Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences

NEW IDEAS

Possible effects of extensive technological use on the identity process: from continuity to multiplicity

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The starting point of our study is the awareness that currently we are in a phase of epochal change of the epistemological paradigm. As for the passage from oral to writing culture, now we can see, with the technological diffusion, a further transition to digital culture. Our aim is to make psychotherapists, researchers, and educators aware that the new phenomena emerging in relation to this technological diffusion bring on a necessary change. Such a change is needed in the way these phenomena are appraised and treated at the psychological and sociological level.

Key words: identity, Self, technology, Internet Web, psychopathology, post-rationalist psychotherapy

DIAL PHIL MENT NEURO SCI 2008; 1(1): 33-36

INTRODUCTION.

In our theoretical background (Arciero and Guidano, 2000) the human being is considered as an integral part of a community in which actions and meanings are elements of a history which in turn pre-exists to him and exists with him. We consider the human "Being-a-Lived-Body-in-the-World" as something that is not only biological (body as Körper) but also the active subject of a (more or less explicitly) co-developed and shared praxis and meaning (Husserl E, 1959). The biological-historical matrix shared by the human being gives him the access and the involvement to "living custom". At the same time, this inter-subjectivity of meanings and views makes possible the emergence of a conscious reflection about his personal and unique experience of the world. From this "lived experience" self-knowledge takes shape, and circularly connects life events appearing in a continuum to a sharable net of meanings. This allows a stable ordering of events in a coherent narrative. According to Simone (2000), human beings might be in a third phase of their history. In this phase man has began to renounce to the alphabetical vision when he became aware that the increased amount of "hearing-mediated" and "non-alphabetical-visual" information provided him with much more equally rich sources of knowledge. His supposition is that

in the last twenty years of the XX century, human beings shifted from a predominantly linear form of knowledge to a new phase (the Third Phase) in which a simultaneity of stimuli and of their elaboration prevails. The author regards as a first phase that one characterized by the creation of writing, which allowed fixing all information on a stable support. This helped to "download" a lot of individual and collective mnestic data on a support, consequently making space for other cognitive activities. The second phase started twenty centuries later and was characterized by the invention of print, that made the book (previously very expensive and irreproducible) low-price and popular, thus allowing a spread diffusion of ideas that could formerly be known only by direct verbal communication. These two phases created an important transformation on two levels (writing and reading) of the same operation. This operation renders the knowledge more stable and gives values to the written text. Accordingly, our culture and our mentality have an important debt with the alphabet (and its equivalent in other languages); after all, the history of man as a self-conscious being began with the use of this resource.

In Simone's (2000) opinion, current knowledge (characterizing the third phase) is less complex, less prone to subtle distinctions and not necessarily founded on verbal information. That is why some people think that, at the Turn of the 21th Century, knowledge has lowered its qualitative level, although it is probably only a change of nature.

Our work is not aimed to study the quality of current knowledge or its possible change. Rather its aim is to observe how these new praxis are involved in our life, that is in the way we feel, we make sense of things, we know the world and ourselves (how we conceive our identity). So, the next step is to consider the Web not only as a new technology but as a human experience of communication. Manuel Castells (2002) gives us a useful image when he defines the Web "as the new social morphology of our societies", and he describes how the Web and its logic deeply involves our way of production, our experiences, the form of power and culture. Thus the web-like way of functioning is a mark (not only social but even cultural) of our societies and of our modality to live together. The Internet Web is a means of communication with its own specific characteristics and codes used not only in a particular field of cultural expression. On the contrary, it is transversal to every cultural area and it is a proper means of communication and not only a simple means of entertainment, thus different from other audiovisual media, like television. Web is characterized by an open structure, it develops and evolves with users that become themselves consumers and producers of this technology, thus circularly modeling with their feedback the Web itself. In turn, the Web influences and shapes human communication, that is why the Web is continuously growing. It should be stressed that all technology is a human product even in its more extreme developments, influencing, at the same time, human beings (that is, by soliciting their transformation). It is this transformation the point of departure of our speculation. Writing language allowed a more abstract experience re-configuration compared to what happens in life praxis. We can see an example of this progressive abstraction between life praxis and its language re-configuration in an oral culture, pre-written, which is entirely based on the action level (Havelock, 1963; Ong, 1982). Accordingly, the emergence of the written language and its development progressively moved away action from feeling, interposing between them a world of shared sense: language, "the world of symbolic sense", abstractness, "the semantic universe". The "sequential intelligence" (reading-writing phenomena) organizes one's own way to feel himself, thus creating the real chance to tell and tell-himself one's own history, leading to a definite sense of himself. The opportunity to *tell*, the opportunity to *leave* my written words upon sheet, produces a first step of abstraction: me and my "told". This abstraction creates a difference between an inside and an outside, that is between an external reality and what is felt as an

individual, personal world. The latter involves a sense of himself that has to be managed, and it is in this context that the written language gives us the opportunity of *thinking about it*; in other words, it is the opportunity of having an "inner world" and a thought about ourselves and about the world. The distance that the language introduces between thought and action creates a new world of sense where we can construct progressively more abstract (and technological) knowledge; on this base praxis becomes more and more complex as far as it requires at one side technological competencies (preliminary and essential for a practical use), and on the other side new abilities and skills to deal with oneself. The Internet diffusion, in the sense stressed herein as a new way of communication, shows the complexity of what happens and it also shows a reality in continuous evolution, manifold and polyphonic, and so our question is: what kind of identity, what uniqueness and what kind of continuity is it possible in this contest?

The viewpoint from which we consider this matter is that one that conceives identity as a process of meaning construction that is never between me and myself but that rather involves an emotional contact with someone else. Accordingly, the identity process is not to be considered as a solipsistic activity; it is rather something always between "my own way" to organize experience and the way this is done in the inter-subjective world. As such, the concept of identity refers to that process which allows: a) a clear distinction between what is part of "me" and what is "outside me" (a boundary whose constitution is the effect of a process involving the feeling of being part of countless memberships); b) a language-mediated symbolic re-organization of emotional experience; c) the elaboration of those thematic emotion on which it is anchored, thus integrating contradictory emotions in a sense of unity and uniqueness. This point of view challenges current conceptions of identity by introducing new ideas like for example Turkle's (2005) "body outspreading of the virtual reality" and "fluctuating oneself". Now the question is: how could we aim to a spatial, temporal and social integration, and consequently to the construction of a coherent identity, while considering at the same time our fragmentation and our dispersion in the Web? The usual dichotomies of the modern thought, viz. mind/body, public/private, animal/human, body/machine, man/woman, nature/nurture, natural/artificial are now considered in crisis; as a result, what kind of consequences could we observe in this situation, considered by a lot of people a kind of leakage from the reassuring and univocal identity boundaries? More specifically, does the digital revolution and the related complexity of our contemporary world solicit a radical change in the way identity is constructed and its continuity is maintained? Furthermore, the constantly increasing technological development discloses new horizons and paves the way to new unimaginable possible experiences. Is this also introducing to new possible expressions of distress and psychopathology? In our opinion our knowledge of the emotional effects of this rapid technological development on single individuals as well as on the population does not grow up in a comparable speedy rhythm. In this field too many studies are still based on a rationalist methodology, which is for its nature unable to comprehend (both longitudinally and transversally) the digital revolution. It must be said that the tight relationship between what is human and what is technological cannot be understood neither through classic-humanistic readings nor by means of mechanistic explanations.

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