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From virtual to embodied extremism: an existential phenomenological account of extremist echo chambers through Ortega y Gasset and Merleau-Ponty

The current paper explores the existential motivation for the formation of extremist echo chambers through a phenomenological analysis. We advance two claims. Firstly, following Ortega y Gasset, that virtuality is a constant framework for experience. And secondly, following Merleau-Ponty, that there is persistent embodiment in online spaces. On this account virtuality is a permanent feature of embodiment, existing prior to technological intervention while at the same time being modifiable by technological artefacts. Understanding virtuality in this way allows us to analyse the existential phenomenological characteristics of extremist echo chambers online. We argue that due to the persistence of embodiment throughout, and the restructuring of the virtual axes of experience, such online spaces can and do influence political praxis in offline spaces.

Introduction

The rise of extremism online is a salient problem in contemporary society since digital technologies increasingly typify the lifeworld. We draw upon the work of two existential phenomenologists, José Ortega y Gasset and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to trace the genesis of extremist echo chambers in these spaces. We argue that the formation and function of echo chambers should be understood in terms of the persistent virtual character of experience and the persistence of embodiment in the individual's encounter with the technological virtual.

Ortega describes how the world of direct perceptibility is overlaid with the ideational, and in turn that the features of objects in the world are superimposed with potentialities for praxis (or 'pragmatic fields'). For Ortega, the totality of the sensible includes the virtual, which is suggestive of those dynamic fields of relations of serviceability that extend beyond the surface level of the object. This paper then supplements Ortega's account of the virtual with Daniel O'Shiel's insight that virtuality consists of four axes (or 'real virtualities') that are perpetually present in our experience and which are modified in online engagement. We turn then to Merleau-Ponty's description of the centrality of embodiment to the individual's experience of a world and argue that – beyond postulates of disembodiment in relation to the virtual – that the body-subject remains a persistent feature of the individual's encounter with digital technology, which in turn structures the virtual.

These guiding concepts, that the virtual is inherently embodied and that virtuality is a permanent feature of embodiment (which can be modified by technology), provide a novel avenue for an existential phenomenological analysis that explores the existential motivations operative in the creation of extremist formations online. Moreover, such an analysis allows us to trace how participation in echo chambers online alters the experience of the world in terms of the phenomenological structures of experience and in terms of existential

motivations for the individual, providing insight into the destructive effects that arise when extremism is enacted outside online spaces.[1]

Ortega y Gasset and the persistent virtual

We first explore the ways in which 'reality', or our embodied existence when not mediated by digital technological devices, intertwines with the 'virtual', or our embodied existence in online spaces. And to do so we turn to the work of the existential phenomenologist José Ortega y Gasset. Ortega himself lived in a period in which democracy was threatened by political extremism, and much of his work can be viewed as the attempt to grasp the nature of extremist thought through an existential phenomenological framework. In the following section we reconstruct his views on the genesis of extremism and its existential appeal, and then use them to develop an existential and phenomenological analysis of the social phenomenon of echo chambers.

Ortega locates the origins of the contemporary urge to extremism, of which far-right political extremism in the virtual is an instance, in the increasing complexity of modern existence. Ortega views the modern age as having brought about several fundamental alterations in the social milieu. The first is the popular belief in the sovereignty of the individual. For Ortega this belief is a consequence of the ascent of liberal democracy and the general acceptance of the levelling ideals and fundamental human rights that it upheld. However, in recent times, what was formerly a juridical ideal or fiction has changed "from aspirations and ideals into appetites and unconscious assumptions" and the sovereignty of the individual has become "a psychological state inherent" in the average individual (Ortega 1961: 18). The second fundamental alteration that Ortega identifies is the radical expansion of technological knowledge. For Ortega the rise of liberal democracy went hand in hand with the Industrial Revolution and the concurrent advances in scientific knowledge, and the offspring of both, the proliferation of technological devices throughout society. The ubiquity of technological products means that the

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1   This paper follows conventional usage in understanding the term echo chamber to refer to "a self-affirming, self-filtering process by which internet users are exposed to content that reinforces their social and political views" (Noar 2021: 293). Echo chambers are often contrasted with filter bubbles, an online process whereby "the content we are exposed to online is personalized, through extrapolations and algorithms, in accordance with our navigation history" (Diana 2016: 5). This choice of terms unfortunately obscures as much as it enlightens. The idea of algorithmic filtering tends to suggest a passive process, with online individuals being herded into the bubbles, when in some cases the algorithmic filtering is actively selected by those subject to it. And the term echo chamber suggests a hermetically sealed enclosure rather than a porous protective bubble which actively filters content.

average individual today has a vastly increased amount of knowledge regarding the utilisation of technology compared to previous generations.[2]

The consequence of the combination of liberal democracy and technical knowledge has been what Ortega terms a raising of the historic level. The inhabitants of modern technologically-mediated society find themselves surrounded by a historically unprecedented abundance of experiences, information and opportunities. The individual's sense of reality, Ortega writes, has become "world-wide in character" through the intervention of technology, first radio and television, and now social media (1961: 29). And with the rapid influx of news from all corners of the world came a radical alteration in the individual's phenomenological experience of existence. "This nearness of the far off, this presence of the absent, has extended in fabulous proportions the horizon of each individual existence." (Ortega 1961: 29) The individual feels themselves in a world vastly bigger than themselves and far more populated with objects and others, with perils and possibilities. The increase in the sense of individual potentiality comes paired with a sense of personal diminution in the face of the sheer enormity of the possibilities available.

This, Ortega says, produces for many a sense of existential disorientation. Faced with the sheer excess and complexity of modern technological existence, many find themselves bewildered and adrift. Historically, culture would have played a central role in orienting such individuals. However, two of the guiding principles of Western culture in the modern era, namely liberal democracy and science, no longer have the cohesive power that they once possessed. The very success of their programme has transformed them from ideals to be striven for into quotidian features of modern existence, as natural and inevitable as the blueness of the sky and the availability of free wifi. And so one finds oneself forced to navigate an ever expanding and increasingly intricate global form of existence without a cultural framework capable of integrating its parts into an intelligible whole, and incapable of providing guidance with regards to mores and conduct within this now global society. It is precisely such conditions, Ortega argues, that breed extremism.

The modern individual is faced with the compulsion to choose an existential project for themselves in a technological world that overflows with a superabundance of possibilities. Those who are incapable of doing so, for whatever reason, come to view their own existence as a negative and without

2   It must be stressed that for Ortega this represents an increase in technological knowledge in the sense of technique, the skills needed to employ technological devices, as opposed to the knowledge of the scientific principles behind the operation of those devices, or the engineering knowledge required to produce and maintain them.

value (Ortega 1958: 141). A common response to this intolerable state of affairs is a flight from complexity as the afflicted individual seeks salvation in simplicity. Rather than deal with the fluidity of modern existence in which one "can think too many thoughts, want too many things, follow too many different types of life", they instead seek for a corner of stability amid the flux which can serve as a sort of existential anchor (Ortega 1958: 142). And in so doing they tend to use that fixed point as a phenomenological filter in order to screen out the sensational abundance of technological society and to control the aspects of social reality that are allowed to appear within it. This is the existential motivation behind the formation of echo chambers on Ortega's account. A key difference between the echo chambers that he analysed in the 1930s and 40s and the echo chambers of today is that the point of safety sought is often found in the same place as the cause of the existential disorientation that drove the search for safety in the first place. In other words, the solution to the existential negation caused by the technological complexity of the world is now sought within the technology itself.

Ortega does not view this flight from complexity as necessarily harmful in and of itself, but he does view it with concern. And his reasons for doing so stem from his idea of the existential dialectic, a perpetual movement between within and without, which plays a central role in his philosophical analysis.

Alteración/Ensimismamiento

For Ortega, the one capacity that truly separates humanity from all other living beings is the capacity for what he terms meditation. He says that,

> man can, from time to time, suspend his direct concern with things, detach himself from his surroundings, ignore them, and subjecting his faculty of attention to a radical shift… turn, so to speak, his back on the world and take his stand within himself (Ortega 1963: 17-18).

Now Ortega does not mean that one literally leaves the world but rather that the centre of one's perceptual focus shifts from the world around to the world within. This capacity may seem rather mundane but for Ortega it is central to our capacity to be human. Other animals, Ortega argues, lack this capacity and spend their days with their perceptual focus perpetually trained on the external world. Their consciousness is continuously governed by the outside environment and preoccupied with reacting to its alterations. This mode of existence Ortega terms *alteración*. It is a state of being outside oneself. Ortega argues that this is a mode of existence that humans share with the other animals, particularly in moments of stress and danger when we too of necessity become unreflective and reactive. It is a state in which we feel ourselves to be lost among the things of the world.

The counterpart to the state of *alteración* is what Ortega terms *ensimismamiento*, being-within-oneself. By effort of concentration the individual is able to redirect their focus from the things without to the ideas within that have been evoked by their experiences of those things. This withdrawal from the world is for Ortega eminently practical in nature. The step within is to "form a plan of attack against his circumstances", to devise a strategy for addressing whatever it is that obstructs them by imposing their will and design upon the external world (Ortega 1963: 20). One withdraws from the world in order to return to it with a plan of action. And this movement from the outer to the inner, and then returning to the outer with practical effect, is for Ortega a recurrent feature of all human existence. Action is governed by previous meditation and meditation is nothing other than "a projecting of future action" (Ortega 1963: 23).

Ortega's within/without dialectic corresponds directly to his existential understanding of the human condition. Human beings are thrown into the world without an essence and are obliged to choose one for themselves from among the available existential possibilities. Or as Ortega puts it, "life is fired at us point blank" (Ortega 1963: 42). We find ourselves in a set of circumstances that we did not choose and are forced to define ourselves by formulating a plan of action for navigating those circumstances. It is through action that we are. And it is for these reasons that Ortega views the flight from complexity and the formation of echo chambers as potentially problematic.

When viewed through Ortega's existential categories, the effect of the increasing technological complexity of the world has been to induce a state of *alteración* in many. They feel "shipwrecked among things" and seek existential security through attaching themselves to whatever resembles a fixed point in their current existence (Ortega 1963: 23). These fixed points can be of any sort; family, religion, science. But their function is the same, namely to provide a feeling of safety and stability. By making this thing the centre of their existence they foreground it in their lives and in so doing are able to push all the other contents of the world into the distance of the background. The security gained here comes through a radical simplification of existence. The unsettling excess of technological existence is not integrated but rather screened off. The world that appears to those within this filter may appear more secure and comprehensible but it is a self-consciously fictionalised mode of existence.

The virtual

Individuals are capable of this act of reality-filtering due to the phenomenological structures that form our experience of the world. A large part of the fabric of our everyday lives is, on Ortega's account, made up of what he terms the *virtual*. It is

a central claim of phenomenology that much of what we take to be the concrete, material world around us is in fact made up of a blend of presences and absences, with the absences far outweighing the presences (Sokolowski 2000: 4). Indeed, Sokolowski argues that phenomenology sees "presentations and absences [as] exquisitely interwoven" (2000: 14). This entails that our direct perception of the world and its contents is always limited. As embodied selves, our view of the world is necessarily perspectival and limited in scope. Consequently, we can only perceive certain aspects of an object at any one time. If, for instance, I observe a cube then my perception of it is 'flat', limited to the sides visible to me. To perceive the sides of the cube hidden from me would require a change in my embodied perspective, either by moving around the cube myself or by turning the cube to reveal the obscured sides. And in the process of so doing I would simultaneously conceal the previously visible sides of the cube. And yet when I direct my attention to the cube I do not experience it as a series of two-dimensional faces, but rather as a coherent, three-dimensional whole. Our embodied subjectivity adds depth and volume to the surface-level perception of the object by creating what Ortega calls a "ghost of itself" (Ortega 1975: 138).

For Ortega it is by withdrawing from our immediate lived experience of an object, like the cube, that it can become an object of our cognition in the form of an image or concept. And it is at this meditative level that we can reflect upon the relational web within which the cube is located, the properties of the cube, etc. Indeed, the movement from our direct lived experience of an object, to any consideration of the object in terms of its properties, or its relations to our own objectives, is for Ortega a *virtual* movement from direct experience of the things in the world to meditation upon ideas of the things in the world. And, for Ortega, all meditation is future-facing and oriented towards praxis, even in its retrospective forms. Thus, the movement from our direct experience of a thing to the virtual "shadow or outline of itself" is always only one part of a continuous movement from immediate to virtual and back to immediate again (Ortega 1975: 136). The immediate object of our perception is overlaid with the ideational object which, in addition to incorporating all the features of the object that are latent (potentially present but not presently perceivable), also layers the object with potentialities for praxis. The car in my driveway appears to me then not just as a three-dimensional object of a certain colour, but also an instrument that could be used to drive me down the road to the shops or to the beach. The virtual 'shadows' that accompany my perception of objects in the world constitute what Ortega calls "pragmatic fields", dynamic fields of relations of serviceability that to a large extent determine my understanding of an object (Ortega 1963: 80). It is the totality of what we sense in the presence of the object, beyond the surface details directly apparent to us, that Ortega means by the virtual.

While Ortega's understanding of the virtual is certainly suggestive, it remains relatively underdeveloped in his work. However recent research by Daniel O'Shiel (2022) marks a significant development of the subject. We suggest that O'Shiel's phenomenological investigation of virtual technology, though it draws upon other phenomenological sources, operates with an understanding of the virtual very similar to that of Ortega. [3] Namely, as a cloud of potentialities that inheres in all our perceptual objects. O'Shiel argues that imagination and perception are in constant interplay in our perception of objects, and that both are permeated with virtuality. O'Shiel identifies four categories of the virtual, Self, World, Others, and Values, which he terms 'real virtualities'. O'Shiel argues that these virtualities are 'real' in the sense that they are perpetually operative in all our experiences.

O'Shiel's phenomenological framework suggests that objects are perfused by a cloud of virtual potentialities. Therefore, an object does not appear to us merely as an object but rather always as saturated with potentialities. Our experience of the object is always from our particular point of view, involving the four categories of the cloud (Self, World, Others, and Values) explicated by O'Shiel. O'Shiel argues that "the everyday perceptual real virtualities with their inherent 'almost', just-around-the-corner quality to all that we perceive, [and] the intrinsic and always horizonal elements of self, world, others and values that we never directly perceive even though we always assume and experience them through so many other related perceptual phenomena" (O'Shiel 2022: 119-120). In other words, humans are directly implicated in the perceptual experience of the object, inherently constituting and constructing it through the perceptual act.

Virtual technologies, per O'Shiel, utilise the fundamental everyday capacities of our perception since humans are already, even before using technology, constituents of the virtual through perception itself. Technology, then, is an unveiling and a revealing of our perceptual capacities as always engaged with the virtual. The virtual is a mode of perceptual experience, argues O'Shiel, that is persistently entangled with our everyday existence. Thus, while we take advantage of novel technologies when using virtual technologies, those perceptual capacities that allow us to experience the virtual exist even before the use of those technologies and are already inherently virtual. When I then make use of an Oculus Rift headset, for example, I would still not transcend my own perceptual experience – rather, pre-existing transcendent features of human perception are implicated by the artefact to generate the technological virtual.

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3   More specifically, O'Shiel draws upon work by Husserl and Fink on image consciousness, on the conceptualisation of 'forked being' found in Heidegger, the cloud of potentialities described by Bergson, and the 'fundamental intertwinement' of Merleau-Ponty, in the course of developing their account of the four 'real' virtualities.

Hereby O'Shiel intuits not an ontological difference through the use of virtual (and other) technologies, but rather an experiential or qualitative difference. In essence, technology is representative of a discretely analysable node of altered perception.

Echo chambers online

From an Ortegan perspective, extremism develops in response to a historically-contingent existential need and represents an alteration in the ways in which individuals encounter the world. More specifically, this alteration is an alteration to the virtual. Extremism then can be understood phenomenologically through the analysis of the alterations to the virtual using the four axes of virtuality that O'Shiel provides, namely, those of Self, World, Others and Values. This is not to suggest that the forms of extremism that Ortega analysed in the early 20th century are identical to the forms of extremism that we find in online spaces nowadays, but rather that they arise in response to a similar existential need and involve the same phenomenological structures. Today's online echo chambers and Ortega's offline echo chambers both engage with the virtual structures of experience, the key difference between the two being the ways in which technology mediates the experience.

As we have seen, on Ortega's account, for some individuals the increasing complexity of the world revealed by the technological mediation of our existence exceeds the capacity of their cultural narrative to integrate. This lack of integration produces a sense of existential shock that reverberates along the axes of the virtual. The afflicted individual feels a loss of identity, the world seems to lose cohesion, they feel a sense of moral disorientation, and lack of direction in their dealing with others and their own conduct. And as their perceptual faith in the idea of the world that they carried with them is shaken, they seek existential stability in the simple and the secure. And they orient themselves around this fixed point (whatever it may be) by altering the virtual such that, rather than integrating the things of the world, it actively screens them out. The significance of this for online echo chambers is that with so-called virtual technologies, the 'virtual' aspect is something that we always as humans already had. It is not something that the technology creates. The qualitative novelty of 'virtual' technologies is the ways in which they interact with the virtual selves that we bring to the technology. In the case of Ortega's existential extremist, it is this restricted virtual world and yearning for ontological security that is brought with them into the online spaces.

As mentioned earlier Ortega is not unsympathetic to those afflicted by this existential disorientation. Nor does he view echo chambers *per se* as necessarily dangerous. Ortega puts forward a typology of echo chambers that ranges from the

possibly beneficial to the downright harmful. At the positive end of the spectrum we have the benign type of echo chamber, one that serves as a place of security and repose whilst the inhabitants fashion for themselves a new worldview, a new idea of society. The echo chamber is a temporary place of refuge preparatory to a vigorous return to the world with a new "harmonizing formula" capable of accommodating and ordering its many dimensions (Ortega 1958: 144). This movement, from withdrawal to return with a new plan of action for existence, is for Ortega a positive one in the sense that it corresponds to the existential dialectic between *alteración* and *ensimismamiento*. And as such it represents an authentic response to an existential problem. Then we have the more problematic forms of echo chamber which we describe here as malign and toxic respectively.

A malign echo chamber is instanced by the communities that form around what, for want of a better term, might be considered to be tangential affairs. That is to say, things that were in any case peripheral to the matters held to be existentially significant by the previous cultural order. In a situation in which culture no longer performs its work of integration, the despairing individual comes to place a negative value on everything most representative of that former integration in their previous life. That which was peripheral to the previous integrative schema due to its distance now possesses a positive, or at least non-negative value. We see examples of such communities in online groups dedicated to 80s toys or other instances of past pop culture. The adult obsession with what previously would have been considered inappropriately childish is both a rejection of the old norms of acceptable adult behaviour, and a refuge from the intricacies of the contemporary world in the retrospective gaze. The past, for Ortega, is often a place of refuge for those living through times of disorientation since the past, being past, is fixed and secure. And, in the case of a retrospective gaze that fixates upon aspects of one's own childhood, it recalls a time of comparative freedom when navigating the complexities of life was somebody else's responsibility, a dream "of the life which existed before these complications arose" (Ortega 1958: 143). Such filters may appear harmless but for Ortega they are problematic precisely because of their retrospective nature. They represent a withdrawal from life that serves no purpose because it is not oriented towards future praxis, but is rather an escape from freedom and existential responsibility through the avoidance of life. They may not do any harm to anyone else, but they do harm the occupants of the bubble.

The toxic form of malign echo chamber, on the other hand, is a virtual space in which the occupants do not turn away from the world, as was the case with previous type of echo chamber, but rather remain oriented towards the world. And yet this orientation to the world does not mean that the movement of withdrawal precedes a return to the world with a new or revised integrative

schema. Rather the purpose of this more toxic form of malign echo chamber is to create a restricted virtual space in which the world is rendered manageable by virtue of the exclusion of complexity. These bubbles alter the axes of virtuality such that the world presents itself in a way that corresponds to the image of the world that the individual has fashioned around, and in support of, the tangential matter in which they have sought refuge.

Now, from the previous example of malign echo chambers, it might be thought that such peripheral affairs are usually trivial. But this is not necessarily the case. While the tangential affairs latched onto by the existentially disoriented all share the virtue of simplicity when compared to the complexity of contemporary existence this does not mean that they are necessarily inconsequential. For example, sexual urges or ethnicity are aspects of most human lives. And while they are not unimportant aspects, few people would make them the central concern of their existence, let alone the basis for a social order and value system. Such concerns have been removed from their proper place, Ortega argues, and to make them the foundation of one's existence is to refuse to engage with reality as it really is. Furthermore, when one's sense of existential security is now entirely dependent on this inadequate foundation, then anything that threatens to destabilise it or call it into question is perceived as an existential threat and is reacted to as such. Ortega describes the inhabitant of such a toxic bubble as one who

> by means of a personal and intimate fiction which his desperation inspires in him… reduces life to an extreme in which he installs himself and gives himself over to extremism. And from that extreme he will fight all the rest of the enormous sector of human affairs, will deny science, morality, status, truth, and so on (Ortega 1958: 146).

The withdrawal from life in this case foreshadows a return to the world with a programme of violent praxis, the violence stemming initially from the compulsion to force the complexity of the world into the narrow confines of their partial worldview.

The phenomenology of toxic echo chambers

Having examined the existential motivations behind the formation of echo chambers, and the existential function that they serve, we can also use Ortega's work to explore phenomenologically the ways in which the echo chamber alters the virtual structures (Self, World, Others, and Values) of its inhabitants, and thereby alters their experience of the world. The first type of alterations take place at the level of the Self. The individual who feels themselves lost amidst

the things of the world is drawn to the extremist position because it offers to restore their sense of self, a sense of individual purpose and significance and a means to differentiate oneself from others. A toxic echo chamber addresses this need by screening circumstances such that the sovereignty of the individual is both unchallenged and perpetually reinforced at the epistemic level. Within the bubble the paramountcy of whichever peripheral matter one has elected to make central to one's existence, whether it be politics or gender identity, will never be questioned. The individual member, held secure by their belief in an extremist political position for instance, will not question their beliefs or argue for them in any substantive manner, for this would raise the possibility of calling those beliefs into question. And this in turn would problematise, even at the hypothetical level, the existential security provided by those beliefs. Also, at the inter-subjective level, a large function of the group within the echo chamber is to reinforce the shared viewpoint of its members. As membership of the group stems from a commitment to the peripheral matter that induces a feeling of security, any discussion of the extremist position itself is unlikely except in the most affirmatory manner. Thus the individual hears their own position repeated to them by others, and which they in turn repeat themselves. The sense of security is increased, and so is the individual's doxastic commitment to their extremist beliefs.

Ortega raises an interesting point about the epistemic function of the groups within echo chambers. The existentially disoriented individual does not wish to be just another thing among the teeming things of the world, and seeks a new structure that gives them a sense of identity. In other words, something that differentiates them from others. And yet, to truly differentiate oneself would require the individual to develop a new structure, to apply it to the world, and to justify it to others. And this would require them to engage critically with their new creed, and to be prepared to engage with the views of others. This however would require a level of meditation and praxis, and thus rational engagement and existential risk, that many have entered the echo chamber precisely to avoid. As Ortega puts it

> he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover over it with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his 'ideas' are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defence of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality" (Ortega 1961: 120).

Authentic differentiation from others, such as might be called for by a genuine commitment to put one's programme into effect, is problematic for such an individual. And so the echo chamber offers a pseudo-differentiation, the feeling of distinctiveness from the mass coupled with the reassurance that 'everybody'

around thinks the same way as you do. 'Everybody' in the bubble shares the same beliefs with the same level of commitment and it is understood that these beliefs must be asserted as self-evident rather than argued for. 'Everybody' is correct, 'everybody' is important, and 'everybody' is superior to 'anybody' outside the group. And within the group "anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated" (Ortega 1961: 14).

The alterations to the virtual axes also have implications for the way in which we view the world. An appropriate worldview, Ortega states, is one that can integrate and order all the complexity of the world. It must also preserve the function of society, which for him represents a series of habits and practices that have been developed in order to manage the friction that inevitably arises between any large group of people living in a community. When, however, one views the world through the prism of a toxic echo chamber then one views it in a way that represents the antithesis of Ortega's appropriate worldview. A echo chamber of this sort does not integrate the complexity of the world, but simplifies it by excluding content. And to view the governing opinions of your bubble as self-evidently correct is to treat them as maxims for life while preserving them in a virtual space in which they never collide with the reality of social existence. What makes this sort of echo chamber toxic is that it promotes what is essentially a disassociative outlook that presents itself as a model for association and integration.

Particularly significant in this sort of echo chamber is the alteration made to the real virtuality of the Other. Ortega suggests that when we encounter another for the first time we surround them in a virtual cloud of potentialities. He says that the "pure Other is... provisionally and equally my possible friend or my potential enemy" (Ortega 1963: 150). We have no way of directly experiencing that person's intentions or character and thus attribute to them a spectrum of possible behaviours and personalities ranging from saint to axe-murderer. Over the passage of time, however, through interaction with the Other I form an assessment of their character. Through observing their conduct and the way that the "expressive field" of their body signals its interior life, the virtual cloud around them is reduced to a group of core potentialities (Ortega 1963: 93). Namely, the types of behaviour that I consider to be either possible or impossible for this particular person. It is central to Ortega's account that my growing sense of the Other's personality, i.e. their likelihood to act or react in certain ways in certain situations, is the result of the ongoing friction between the initial cloud of virtual of possibilities that I positioned around them and the actuality of their conduct. This friction must occur if the Other is to become a You, as opposed to a thing or an idea.

However, within the toxic echo chamber this process does not, indeed could not, occur. The Other, whether they be nubile heterosexual women or members of an ethnic minority, are indeed perpetually present in the echo chamber but in a virtual mode that ensures that they are never actually present. A virtual construct of the Other is placed within the bubble in such a way that it can stimulate discourse and serve as a pole around which it can gravitate. But this virtual Other could never become a You to the inhabitants of the bubble because the virtual cloud that constitutes the Other within the bubble never comes into contact with the actuality of the Other's existence outside the bubble. This in turn connects to the earlier discussion of the epistemic sovereignty of the Self within the bubble. For the perpetual presence of the virtual Other means that the denizens of the bubble feel themselves to be infinitely familiar with the Other, their motivations and intentions, such that they can predict with unerring accuracy their probable behaviour. And yet they have never been further removed from the possibility of such knowledge. This combination of self-certainty with a fictional understanding of the Other is itself problematic, but when coupled with a view of the world that is partial and exclusionary it becomes potentially dangerous. And this danger is increased by the way in which the Other is allowed presence in the bubble.

The Other is constructed in such a way as to perpetually provoke a state of *alteración* in the denizens of the echo chamber. The virtual construct is designed to trigger an emotional response of rage or fear, and to put them in an agitated state which prohibits the very possibility of *ensimismamiento*, of meditation. A echo chamber is formed to offer respite from the feeling of *alteración*, of being lost outside oneself among things. In the toxic echo chamber the withdrawal from the actual to the virtual offers not security from *alteración*, but rather security in *alteración*. In return for the illusion of sovereignty and security, the individual embraces a state of perpetual rage and insecurity, and places themselves in a position in which they are easy prey for the agitators, "the demagogues and Impresarios of *alteración*" (Ortega 1963: 33).[4] These are the actors, "figures of the pure man of action" who

> harass men so that they cannot reflect, see to it that they are kept herded together in crowds so that they cannot reconstruct their individuality in the one place where it can be reconstructed which is in solitude. They cry down service to truth, and in its stead offer us: *myths*. And by all these means they succeed in throwing men into a passion, in putting them, between ardors and terrors, *beside*, that is, *outside of, themselves*" (Ortega 1963: 33).

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4   Although there is not space to explore this here, Ortega draws a clear link between membership of an extremist echo chamber and the affinity for populist forms of politics.

In other words, they fuel states of *alteración* in the virtual in order that they may direct those in the bubble back into the world to engage in direct action in order to refashion the world such that it resembles the diminished world constructed within the bubble. For the members of the echo chamber it is a situation rather akin to the Two Minutes Hate in George Orwell's novel *1984*, a daily occurrence in which the inhabitants of Oceania are guided to vent their existential anxiety in a performance of structured hate against the current enemies of the regime. Of course, thanks to the mediation of social media, the Two Minutes Hate is now available to members of the echo chamber 24 hours a day.

Extremism, for Ortega, operates as a response to a specific, socially-contingent existential need, using certain phenomenological categories, that results in a certain form of political praxis, such as one finds in virtual echo chambers.

Fleshing out the virtual with Merleau-Ponty

Virtuality then is a perpetual feature of embodied existence. And contrary to science fiction-influenced views of virtual technology, when one enters virtual spaces online one does not 'bracket' or 'suspend' embodiment. There is an ontological primacy of embodiment in engagement with digital technologies (as developed from Merleau-Ponty's position), and as result we find alterations in virtuality in online spaces persist in offline spaces, leading in turn to alterations in political praxis.[5]

We argue that the key to understanding the offline persistence of extremist alteration through virtuality is embodiment. In the 1980s and 1990s there was extensive cultural enquiry into the relation between the body and early digital technology, theorising everything from cyborgs (the building of robots in the shape of humans) to hive-minds (describing the interconnection of human minds through technology) (Jones 2006: 1). These speculations emphasised one's going beyond one's body by means of digital technologies as "an imagined bodiless existence once celebrated as 'virtual reality'" – a form of disembodied engagement with the virtual (Jones 2006: 2).

In this regard, Mary Midgley argues that prominent thinkers in posthumanism and transhumanism – such as JBS Haldane and Marvin Minsky – are trying to "[get] away from the body" in their ontology, not just their philosophising on technology (Midgley 1992: 162). Concurrently, some forms of posthumanism only hesitantly engage with the body. On a broader scale, disembodied ways

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5   The ways in which Merleau-Ponty's thought explicates key features of embodiment in relation to virtuality is explored in greater detail in the following works. See Du Toit (2020a), Du Toit (2020b) and Du Toit and Swer (2021).

of thinking are characteristic of distinctly Modern trends, such as atomised individualism, body commodification, consumer culture and mechanical values that emphasise mechanistic problem-solving (Giesen 2004; Holmes 2014; Roden 2014). Disembodiment still permeates much formal and informal discussion on virtual space, often becoming an underlying assumption in conceptualising the virtual. Clearly, extant views of the virtual need to be refined and redefined to overcome the dualism inherent in these views.

We argue that the corporeality of the body must be acknowledged as a means not only to overcome rationalistic and disembodied ways of thinking of the body's relation to the virtual, but also to anchor discussions of the virtual in materiality in a non-dualistic structure.[6] Indeed, a return to the body opens up a new avenue for an alternative conceptualisation of the individual in relation to the virtual that is true to one's lived experience. In fact, we are continuously confronted by the question of the body in describing our experience of the virtual, since we are plunged into the virtual from the basis of our perceptual experience which is at its core based in the body-subject. In actuality, without the/a body, no experience would be possible in a broad sense, including the experience of virtual space. The phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty is important in this regard, since his thought is centred on an account of the body as avenue for perception (Smith 2005). He argues that the body entails, firstly, material aspects of the brain, sensory organs, and the extension of the physiological body into the world by means of technological artefacts (his description of the blind man's cane remains key in this account). Secondly, the physiological body is at the same time a lived body (an embodiment) that is not merely one more object in the world – it is the implicit mediator and conduit of one's consciousness of the world.[7]

We go beyond this point – not only is perception embodied (per Merleau-Ponty), but perception is inherently virtual (per our description of Ortega) and the virtual is a central part of the embodiment just described. This argument, as we have suggested above, is already implicit in Ortega and it may be made explicit through the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. In using Merleau-Ponty's work we may ground Ortega's insights into the perpetuity of the virtual by anchoring Ortega's account in a phenomenological understanding of embodiment. Thus the virtual surrounds us, not merely because we live in highly technologised societies and carry with us portable artefacts, but also because

6   In this sense the body is a useful grounding concept for posthumanist thought that posthuman thinkers like Rosi Braidotti emphasise in their call for an embodied and embedded understanding of the individual.

7   Though the technological virtual is not explicated in Merleau-Ponty's work, we feel that his phenomenology provides many of the conceptual tools necessary for its analysis.

the "the real is a tightly woven fabric [which] does not wait for our judgments in order to incorporate the most surprising of phenomena, nor to reject the most convincing of our imaginings" (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2002, p. 11). This conceptualisation of the real as integrative of various forms of perception echoes Ortega's description of perception as persistently virtual, and further concretises his description by making explicit what was implicit in his own account. Through grounding Ortega's account, we find close correlates between Merleau-Ponty and Ortega. According to Merleau-Ponty, and echoing Ortega's own thought, the virtual forms a crucial part of our experience of the world on dual levels – a primary or primordial level, and a secondary technological level that is predicated on the artefactual.

First there is the primary or primordial level. Mainstream accounts of psychology dualistically delineate varying states of consciousness, such as waking and sleeping, that concurrently see an alteration of one's perception. Morley (1999) describes how, in such accounts, "the dualistic habit of thinking is extended to a separation of the imaginary and the real, or between the sleeping, imagining mind and the waking, rational mind" (Morley 1999: 90-91). Furthermore, "a hierarchical relation is implicit in that separation, where the imaginary is construed as secondary to or derivative of the real" (Morley 1999: 90-91). Merleau-Ponty, Morely points out, challenges this dualistic view and in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty (1968) writes that "the difference between perception and dream not being absolute, one is justified in counting them both among 'our experiences'" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 6).

There is through the body-subject a recognition that as an inherent part of our perception we find varying states of consciousness – waking differs from sleeping, for example – that we cannot easily distinguish if we are to give a contextualised account of the body-subject. Merleau-Ponty argues that, contrary to postulations of brute sensation, perceptual experience is given to the body-subject as a structured and unified whole directed towards things in the world. Thus, when he argues that "the real is a tightly woven fabric" (2002: 11), he is suggesting that the perceptual in its entirety is integrated in the lived body of the body-subject – integrative of both perceptual experience and imagining. Indeed, all perception is integrated in the lived body, which precludes a dichotomisation between states of consciousness such as sleeping, waking, or imagining – a crucial point for addressing problematic dichotomisations between the 'real' world and the virtual (whether the virtual is part and parcel of perception, as Ortega posits, or technological). Thus, perception is an integrated (and integrative) phenomenon in the individual's everyday life – its integration of the imaginary and the wakeful directs one's movements in the world.

On a secondary, technological level, the technological virtual cannot exist were it not for the specific mechanical functioning of the digital artefact. In this regard, the virtual relates (following on from the description of the virtual on a primary or primordial level) to that which arises in the engagement of the body-subject with the digital technology artefact. Crucially, however, we must go beyond Merleau-Ponty's early accounts of technology, such as his description of the blind man's stick (1962: 175-176), in attempting to describe the experience of the virtual. His account of the blind man's stick provides phenomenological explication of both a motor habit and a perceptual habit, but is still lodged in a framework of instrumentalism – disregarding the hermeneutic aspect of digital technology (Du Toit and Swer 2021). The stick (and other examples of technology employed in Merleau-Ponty's description) is merely a tool that extends the body schema.[8]

Merleau-Ponty's early instrumentalist accounts give way to a hermeneutic perspective in his later work, which sees an increased focus on instruments, tools, and technologies – particularly in *The Visible and the Invisible* and his unfinished manuscripts and lecture notes (Carusi and Hoel 2015: 73). His later work develops the concept of *la chair* (the flesh) to describe the reversible relation and negotiation between the body-subject and the world from which experience arises (1968), and this ontological structure allows us to explicate the structuring of the virtual in relation to the body-subject. The flesh refers to the entirety of sensed things with which the body forms a continuous surface, "the underlying ontological foundation of sensory receptivity and motor spontaneity" (Carman 2008: 123). It is descriptive of the matrix of intertwined and reciprocal relations serving as the foundation of the body's relational engagement with the technological artefact from which the virtual space arises as that "between" in the relationship between the digital technology artefact and the embodied individual. The virtual here describes the *fleshy* engagement of the body-subject with the said virtual world as interrelated with the world as encountered in the everyday. Thus, the flesh allows us to explain our engagement with technological artefacts (objects in the world) as a mutually constituted experiential field. As argued earlier, Ortega has already illustrated that virtual permeates tool use and perception – though this Merleau-Pontian description grounds and supports Ortega's views. We may thus say that to be embodied is to be virtual, and in turn one may clearly see that the dangers of the alteration of the virtual inheres in every aspect of embodiment, including the formation of extremist groupings online.

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8   The blind man uses the stick as sensory apparatus, but is also identified as blind through his use of the device.

The division between a primary and secondary level is suggested for purposes of illustration, and we find in the ebb and flow of our moving through the world that the virtual erupts across or through both these levels (again, echoing Ortega's claim that perception is persistently virtual). This is emphasised by the fundamental technological matrix that intermixes with the lifeworld of the individual in contemporary societies – bringing into view the everyday, non-technological but virtual character of perception and revealing the artefact as a nexus of altered perception. Moreover, the technological artefact describes a unique type of node with which the body-subject becomes intertwined in novel ways. In terms of older forms of technology, the later Merleau-Ponty describes how "every technique is a 'technique of the body', illustrating and amplifying the metaphysical structure of our flesh" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 6). We expand on this insight to circumscribe the ontological character of the virtual, and to extend this ontological characterisation in relation to the political question of extremism online.

The virtual emergently alters the individual's perception and behaviour, foundationally affecting the individual's sense-making of the self, the world and the other through the technological artefact. Sense-making in the technological virtual relies on the intentionality of consciousness and bodily signification, rather than on perceptual faith – a making sense of the virtual as it is presented to bodily frames of reference that may be intended towards this or that as allowed by the functioning of the digital technology artefact. This is what Hoel and Carusi refer to as the measuring body (Hoel and Carusi 2018).

Thus, we argue that the thought of Ortega (who shows that the virtual is an inherent feature of human existence) and O'Shiel (who shows that so-called virtual technologies operate by altering the structures of virtuality) may be brought into productive conversation with Merleau-Ponty's claim that a) the virtual structures of our existence are necessarily embodied and b) that embodiment is the prerequisite of all experience, including virtuality. The crucial insight derived from Merleau-Ponty in this regard is that, since embodiment persists across online and offline space, alterations to virtual structures in online space are themselves necessarily embodied. In other words, that which is embodied in the online mode is similarly embodied in the offline (since embodiment persists as the necessary basis for all human experience). Therefore, alterations to the virtual are also alterations to the body-subject, and alterations to the body-subject provide the basis for the persistence of persistent changes in both online and offline spaces. Therefore, due to alterations in their virtual structure, the embodied subject engages in praxis in the offline world that is necessarily shaped by the online. Through embodiment, as the persistent framework for perception, we see how the virtual axes that are altered within echo chambers are themselves

perpetual features of our embodied existence which inhere in our experience of the world whether we are online or not. And it is the virtual axes that shape our conduct. The novelty of online echo chambers is the way in which technology facilitates the formation of echo chambers and the alteration of virtual axes. In Ortega's account echo chambers are a recurrent feature of human existence in times of crisis. The effect of virtual technologies has been to accelerate the process of bubble formation and to enable them to integrate more seamlessly into everyday existence. The ubiquity of social media combined with the prevalence of smartphones means that one is now seldom offline, and the boundary between the images and discourse of the echo chamber and the concrete actualities of existence becomes increasingly permeable. Problematically then, in presenting fictions in the mode of apparent actuality, malignant echo chambers may result (and have resulted) in real-world violence.

Conclusion

We have argued here that Ortega y Gasset and Merleau-Ponty provide valuable tools for exploring the existential dimensions of extremist formations and echo chambers online. Their phenomenological insights show that embodiment persists in engagement with digital technology, and that the virtual is an inherent aspect of our experience. The continuum between online and offline must be noted here, and is crucial for conceptualising the formation of extremist echo chambers online.

Participation in echo chambers alters experience of the world to the extent that modification of the virtual persists in physical space, and such modification is carried in us and in our bodies. What occurs is an active filtering process that results in the alteration of praxis – fictions are presented in the mode of apparent actuality – and resultantly, alteration of the virtual axes by digital technology results in an alteration of the virtual axes of the self and the body-schema.

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