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Grasping Extramedial Meanings

ABSTRACT

The article provides suggestions concerning the cultural relevance and embedded-ness of dualist and non-dualist media and demonstrates that the presence or absence of certain types of media has extra-medial relevance that can contain ethical, political, and social meanings. When I am talking about these kinds of dualities I am referring to distinctions like the one between good and evil, mind and body, culture and nature, the material and the immaterial or the organic and the inorganic. The contemporary examples I mention paradigmatically represent the phenomenon in question. Howev-er, several other artists, composers and designers are central figures, too, e.g. Patricia Piccinini, Eduardo Kac, Stelarc.

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Dr. Stefan Lorenz Sorgner teaches philosophy at John Cabot University in Rome and is director and co-founder of the Beyond Humanism Network, Fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET) and Research Fellow at the Ewha Institute for the Humanities at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. He is au-thor and editor of more than 10 books, e.g. "Menschenwürde nach Nietzsche" (WBG 2010). Furthermore, he is in great demand as a speaker in all parts of the world (e.g. TEDx; World Humanities Forum) and a regular contact person of national and interna-tional journalists and media representatives. (e.g. Die Zeit).

I became fascinated by questions concerning duality and non-duality during my teen-age years, when I started to realise how widespread categorical dual distinctions are and that they can be found in various fields and strata of culture and life. When I talk about these kinds of dualities, I am referring to distinctions like those between good and evil, mind and body, culture and nature, the material and the immaterial, and the

organic and the inorganic. These examples are an arbitrary selection; others could be mentioned too. One might wonder what is the problem with these distinctions, for we use them every day and it is at least not immediately clear why employing them might be problematic.

The first problems I recognised, while still a teenager, were related to the distinction between the immaterial mind and the material body. If human beings consist of two such radically separate substances, how is it possible for mind and body to interact? If two substances do not have anything in common, then any kind of interaction seems highly unlikely.[1] I next recognised evaluations of the two substances: the immaterial world was usually related to the good, stability, and unity; the material world was connected with evil, change, and plurality.[2]

This conceptualisation of the world understands as good something that is universally valid. The good that stands for the qualities connected with the good life can be described and is valid for all human beings, as anthropologically all human beings are identical. All possess an immaterial soul that separates them categorically from all other solely natural beings, like apes, dolphins, and elephants.

This way of thinking can still be found in many social contexts, most legal constitutions, and sundry moral laws. Only human beings have dignity or personhood. All solely natural beings like animals are things and hence belong to the same category as stones and plants. This position also applies to German Basic Law. Animals are not seen as things, but legally they are to be treated like things. Only human beings possess dignity. This distinction of human beings implies the categorical duality previously mentioned and is a characteristic of Platonic, Stoic, Christian, and Kantian thinking. It also accompanies paternalistic structures and the violent treatment of monsters, and we all are monsters in one way or the other.[3]

Furthermore, only one concept of the good is supposed to be valid for all human beings. The characteristics of what has been recognised as the good, however, have varied in history. For Plato the cardinal virtues were seen as sole good, and for Aristotle it was a combination of virtues, the good of the body and external virtues. For Stoic thinkers, being virtuous was sufficient for living a good life, and if one possesses one virtue, one immediately possesses all virtues and turns into a moral saint. For Christian thinkers the virtues of love, faith, and hope became relevant, and contemporary Christian philosophers tend to stress that love is all that is needed for living a good life (love and do what you want) – Michael Sandel and Gianni Vattimo are prime examples of this position.[4]

What seems problematic with this point of view is that it does not sufficiently consider that we are all psychophysiological, with radically different drives, wishes, and

1   Sorgner 2007, 46.
2   Sorgner 2010, 193–211.
3   Sorgner 2013, 135–159.
4   See Eissa/Sorgner 2011.

desires. We are all monsters, and it is good for us to live in our monstrous ways. Having realised this, I regard it as important to accept that it is highly likely that any non-formal account of the good will be implausible.[5]

In light of the aforementioned examples of dualistic conceptualisations of the world, which seem highly problematic, I realised that we find analogous dualities in various aspects of our way of grasping the world. More though, it seemed to me that cultural processes usually occur in parallel events. Philosophers conceptualise the world in a dualistic manner and a similar process occurs in ethics or in the media. Is it always the case that historically a certain group, a discipline comes first? I do not know. Nietzsche suggested that music is a discipline in which the processes in question occur rather later than in other fields and disciplines. (Nietzsche, 1967-77, 450-452 = KSA MA, 2, 450-454) Such may be the case, but to my mind the processes do not seem to follow such given paradigms. Change seems to me more chaotic. Sometimes music comes last within the organic process of a culture, but in other circumstances it might come first. This question, however, would need to be discussed separately.

Having reflected upon duality and non-duality for a long time, only recently I managed to connect two insights that I had had for some time but had not seen as connected, on the birth of dualistic thinking and on the dualistic media.

In early August 2013, just before attending the World Congress of Philosophy in Athens, Jaime del Val, to whom I will return below, and I were on the island of Aegina and decided to attend a performance of *The Cyclops* by Euripides, which was being performed in the theatre at Epidaurus. *The Cyclops* is the only complete satyr play to have survived. During the performance, the dualities that had come about during the birth of Ancient Greek drama suddenly became clear, as I was confronted with the architectural prerequisites that had accompanied the institutionalisation of drama during the sixth century BCE.

Originally, there had been no theatre buildings, no stage, and no spectators separated from the stage. Before the institutionalisation of tragedy, there had been only groups of human beings singing and dancing together, without a rigid dualistic spatial separation of actors and audience. Various categorical dualities were introduced only later, during the birth of tragedy.

First, there was the spatial separation between audience and actors. The audience had to remain seated within certain linear and circular fields, which were separated from but also directed towards the circle, or stage, on which the actors were to fulfil their tasks. Secondly, a further distinction was introduced, namely the distinction between chorus and protagonists: on the one hand, there was the chorus, and the task of the chorus was to sing and dance together; on the other hand, there were the individual actors, whose task was to recite their roles. Hence, the duality of audience and actors was amplified with the introduction of the duality of protagonists and

chorus. Thirdly, a dualistic theatre architecture was created, which was responsible for enforcing these dualistic structures. All of these dualities were absent from the festivities that had taken place before the invention and institutionalisation of the theatre, which began with the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens in the sixth century BCE.[6]

I am not suggesting that the establishment of this theatre was the sole event that established dualistic media. It seems plausible to claim, however, that this event was a vital stepping stone for the emergence of dualistic media. Jaime del Val has successfully demonstrated in some of his writings and presentations how this kind of duality was transforming over the further history of the media, but at the same time he has also shown how visual art kept its dualistic directedness or foundational structure.[7]

The same can be noted in the realm of philosophy. Dualistic thinking in the Western tradition was strongly influenced by Plato's thinking of the fifth century BCE. Before Plato, dualistic conceptions could be found in Zoroaster's thought, of the first half of the second millenium BCE, but Plato was key to the introduction of dualistic categories into Western cultural tradition.

In Plato's view, there is a dualism involving the realm of forms and the material world. Even though he introduced a dualism with the distinction between human beings who possess rational souls and animals who do not have such souls, the separation was not yet as rigid as it became later on, for Plato also stressed that there are several types of souls – vegetative, sensitive, and rational. The soul or psyche is responsible for self-movement and hence for life. Consequently, Plato had good reason to attribute souls to plants and animals, as both are capable of directed self-movement. Still, only human beings have a rational soul, and a rational soul is necessary for having the option of entering the realm of forms and grasping the forms, and also for using language and for communicating via language with one another.

The second significant step for the development of dualistic ways of thinking occurred with the Stoics. Stoic philosophy holds that a unified *logos* encloses immaterial human souls, and for the Stoics animals did not have such souls. The main difference from Plato on the issue of duality is that in Plato's case the fact that human beings possess a rational soul is not connected to the evaluation that all human beings ought to be treated equally well. According to Plato social rank depends on the type of metal one has in one's soul, which might be gold, silver, or iron. Stoic philosophers introduced the notion of *humanitas,* which was linked to the equal evaluation of all human beings. This notion was transformed by Cicero into the concept of dignity, which all human beings were supposed to have equally because they possess a rational soul and belong to the human species. Although clearly human beings differ with respect to their talents and capacities, it came to be acknowledged that all human beings ought to be treated well solely because they are members of the human species. Stoic

6   MacDonald/Walton 2011.

7   Jaime del Val's talk "Relational & Multi-Dimensional Perception" demonstrates in a descriptive manner central stepping stones in the history of perception: https://vimeo.com/88375539, 14.4.2016.

philosophers and Cicero did not develop an egalitarian society in the modern sense, but this changed evaluation of human beings did have practical implications for the treatment of slaves in their own society.

The third central step in dualistic thinking took place with Descartes. Where ancient thinkers within the Platonic tradition had acknowledged that there are a variety of different souls, Descartes put dualism on an even more solid footing by distinguishing between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, with only human beings participating in both. Animals and all other solely natural objects belong only to the realm of *res extensa*.

Such thinking was developed further within Kantianism, in which the same ontological distinction as in Descartes' philosophy can be found. Kant focussed more, however, on the ethical relevance and implications and developed a complex ethics and political philosophy that is still the core of German Basic Law. As a result, it is legally forbidden to treat another person as solely a means, which presupposes a radically dualistic distinction between objects and subjects. Furthermore, this influence is the reason for German Basic Law's claim that only human beings possess dignity and that animals and all other solely natural entities are to be treated as things. This separation also presupposes the highly problematic categorically dualistic ontological separation we found in Descartes' philosophy.

After Kant, Nietzsche moved beyond the dualistic history of Western philosophy. All the consequences of his approach have not yet been grasped by many scholars, thinkers, and philosophers today, but together with Nietzsche, Wagner, Darwin, and Jung initiated the cultural move towards a non-dualistic way of thinking. Consequently, it is possible to assert that with these cultural movements humanism has come or is coming to an end. Here I take humanism as a worldview founded upon the affirmation of categorical dualities. In light of the plausibility of these reflections on the development of dualistic thinking, I can stress that the development of Plato's philosophy has most probably been the corner stone of Western culture as a dualistic culture. Peter Sloterdijk, who identifies the beginnings of humanism with the age of Stoic philosophy, and Ihab Hassan, who stresses the close connections of the beginnings of the Enlightenment with the beginnings of humanism, are surely right in claiming that strong versions of dualisms can be found in the philosophies of the Stoics and of Descartes,[8] but we should not overlook the central importance of Plato's philosophy for this development.

Given that there are cultural movements beyond dualities, it seems appropriate to stress that we are moving beyond humanism into a posthuman age. We have also been able to recognise that an important dualistic media had been created about one hundred years before the dualistic way of thinking was developed in the field of philosophical reflection. Given that dualism had come in the media before it emerged in philosophy, we can speculate that the media artists ought to have been first to rec-

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8   See Sloterdijk 2009 and Hassan 1977.

ognise the violence, dangers, and implausibilities connected to dualistic approaches. Was this the case? Dadaism, stochastic music as developed by Iannis Xenakis, and postdramatic theatre provide three examples of arts in which non-dualistic elements can be found. In the discussion that follows, I present four examples of how non-dualistic media can occur and in what respect they can be deemed non-dualistic media. I consider here media artists Kevin Warwick, Dale Herigstad, Neil Harbisson, and Jaime del Val, using the term "media artist" in a rather loose sense, for Kevin Warwick, for example, is more of a pioneer of engineering or an inventor. However, the devices I deal with are striking examples of moving beyond dualistic media.

I mention Warwick's work because it is dissolving the categorical dualities of mind and body and of the organic body and inorganic things. One of his many inventions can reveal to us a possible direction in which many developments might move. Warwick developed a brain-computer interface by means of which his nervous system was connected via a computer to the Internet while he was in New York. The signals he was sending out were transported via the Internet to a mechanical arm in his laboratory at the University of Reading, in the United Kingdom. He was able to move this arm so that it could touch or grab another thing, and the sensors in the fingertips of the mechanical arm sent the sensory input back via a computer and the Internet to Warwick's brain and nervous system as he sat in a room in Columbia University in New York, where he was able to feel his mechanical fingertips touching an object at the University of Reading. He did not first try this experiment on animals, but took the risk of establishing this feedback mechanism using his own brain. The success of the experiment provides us with grounds to suggest that the former rigid categorical separation of mind and body or of organic and inorganic no longer holds.

Dale Herigstad is a media designer (e.g. the Spielberg movie "Minority Report") and inventor and a four-time Emmy winner . When we met recently at a TEDx event in Rome and discussed our most recent projects, it was evident that although Herigstad and I come from completely different fields, our work is moving in similar directions. Herigstad spoke to me of the long-dominant dualist concepts in media and described moving beyond dualistic media in his own work on three-dimensional media. He has recently developed a mobile phone app that makes it possible to move the content of a computer screen into a 3-D space and simultaneously watch television. Currently 3-D television and 3-D spectacles are required. This development is only one step away from his ultimate goal, namely glasses that can be placed in front of your eyes without your eyes able to see their limits, placing you in a 3-D world in which you can move around and gain experiences. When you turn around you will be able to see what lies behind and around you, so you will have the visual impression of being in a different zone. This vision goes far beyond the traditional media setup, where the spectator is placed in front of a television or a computer screen with a clear separation between user and screen, which are therefore in a permanent dualistic relationship. A further

step would be to use contact lenses instead of glasses or even devices implanted into the eyes to engage 3-D computer applications.

Human eyeborg Neil Harbisson is a colour-blind artist who, with the help of an engineer, developed a device that enables him to hear colours. Technology has thus given him synaesthesia, a capacity quite a few artists appear to have possessed, including Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Franz Liszt, Olivier Messiaen, and Alexander Scriabin. Harbisson creates his compositions from his new way of experiencing colour and sound.

Last but not least is pangender cyborg Jaime del Val, whose most recent metabody project seems one of the most promising ways of moving beyond dualist media. Here I wish to refer briefly to one of his metaformances, available on YouTube and therefore easily accessed. Del Val developed a device that consists of several cameras placed on different parts of his body. A projector in front of his chest and loudspeakers on his back allow transmission of the altered and amplified sounds he makes. Of the many philosophically challenging aspects related to this metaformance, I will refer here to three specifically.

First, the non-duality of ontology is revealed as part of this metaformance. The Christian and Kantian traditions categorically distinguished between objects and subjects. This distinction is dissolved through this metaformance. The cameras portray small aspects of his body. For example, an unusual perspective on his thumb, a post-anatomical perspective, is projected onto the walls around him. However, one is affected by whatever surrounds one, and therefore the first small perspectives become amplified, with any slow movement becoming faster, and this projection feeds back onto del Val. He interacts with himself, for he moves and via the projections of his movements, he alters his future movements. Permanent interaction results in a process of amorphous becoming. This metaformance is a strong criticism of the rigid subject and object distinction of dualistic ontologies.

Secondly, the cameras' perspectives are, as noted, unusual, for they do not divide up the body into traditional anatomical parts. Thereby the contingency of anatomical classification is revealed, for it is possible to classify the body in many different modes. Hence, the post-anatomical perspectives that are part of this metaformance break down encrusted linguistic structures, revealing the contingency of categories and, thereby, opening new fields of becoming.

Thirdly, the post-anatomical perspectives, supported by sounds presented by del Val's metabody, challenge the traditional dualistic conception of sexual relationships. Dualistic concepts of sexuality reduce sexual relationships to the genitals, classified in binary fashion. The post-anatomical perspectives and corresponding sounds make evident that sexuality can be present in an unusual way of perceiving an ear, shoulder, or leg, or in the way we approach a foot, or in being confronted with a new sound,

such a scream or a shout. The enormous multiplicity of possible relationships can be grasped as sexual and connected to intense feelings of gratification. Hence, this meta-formance also enables us to move beyond a binary concept of sex towards metasex. These brief descriptions of movements beyond dualistic media are only brief hints of how the death of dualist media can be understood.

The four media artist-scientists represent not only four movements from dualist media towards non-dualist media but also different varieties of these developments. In stressing ontological non-duality, ethical plurality, and perspectivism within his artistic works, Jaime del Val represents a metahumanist version. With their projects including a strong affirmation of the use of technologies, Kevin Warwick and Neil Harbisson are more closely connected to transhumanism. In light of his emphasis on non-duality in his digital media projects, Dale Herigstad is most closely connected to posthumanism. Thus, the various creators discussed here represent a broad survey of what it can mean to transcend dualist, humanist art.

My principal goal for this article was to provide suggestions concerning the cultural relevance and embeddedness of dualist and non-dualist media and to demonstrate that the presence or absence of certain types of media has extramedial relevance that can contain ethical, political, and social meanings. The processes to which I have referred are neither final nor completed. I have sought merely to suggest ways we might grasp the extramedial meanings of dualist and non-dualist media.

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