditions enabling their freedom to shop, largely thanks to immersion in digital information technologies. As the internet continues to negate philosophy, therefore, it will also negate civilization, reducing us to a world of brain-eating zombies.

If you accept that we need to do something, what can we do? In a radio panel discussion on the future of Australia, a few years ago now, two of the futurists speculated that Australians will be so totally integrated into the virtual worlds of the global digital network and these virtual worlds will be of such high definition that we will need specialized teams of philosophers running around dealing with reality crises. While this sounds good for the future of philosophy, provided I got a car and travel expenses, it sounds too much like what psychologist do now; run around re-integrating so-called crazies into the status quo. This countering one extreme with another though is not what philosophy is about. If people are losing their sense of reality, then philosophers should be looking at the whole picture and questioning the assumptions about reality that are causing such problems The problem is, however, in a world totally integrated with the cloud, where will the philosophers come from? Apart from the odd, crazy fringe group, philosophy will be dead.

At Swinburne, therefore, our focus has turned to the creation of an ecological civilization as a way of ensuring philosophy and civilization flourish. I don't have time to go into all that we understand so far about this and it is a work in progress, but generally, an ecological civilization is one that puts constraints on atomistic, mechanical, analytical and materialist thinking and its product of post-human ideology. It does this by creating a grand narrative of re-embodiment and a groundless ground of complex process. An ecological civilization is one that is based on reality; the reality that we are natural events, processes of becoming existing in dependent co-originating relationships with multiple other levels, those which we constrain and those which constrain us. An ecological civilization is one that stresses dialectical reasoning so that apparent dichotomies such as integrated and apocalyptic, utopia and ideology, reality and virtual reality, being and becoming, can be understood as relational, not reducible.

The concept of practical wisdom suggests that we should do philosophy for a practical reason, to live a good life. For process philosophers, one can't live a good life without engaging in creating conditions for life to flourish in general. As I've argued, these are also the conditions for civilization and philosophy itself to flourish. It seems to me, therefore, that all serious philosophers should be reflecting on whether they're doing this. Whether we are using our imaginations to create virtual models of worlds in which philosophy and civilization flourish and whether, following Aristotle's concept of mimesis, we are maintaining some critical distance from them. I suggest that after such reflection and speculation, we should conclude that the triumph of virtual reality over reality needs to be resisted and the case for a reality of process be forcefully made.