Digital *Umgang* and The Loss of a Common World: Approaching Post-Truth from an Ecological and Educational Perspective

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It is reasonable to assume that what was once called "information society" has today lost its orientation points, and, with this, also its allure. Notwithstanding the enormous wealth of accessible information that we have at our disposal, this hasn't brought us liberation. Rather, it has become a source of issues like misinformation, disinformation, and post-truth. These problems are not only recognized as a genuine threat to democratic systems based on the rule of law[1], the very fundaments of our social life (and the way we function as families, neighbors, communities) and our personal wellbeing, including mental health, or—should we say—sanity[2], but also our capacity to take necessary actions against climate change so that human and non-human beings might thrive on this planet.[3] Arguably, these phenomena are the most pressing issues demanding our scholarly attention.

When dealing in a philosophical manner with these phenomena the default position is treating them as an *epistemological* problem.[4] This is to say that at the heart of the matter lies the challenge of differentiating between facts and opinions, truth and falsehoods, information and mis/disinformation. Establishing reliable criteria for making these distinctions, it is believed, could help fighting the current state of confusion and being-lost. Education would then have to play a crucial role in imparting the ability to apply critical criteria accurately, fostering the habit of using them, and emphasizing the importance of facts over opinions and truth over falsehoods.

Central to this epistemological take on the matter is the assumption that enhancing our awareness of specific intellectual tools and the sharpening of our epistemic capacities will resolve our issues. Education becomes then essential for navigating the messiness of current social reality, and it is philosophy that should furnish the conceptual tools needed to regain our lost orientation in the

world and regain control over our lives. The idea behind this hope is typical for the *critical* understanding of the role that philosophy is supposed to have vis-à-vis education:[5] first, philosophy needs to establish concepts that allow for a critique of the status quo and for standing up for "the oppressed" (For example, the truth itself,[6] or economically and politically disadvantaged people,[7] or the democratic institutions[8]—depending on the intellectual tradition one is part of). Next to this, people need to be enlightened, that is, they need to learn how to use these concepts, in order to make their daily understanding of reality more critical. Only then will they be in a position to fight against oppression and with a view of the right cause (for example, the truth, their own freedom and equality, democracy as such). In other words: philosophy has to deliver tools for critique with the help of which we will be able again to recognize not only misinformation and disinformation itself, but also the ways it emerges and is produced, as well as the reasons behind this. Educating people in using these conceptual tools will—therefore—change the way the world works.

In this paper we will argue for an altogether different point of view that renders the problem of post-truth and mis/disinformation as an *ecological* one, and hence, as a problem that needs to be conceptualized at an ontological, rather than an epistemological plane. "Ecology" here refers not so much to the challenge of global warming and the preservation of the biosphere, as it does to the environment, that is, to the many ways in which all aspects of human existence (including practices of knowledge) are embedded. Otherwise put, "ecological" refers to the broader material and societal arrangements that shape and define our humanity.[9] This paper begins, first, by extending the analysis of the epistemological-critical perspective we just outlined, emphasizing its underlying ontological assumptions, namely, the idea that knowledge practices center around a disembodied rational consciousness, and that technology can be fathomed as transparent tools under conscious control. This perspective, however, overlooks how humans are shaped by the technologies they depend on. Second, we point out that our everyday existence is currently so embedded in technological conditions that these function as an environment that is reshaping our lives fundamentally. Third, we show that the personalization and radical

privatization that typify digital forms of life is detrimental for both the spheres of politics and of education. Finally, with reference to the (neo)pragmatist idea of truth as an operational category, we propose that, instead of focusing on epistemic criteria and/or critical concepts, we need to turn our attention to truth seeking practices, which are essentially educational.

THE DISEMBODIED EMPEROR AND DIGITAL *UMGANG*

The belief that we can address the threats of mis/disinformation through finding epistemic criteria and simply educating about them stems from a particular idea of human subjectivity, that is to say, a rational, transparent and self-governing being that operates on the basis of accessible knowledge. The technological apparatus of the digital sphere is then viewed as transparent means which this subject can use freely, in many different ways and according to its will. Therefore, the only thing lacking today is the right knowledge about how these technologies work, and how to use them correctly. We find this imaginary highly problematic, and over and against this vision of a purely rational subject able to make final, objective and epistemically sound judgements (for example, about the content of particular websites), we think it is of utmost importance to acknowledge that *when we use digital means we are framed by a different form of life*. And since we do this literally constantly, we cannot regard the digital solely as means.

Phenomenologically speaking it is difficult to find any activity (mundane or extraordinary) that is currently not mediated by digital "means." When we buy train tickets, check the weather report, look for a partner, find our way out of a traffic jam, take a loan, set a meeting, share news, prepare a presentation, write a paper to pass an exam, and what not—we are using our digital devices. Moreover, when we seek for truthful information—we google it. Notwithstanding the critical views we as philosophers might rise, we are all users of Google all the time and hence dependent upon this search engine's algorithm. Because of the way it operates (tapping into the collective intelligence of billions of users), it will faultlessly offer that what we are looking for, present us with things that satisfy our hunger for information, and hence it has become—in very mundane and practical terms—our touchstone for truth. Depending on the results of a Google search we make our daily decisions, and hence, what we perceive as

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technological means functions—in fact—as an environment shaping our way of being in a particular direction.

To put this more strongly, the digital defines our relation with the world, with others and with ourselves. It structures what we can think, feel, and do (and cannot). This dealing,[10] getting around, or going about Martin Heidegger originally called *Umgang*.[11] Our point is that in responding to our post-truth condition we cannot abstract from the extent to which our *Umgang* is framed by the digital infrastructure. Giving an adequate response is thus not only a matter of what we know (and don't know), a matter of skills, or setting the right criteria. Rather the matter at hand concerns *our ways of being in everyday life*: posting, reacting with emoticons, scrolling, uploading, googling, sharing via social media accounts, using AI to make a summary, and so on. We don't find ourselves at the outside of the digital as a problem that we can simply put in front of us and at a distance. Instead, based on what we do day in day out, we are completely at the center of the problem itself.

What is particularly important to take into account is that the way in which our *Umgang* is framed by the digital today happens along the lines of an extreme form of personalization and of pervasive privatization. Customized "news" feeds create an illusion of universality while tailoring content specifically for ourselves. Tracking via cookie files enables algorithms to intricately understand our inclinations, desires, and life circumstances. These mechanisms lead to epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, fabricating a personalized reality that is perceived as a shared one. However, when using X or TikTok *there is nothing on the table that relates and separates us at the same time*, to refer here to Hannah Arendt's famous definition of the political debate.[12] There are only individual "worlds," a myriad of digital *Lebenwelten* that generate secure and isolated bubbles. The key ontological feature of the digital *Umgang* is, therefore, the disappearance of the common world. And this—we argue—is destructive for both politics and education.

Another way of putting this, is that according to the critical-epistemological perspective, democracy can be in principle e-democracy: if only we finally have the conceptual tools at our disposal to tell truth from illusion again,

we could organize a workable and reliable (and more efficient) digital-political sphere. In our view however, digital *Umgang* excludes the very possibility of democratic politics , as we will try to show in the remaining part of this paper. E-democracy is a contradiction in terms, and this will mean that we also need to think carefully about an adequate educational response beyond the critical-epistemological take on this issue.

POLITICS AND EDUCATION IN THE ABSENCE OF THE COMMON WORLD?

To make this more concrete, we take our cue from Adriana Cavarero's study on Arendt's understanding of democratic politics. More exactly, she offers an analogous view on how the digitization of human existence has a severe impact on our political form of life:

> Arendt's insistence on the spatial, physical, and corporeal dimension of political interaction cannot be stressed enough. Politics, as she defines it, is a public space of appearance in which human beings, through their interactions with others, distinguish and reveal themselves. It is a physical space of reciprocal appearance in which those present see and are seen, hear and are heard. […] Nothing could be farther removed from the individualistic ontology of modernity and, even more so, from its current metamorphosis into the digital individualism that addresses the general internet user[13]

Contrary to the way in which we often understand politics, that is to say, as a pursuit that is aimed at setting an undesirable situation right, Cavarero defines politics as essentially being an autotelic practice that might very well respond to some wrong in the world, but that can't be reduced to this. Politics *is* a form of human gathering that is good in and of itself. It depends on the fulfilling experience of being-together and leaving behind the confines of a life enclosed upon the individual self. This, however, can only materialize under conditions of meeting each other physically. In that sense, when we substitute physical interaction with meeting one another online, this puts a not insignificant

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threat to the very possibility of political gathering. Now, as we said in the first part of this article, the digitization of our existences comes with a far-going personalization and privatization. It is no surprise, then, that the erosion of politics and digitization go hand in hand, and that this evolution might end up in the total loss of real and substantial togetherness, that is, understood in terms of transcending the sphere of selfhood and finding oneself gathered in the true meaning of that word.

Interestingly, a parallel analysis can be made in relation to the sphere of education: when digital technologies become the dominant medium for learning and teaching, education is under jeopardy. According to Arendt,[14] education is about welcoming the new generation and making them attentive for a world in common, so that newcomers can go on with it in their own way. Education is not an individual trajectory of strengthening one's own position in life through learning. Instead, individual learning only becomes educational when the continuation and renewal of a world we all share and are concerned about is at stake. Rather than bringing us closer to each other and the world, and rather than disclosing something we have in common, digital technologies lock us up in our own world and stimulate us to regard learning and teaching as parts of a project aimed at intensifying the sphere of the self. Hence, screenification comes with severe ontological and ecological implications: it alters our *Umgang* in fundamental ways. On the screens of our personalized devices the world appears not as a common world and a shared concern, but as a stream of information that is there to be consumed as part of striving to enrich our personal life project. We are only confronted with ourselves, and not exposed to a world that might not only be antithetical to our own plans and desires, but that can also go beyond our current way of imagining things. In that sense, handheld devices are not an accidental outcome of the screenification of our lives. They bring this evolution to an unprecedented height. These devices offer us the experience to have the world literally in our hand.[15] As if there is nothing beyond ourselves and the screen we firmly clutch to.

As Eric Sadin argues, this is all the more true when social media platforms are concerned.[16] They promise everyone without exception the possibility

to experience for themselves what it means to lead the life of a celebrity or other influential people, a privilege formerly reserved for the happy few whose life got reported on in fancy magazines and television shows. As such users of social media have the impression that they can lead the life of a star, backed up by their networked admirers when they give a like to their conscientiously edited posts and to their carefully staged photographs and selfies on a Facebook or Instagram page. Social media offers its users the impression that their lives are highly important, and above all: unique ones. Likewise, when we drop an X-post we shy away from the potentially troublesome risks that come with entering the political arena, substituting action with the belief that the mere words we spit out in the digital sphere have real life consequences and make a difference: we mistake words for action, and we assume that other people are actually truly impressed and interested in what we have to say. We might then enjoy the fantasy that we are part of a common world and that we influence it, whereas this mere dream actually distances us from truly being a member of the public debate. In sum, we are constantly lured into promoting ourselves as a unique and exceptional personality, or we are prone to believe being a part of or even controlling the political debate, without realizing the ephemeral and utterly insignificant nature of what we do. Or, if we start actually realizing this, the only option left is to post more tantalizing pictures or to throw ever more harsh and oppositional tweets online, hoping this will finally make our lives significant.

With Freud in mind, Sadin analyses this situation further in terms of two kinds of narcissism. Obviously, social media operate in such a way that they wickedly capitalize upon what Freud calls secondary narcissism, that is, the tendency to gain admiration by others so as to invest our own ego libidinally. We care about how we appear in the eyes of others, not as Arendt wants it in terms of becoming part of a real public, but as part of a project of self-management that builds a life of gratification around the approval by others. Importantly to note, this kind of self-love is still predicated upon the existence of others we assume to be really in awe of our own person. However, as Freud argues, this form of narcissism is a further, and to a certain extent healthy and socially speaking necessary, elaboration of a more primordial form of narcissism. In

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the first phase of human existence the libidinal body does not make any difference between self and the world and others outside of the self. The baby is hungry, it gets fed by its mother, and it experiences this as a form of auto-erotic enjoyment: the gratification the baby enjoys is structured as follows: "I felt hungry, hence I have just been feeding myself and I like it (and I want more of this)." If we can speak about belief at this elementary stage of development, it is as if the newborn "believes" that there is nothing but the self and that cravings are satisfied on its own demand—instantaneously. It is only when the baby doesn't get attention and is immediately fed or taken care after whatever it desires (for example, because the mother is busy), that it experiences a huge narcistic aggravation, which is also conducive to the realization that there is a world and others outside of the self. For Freud, this is an unavoidable, albeit painful, step in becoming somebody. Secondary narcissism is, then, to be understood as a (more or less, but never fully successful) attempt to get back to primary narcissism.

Now, secondary narcissism can be a sane and worthwhile way to deal with a libidinal force that is part of our psychological infrastructure: praise that is based on real-life achievements is indeed important for leading a life that we can deem meaningful. But, at the same time, secondary narcissism always risks sinking back into the basic—infantile and savage—logic of primary narcissism. And that trap is exactly what social media taps into. These platforms operate, as Sadin argues, based on the promise of the complete realization of what the newborn according to Freud fantasizes about. Hence, secondary narcissism (which still needs the mediation of the real approval and admiration of others than myself) gives way to the atavistic and all too human tendency of primary narcissism. I no longer have leave my own personal life-world to make real friends, I no longer need to invest a lot of energy in building a public persona and take the risk to fail at this, I no longer have to expose myself to all the hassle that comes with real political activism. To my great (unconscious) satisfaction, I feel constantly affirmed as to who I, myself, am. My social media accounts are my own bubble in which I can lead an existence of full self-attestation. This psychoanalytical account of course dovetails with the critical scrutiny of social

media that have laid bare the *psychological* dynamics that explain why people get so easily addicted to social media.[17] However, what we want to take from Freud's and Sadin's argument is how the workings of social media actually have an *ontological* and *ecological* impact: they force upon us a version of reality that makes gathering with other people and within situations we may don't like, but which might transform us in most meaningful ways, utterly impossible.

FROM REFINING EPISTEMIC JUDGEMENTS TOWARDS PRACTICES OF "WORLDING"

The post-truth situation we are in—that is, that we are trapped inside our own personal bubbles and only seek for what is true within the confines of these bubbles—is thus an ontological and ecological challenge rather than an epistemological and critical one. It will not suffice to debunk confused points of view by getting the facts clearly and publicly spelled out. It is not sufficient to educate "ignorants" so that they will finally acknowledge the truth. Rather, we will have to find a way of dealing with the omnipresence of the digital and social media that will allow us to build once more a world—one world that we can have in common (even if it is the case that we disagree in the harshest ways about this world). Admittedly this is an almost herculean task. Yet, we believe this has always been at the core of the school of pragmatism and neopragmatism.

Taking up an idea developed by William James, the late Bruno Latour[18] reminds us that truth seeking is not so much an epistemological endeavor as it is a very concrete, down-to-earth and practical procedure people have to engage with—not a principle, but a mode of acting, which to a certain extent dovetails with Dewey's plea for public inquiry.[19] For Dewey, finding new insights, is not a matter of ascertaining a final truth "out there," but of carefully and stringently working, as a community of inquirers, towards knowledge that due to this common effort deserves itself to be called true. This concept of truth, then, deviates from the classical definitions of truth in terms of correspondence (the contents of the mind equal the realty of the world) or *aletheia* (a revelation that happens to us).

Of course, since the time that Descartes has formulated the problem

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of truth as an epistemological problem, we can think of a million arguments to constantly remind ourselves that we will eventually fail at getting at a true representation of the world. We have all different views and don't know how to judge which one is the best. Now, if one sets a priori the stakes too high, and actually in such a way that the world is in principle beyond our grasping, then we are in for an unsolvable debate that is educationally speaking most unfavorable. This is because the only possible outcome can be that we all end up living in our own separate worlds. However, what (neo)pragmatism calls for is to leave this debate, fruitless as it is, behind and rather consider truth as an *operational category*. This is to say that truth is a quality of the process of our investigations concerning the world. An account of the world is all the more "true" the more we have had a chance to leave space for possible objections to be formulated and to refute these. Sound inquiry is not a matter of striving after an abstract ideal of objectivity, but of operating under the banner of what we, following Latour, want to call *objectionism*:[20] accounts of the world will be all the more convincing the more viewpoints, and hence possibilities for falsification, we allow for. Without having then to claim absolute truth, we can at least claim to have found a truth we—as a community—can assert. This, however, is not to say that this is an easy, uncomplicated, and undemanding pursuit.

Rather than just assuming that we don't have a world in common (which is the case when we define truth as an unsolvable epistemological problem), what is required is what Donna Haraway calls *worlding*, that is, the laborious work of world-making: building something in common that we then can call our world.[21] Worlding, then, has to be what is at stake in our *Umgang*. It concerns not an easy world we fantasize about, steered by primary and/or secondary narcissism, but a world that is out there, a world that can be adversary, but also a world with which we have to and want to co-exist. Building this world, as an ecological endeavor, does not mean that we can build the world as we like it, as a social and cultural construct, but that we formulate a response to something that transcends our own plans and desires, and that may speak back to us.

CONCLUSION

Worlding is a most necessary and timely ecological challenge in an

age of post-truth. *Seeking the truth as a worlding endeavor is not solving a priori an epistemological problem, but an educational quest that concerns the question what kind of world we cherish to live in*. We have to teach the coming generations in the spirit of objectionism and worlding. This is a most practical and pedagogical concern. It is about joining people around a course of common concern and allowing them to study it together. It is a matter of thinking about concrete practices of study that have the force to let us *experience that we share a world and that it is worth caring for this world*. This, however, will only take place if we want to put an end to the digitization of our *Umgang*, or at least if we take seriously the challenge to relate to digital media in other ways than we have done so far.

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