Towards a Phenomediology of the Soul

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Abstract: The paper discusses different formats of the psyche in connection with opposing phantasmatic pre-decisions building the very basis of every kind of epistemology and ontology. An investigation of the key role of imagination shows that theoretical concepts and their objects devote themselves either to an imaginal phantasm of connection/correlation regarding reality, or to a constructivist one, stressing the opposite (imaginary) phantasm of separation. However, due to the fact that no *God's-eye-view* is available, neither the realistic option nor the constructivist option can be verified/falsified in an ultimate concern. With respect to the key role of imagination, a *medial* format of the psyche is introduced, implying a switch from phenomenology's principle of self-giving evidence to *phenomediology*: anything appearing or any phenomenon is considered of being dependent on multiple medial processes. According to this medialistic view, reality(ies) and objects only arise, because self-differentiated media permanently mediate each other. Against this background psyche can be described as a *medium* – as something that is literally *between*, located in a difference that belongs neither to one side nor to the other: between mind and matter, between inside and outside, between subject and object, between the individual and the collective. In this respect psyche can be seen as a medium of transforming not only the individual but also the traditions of politics, ethics, religions, and of social and economic conditions. This will be shown with respect to psyche's entanglement with technical media.

Keywords: Psyche, Phantasm, Medium, Ethics, Absolute Fragility

1. Introduction

The text suggests a new perspective on psyche which goes back to an investigation of the key role imagination claims in every kind of epistemology and ontology. Basically, two main options can be detected: a realistic one, stressing an imaginal phantasm of connection or correlation regarding reality, and a constructivist one, stressing the opposite (imaginary) phantasm of separation. Due to the fact that no *God's-eye-view* is possible, neither the realistic option nor the constructivist option can be verified (or even falsified) in an ultimate concern. Although both options tend to neglect the opposite phantasm, *both* phantasms are nevertheless indispensable to claim the respective position [1-3]. The realistic point of view depends on the possibility of erring (otherwise everything would be true), whereas the constructivist choice depends on the fact that the theory itself necessarily represents an exception of its own assumption. This leads to the skeptical conclusion that we have to deal with an *absolute fragility* concerning reality and objects. In

other words: theories and terms always reflect a kind of *self-difference*. Due to the fact, that every epistemology depends on two opposing phantasms, the term *medium* [4] is introduced. The term is understood not in a technical but in an *ontological* sense, i.e. as a *self-difference* (or a *relation of connection and separation*). According to this medialistic view, our reality(ies) only arise, because self-differentiated media permanently mediatize each other. This can be shown with respect to the term psyche: After an exploration of two conventional ways of formatting psyche, the material format and the mental one, a *medial* format will be developed. Taking the key role of imagination into account, psyche can be described as something that is literally *between*, located in a difference that belongs neither to one side nor to the other, e. g. between mind and matter, between inside and outside, between subject and object, between the individual and the collective, between true and false, between thinking, feeling, behaviour, etc. The medialistic perspective shall be explored in connection with current tendencies to treat man as a bio-digital machine in order to redefine the relationship of

technology and psyche. While Marshall McLuhan [5] dreamt of a *Golden Age* and of a transmission of human consciousness into the world of computers, Friedrich Kittler [6] attempts to posit machine before man: It is no longer man communicating but a digital gearshift assembly, which saves, calculates and transmits information not from subject to subject, but from machine to machine. Another media-theorist, Vilém Flusser [7], even spoke of a "religious experience" in the "sphere of communicology" and of standing on the threshold to a new level of being situated between "catastrophe and hope". Both tendencies culminate in the current discussion concerning the future of mankind in relation with the possible development of Artificial Intelligence to a kind of singularity [8-10].

2. Psyche's Self-Difference

Different views of the psyche have emerged in the course of the history of culture spanning almost three millennia. The term runs the gamut from the postulate of an ontological entity to the function of a principle, all the way to the dimension of religion and art. Whenever man has thought about life, the *conditio (in-)humana*, knowledge, truth, beauty etc. he has encountered something that is best expressed by the word psyche – a term that discloses a structured world that ranges from matter to mind, from the lowest to the highest – and somewhere in-between man, a mortal being aspiring to knowledge and eternity. Two facts have to be taken into consideration whenever we speak of the soul or psyche: firstly, a constitutive *self-difference* that is implied as soon as a self-identical unity is postulated, and, secondly, a special kind of format that in any case is informed by preliminary decisions that are not conscious at all. As a result of these phantasmatic pre-decisions various positions concerning mind and matter can be observed. This dualism mainly reflects two positions: a mental format and its opposite, a physical one. The classical mental format can be studied, for example, in the development of the multiple centres of excitement such as *thymos* and *phrenes* in the Homeric *Ilias* to the Platonic and Aristotelian *psyché* as a self-cent-red inner unity and entity. Psyché originally meant vitality, *Lebenskraft, élan vital*, the Greek word *empsychos* – meaning animated, vivid and full of vitality. Psyche was imagined as breath, butterfly, bird, shadow and a spirit that left the body when a person died. Apart from this, the Homeric heroes were driven by multiple autonomous forces such as the *thymos* and *phrenes*. In the second half of the 5th century before Christ a far-reaching change concerning the meaning of psyche took place. The idea of a relative autonomous inner entity emerged, which was called *psyche,* and gained the status of immortality. Besides this, fantasies of *metempsychosis* or of an *anima mundi* arose. What this historical process reveals is that the psyche is not only a concept of unity vouched for by the mental format of the *nous* and the *logos* and their metaphysical realism but also something that in itself is different and therefore struggles with manifold differences, e.g., the epistemological difference between perception and thinking, the corresponding ontological one of an intelligible Being and sensible beings and the soteriological one of contingency and redemption (*soteria*).

The second format, the physical one, is particularly visible today in neuroscience and in the overlapping of science, cultural studies, art, and politics. This demonstrates a new orientation in thinking the humane. Man is said to become *transhuman* when experimenting with new styles of being such as cyborgs, clones and androids. A new so-called *dispositive* is being established: a combination of political power, economical strategies, discourses and performative practices. Scientific disciplines like neuroscience, genetic engineering and cybernetics are at the forefront. The trend is to displace psyche or to try to make it visible by the means of digital devices as if it were a concrete object that can be made visible. Digital devices, combined with biological body data, form the basis of a new *terminal* identity. This way man is becoming transformed into a bio-digital machine. Neuroscience places man and machine on the same footing in physical terms. The early stages of this tendency go back to the beginnings of the modern age. Though psyche originally designated the state of the living being and the life principle of the whole body and even of the cosmos, the brain is now its prison. The life principle has become the organ of thinking, whose neuronal and biochemical substrates have replaced the psyche. In this context it is interesting to note that from the 16th century on the corpse and the mechanic machine served as models for experimentation with the human body. So in view of all of this we could ask: what is left of the soul? Modern brain research offers answers such as the following one given by Roth [11] psyche is a "physical state, whose laws are not yet sufficiently known". The term psyche is used to denote the "unity of cognitive, emotional and affective states and achievements" bound to brain structures and brain processes underlying the laws of nature". This turns the psyche, the classical medium of relation and mediation, e.g., between spirit and matter, between the living and the dead, between man and the Gods into a technical issue. The enchanted world of beings and powers connected in a *great chain of being* is displaced by calculation and now loses its spell. Again we notice the previously mentioned self-difference – on the one hand, a unity and on the other, manifold processes such as perception, thinking, emotions and so on that are connected and tamed by a hierarchical principle.

We have explored two kinds of format, the mental or idealistic and the naturalistic or physical one. I would now like to suggest an alternative to both formats. I have stated that whenever we speak of the soul or psyche a special kind of format can be taken for granted, one that is in any case informed by preliminary decisions that are not conscious at all. In my opinion psyche can neither be reduced to something solely mental nor to something physical. Let us now switch to the *medial* psyche. By referring to the third realm of a medial format, I want to avoid succumbing to idealism, materialism or even psychologism. This format considers the psyche to be a medium that transmits what we

usually associate with mind or matter. Psyche means something that is literally between, located in a difference that belongs neither to one side nor to the other: between mind and matter, between inside and outside, between subject and object, between the individual and the collective, between you and me.

Of course, it could be objected that nowadays nearly everything is described in terms of a medium. The term "medium" is a popular one that is used in a very broad sense. We all know that the term *medium* was originally reserved for séances up to the 19th century. In the middle of the 20th century this term entered the realm of technology, communication and information. A few decades later, in the course of the so-called *medial turn*, competing definitions of what a medium is to be considered appeared on the scene. Let me mention just two of them: the medium can be seen as a tool but also as a sphere of possibilities that can be actualized. Due to the fact that every epistemology depends on two opposing phantasms, the term medium is understood in an *ontological* sense as a *self-difference* or as a *relation of connection and separation* [12].

Introducing the psyche as a kind of medial setting means claiming a special field, that differs from the field of science and also from the field of cultural studies. First of all, this means that any phenomenon or any event is embedded in processes of transformation taking place below the medial surface in the so-called *submedial space* [13]. I would suggest calling this process *mediamorphosis* [14]. Let us now view the psyche as a vessel where perception, thinking, feeling, vegetative processes etc. merge. All we perceive, think, feel, fantasize goes back to mediamorphosis and depends on it. As soon as we start to reflect on this process, e.g., explore the evidence of thinking, we interfere in this process, while at the same time stay within its "natural" flow. One could say thinking is something that has gone through the medial gap: on the one hand, it is something that has been mediated by other processes and, on the other hand, it itself is the agent of change involved in mediality. In other words: psyche constitutes the "intermedial between" of cognitive achievements, emotional, intentional, vegetative and affective conditions. Signals of the body and perceptions translate into thinking, feeling and fantasies. Thinking, feeling and fantasies translate into movements, movements into feelings and thinking and so on. This manifold process is a heteronymous and spontaneous one, a flow always searching for a new course. In this intermedial process every experience, perception, thought, and feeling is already something mediated and serves as a medium of change for itself. This means what we consider to be an experience, a thought, a perception, an image, an idea, a phenomenon or the self-giving evidence is already something that has been mediated by manifold processes "in" the submedial space.

It is interesting to see how much mental formatting depends on a medial concept. This could be illustrated by the role of imagination that functions as a link between thinking (*noesis*) and perception or the role images and metaphors play in the works of many thinkers from Plato to Kant and Hegel. These come to bear precisely when something that cannot be expressed by words is translated into pictures, with theory being transformed into mythology or poetry. Nevertheless thinking is still identified with psyche and being claiming its pole position among the other powers like feeling and perception. An idea of world as a kind of totality or horizon of knowledge and *soteria* is thus created – an idea that is indebted to the activity of the *nous* or the *logos* completely denying emotions and perception as those media that play a crucial role establishing the idea of a world and of its manifold political, ethical and religious implications.

It seems as if the real problem of metaphysics is not the *forgetting of Being* (Heidegger) but the *forgetting of mediality*, because metaphysic's dependence on multiple forms of media and the fact that our relationship to ourselves, to the other and to the world is never an immediate but a mediated one is not recognized. Seen from this perspective, the term medium is a metaphysical one inherited by the onto-epistemological enterprise of understanding the world as a totality. Maybe one reason for forgetting mediality is that the term medium implies differences threatening the supposed sovereignty of thinking and therefore has to be ignored. Another reason could be the phenomenological problem how something that happens in the submedial space and eludes detection can reveal itself on a medial surface. In contemporary theories of art it is speculated that this revelation is due to moments of shocks interrupting the conventional "natural" flow lifting attention to another level realizing the change after it had happened.

Keeping the medial format in mind enables us to redefine the relationship of technology and psyche. What is called for is a kind of medial thinking that is able to recognize that technical achievements are not the precondition of psyche – a hypothesis that is prominently advocated by Kittler [15], who maintains that the history of consciousness follows technical innovations. The history of the psyche is embedded in the history of technology. It was, for instance, not accidental that Freud spoke of a psychic device. For Kittler the unconscious is nothing else than a "metaphor for machine-parks" that are yet unknown. When we think of the computer we can say that it is no longer man communicating but a digital gearshift assembly, which saves, calculates and transmits information not from subject to subject, but from machine to machine. To counter this attempt to place machine before man it should be stated that technical achievements are not the pre-condition of psyche because they themselves are part of the intermedial psychic processes. To illustrate this: the data of neuroscience have a background; they are the product of reasoning and have to be translated into writing, speech and symbols. In other words, they are part of the psyche's medial play which – and this is important to be able to avoid succumbing to psychologism – depends on something else serving as the material for mediality.

To demonstrate how much technical media are embedded in the medial psyche I want to tell an anecdote [16]. The philosopher Martin Heidegger was known to have a specific attitude towards technology. Maybe this was the reason why

no TV set found its way into his home. Nevertheless, he used to visit his neighbours whenever the German soccer team played. I have to add that Heidegger also did not like theatre because – as he once mentioned – he wanted to watch "gods and heroes", not modern actors. This is an interesting statement, because referring to Franz Beckenbauer he said: "His team wins the world championship and he himself does not get hurt at all. Such a person I call a god." That Beckenbauer was experienced as a "god" was not only the merit of the technical medium but also the merit of transforming of what he had watched on the TV into a new fantasy. In other words: Television became part of the psychic process of *mediamorphosis*. For Heidegger the screen no longer showed Franz Beckenbauer but a heroic phantasm that transcends the technical medium, thus proving that man is not only a machine-building animal but a being that depends on and creates phantasms.

3. Fantasies on Fantasy

The anecdote above can be seen as an indication for the key role *imagination* is playing not only in everyday life but also in any kind of scientific formatting. It will be important to take into account this role of imagination also when reflecting psychic processes especially in connection with politics, ethics, and religion. Discussing the role of imagination means claiming a certain field, that is different from the field of science, e.g., the electromagnetic field or the field of quantum physics. In this field any phenomenon is considered to be *psychoid* [17]. In a narrower sense this term denotes the depth structure of the psyche, a position that develops a kind of metaphysical realism relying on the world-revealing aspect of fantasies completely failing their illusionary character that in contrast to Jung has been elaborated by Freud and by Lacan in particular. In a broader sense, which I am referring to, the term psychoid means that all phenomena are contained in the medial psyche which as an object of research has an imaginative basis. Whenever we refer to something, e.g. the body, the world, thinking, the soul or to whatever we are not dealing with an a priori given correspondence of *noesis* and *noematic* object but basically with imagination concerning medial processes. This perspective has an impact on epistemology and on the methodical principle of evidence, because there is no evidence that is evident in a way that could legitimate itself as *the* principle of experience. When the psyche is seen as the "intermedial between" of cognitive achievements, emotional, intentional, vegetative and affective conditions, the medial imperative that everything is the result of mediation can be regarded as a challenge, namely to proceed from phenomenology to *phenomediology* taking into account that anything appearing or any phenomenon is dependent on medial processes taking place between "that which appears" (*phainómenon*) and our knowledge (*logos*) of this appearance – a point of view that is different from the phenomenological principle of self-giving evidence. In what we experience we are dealing only with assumptions of something that is considered to be evident. These assumptions depend on the status of imagination. Generally speaking, imagination provides two options. Firstly, an *imaginal* one based on a relation between experience and the experienced, between psyche and the world. It is important to note that despite this connection there is also already a kind of distance assumed between the subject and its objects. The second option is an *imaginary* one placing psyche in an *ignotum X* nevertheless demanding an imaginal element that makes it possible to maintain the refusal and negation of relation.

Tentatively, we can assume that both versions depend on each other. This demands that the not-reflected attitude towards the status of imagination, the *fantasy on fantasy* itself, has to be clarified on the very basis of any theoretical or pragmatic concept. In experience we are dealing with something being fragile, with a world in the liminal state of suspense. *Both* options of imagination build the basis of what could be called the *absolute fragility* of decision and responsibility in research, politics, religion and last but not least in ethics. It is interesting that the trace of this absolute fragility can be detected in the approaches of media theorists like McLuhan or Flusser. I have already mentioned Friedrich Kittler's attempt to posit machine before man. Let me quote one of his precursors: in the sixties of the 20th century Marshall McLuhan [5] dreamt of a *Golden Age* and of a transmission of human consciousness into the world of computers. McLuhan's idea was that the central nervous system can extend out into a global net of communication and information so that it becomes connected with the consciousness of others. His idea was that the central nervous system can extend out into a global net of communication and information so that it becomes connected with the consciousness of others. Again, ancient images of the psyche seem to be revealed in a new guise. Now it is no longer the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, guaranteeing a structured cosmos but the worldwide ICT-net in which all media (images, sound, words, etc.) converge. It is interesting to note that this project is motivated by a religious or soteriological idea: McLuhan enthuses a "deep belief" whose aim is described as a "harmony of all creatures". Another pioneer of media-theory, Vilém Flusser [7] even spoke of a "religious experience" in the "sphere of communicology" and of standing on the threshold to a new level of being situated between "catastrophe and hope". Both tendencies culminate in the current discussion concerning the future of mankind in connection with the possible development of artificial intelligence (AI) to a kind of singularity. This allusion to "catastrophe and hope" refers to something that McLuhan and even Flusser have naively neglected most of the time when proclaiming their new totality of a *connective* consciousness and of a harmony of all creatures. What this allusion reveals is the *self-difference of the religious* itself – the fact that danger, suffering, death and contingency are much too often neglected as pre-conditions of redemption. The truth of religion is its impossibility: the fact that redemption is not possible in an immanent horizontal way. Under the premise that redemption as the ultimate horizon of

religion regularly gets projected onto the screen of an eschatological and apocalyptical split, we must ask ourselves *what about the other* who is not actively part of one's own symbolic universe and therefore finds himself excluded and exposed to death, hell or eternal damnation? A hubris much too often acted out by man taking upon himself a God-like position over life and death, thereby denying and rejecting the absolute fragility that demands decision, compassion, and responsibility.

Under this premise religion becomes transformed into its opposite, thereby slipping into something that could be called a *reliquariat* [18] – a nelogism that suggests another etymology than the one we are familiar with. Not *religare* and *relegere*, but *relinquere* – an expression that opposes the notion that the other is doomed to damnation and therefore excluded from salvation, establishing a dubious identity that denies its self-difference that is projected onto the other. It is not surprising that this self-difference has found its way directly into the ICT-net. I am especially referring to the contradictory self-presentations of symbolic beliefs committed to peace, understanding and tolerance on the one hand and revealing terror and brute force on the other, thus establishing a self-identity that projects its own negativity and destructiveness onto the other. It can be found especially in the global fight of *video against video*, in videos threatening with terror, in videos of Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib, in videos whose messages are in fact *disseminative*, addressed to an anonymous enemy somewhere out in the global sphere, thus establishing a dubious identity that denies its self-difference.

If the psyche is considered to be a medium, then we ourselves can be seen as media transforming the traditions of science, politics, ethics, religions, and of social and economic conditions. Anthropology thus becomes *anthropomediology*. It is a task of envisioning the horizons of the future in connection with something that is absolutely fragile. We are dealing with a world in the liminal state of suspense depending on both options of imagination. These options build the basis of what could be called the absolute fragile of decision and responsibility in research, politics, ethics and last not least in religion. Religion – not in the context of a certain denomination, but in what can be described as the religious interest in a world that goes beyond splitting, preferring an open horizon to be appropriated to the full range of the psyche. Facing psyche's absolute fragility the religious as well as the ethical and political is not a dimension that is objectively given, but something that depends on medial processes and their development. Concerning this, psychoanalysis has taught us how important processes of maturing depend on being grateful, being aware of one's own constitutive self-difference, on avoiding splitting and on the wish to reconcile.

4. Conclusion

Let me summarize by looking back: We started with the exploration of two formats: a mental and a material one. We stressed that at present a new dispositive is being established, one that treats man as a bio-digital machine. To counter this tendency we suggested a medial format that would enable us to discuss and develop a genuine subject of research. The key role of two aspects of imagination was underlined – an imaginary and an imaginal aspect; both aspects can be found at the very basis of any ontology and epistemology. Man can be characterized as a being engaged in an on-going production of identities and differences. In this respect psyche can be seen as a medium of transforming not only the individual but also the traditions of politics [19, 20], ethics [21], religions [22, 23] and of social and economic conditions. It is a task of envisioning the horizons of future in connection with something that is *absolutely fragile*. In light of this fragility we are confronted with psyche and self in their ultimate ethical dimension where there is an inversion of the contingency of life and beings, with contingency becoming *non-contingency* – a paradoxical cluster of necessity and freedom that regards otherness as a medium of becoming oneself.

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