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Theology and Virtuality: The Community of God in the Digital Age

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Abstract:

This paper suggests the self-conception of people set within a western society pervaded by digital apparatus must be conditioned by a certain 'background' understanding of the philosophical idea of 'virtuality'. To practice Theology in this context means engaging with this background understanding to examine the way that it orders and values the ideas and material practices of such a society. This project attempts just such an examination by first exploring the history of *virtuality* so to better understand what is meant by the suggestion that we are living in Digital Age ordered by *virtuality*, and how we become situated in this way by a discursive cultural 'rupture'. It will connect *virtuality* into several recent critiques of postmodern and 'post-human' thought, and in conclusion offer some constructive theological reflections in an attempt to both reconceive of *virtuality* and imagine the Church in relation to it.

Theology and Virtuality:

The Community of God in the Digital Age

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I.   Introduction

This paper is about virtuality. In what follows, I will show how virtuality functions as a crucial point of tension in both postmodern philosophical and theological critiques of contemporary western society. This point of tension reveals itself in a number of ways, but what I will draw out in this paper is how this same root is manifest in two different spheres. In the sphere of theology, the tension arrives in a growing sense one cannot possess the full goods of both the contemporary Digital Age and the sacred – something of one must be left behind to be 'in' on the other, and for social theorists it is in a belief that the very technologies meant to reify community and shared identity are in fact isolating and insulating. I believe these concerns both stem from a broader shift in how virtuality is understood at the everyday level in western society, and the intention I have in demonstrating this is to animate postmodern theory and theology in surprising new ways by engaging them together.

The way the meaning of the word virtuality has changed gives an important model of why I think the word is so important. The Oxford English Dictionary lists three definitions. The first and oldest suggests it as, "something endowed with force or power." The second describes virtuality as the, "essential nature of being, as distinguished from external form or embodiment." The third definition, and most common usage today, describes it as, "a virtual (as opposed to an actual) thing, capacity, etc; a possibility" ("virtuality, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, January 2018.).

The important feature in these is not the definition itself so much as that the definition has flipped from describing the essential and real thing behind appearances to the precise opposite – the power and appearance of something but not the 'real' thing in essence. The old way of describing virtuality suggested that the 'virtual' part of a thing was what it was at its core regardless of how it appeared. It was the power a thing possessed even if that was not apparent on the surface. An excellent example of this (and one reason theologians have spent so much time over the last millennia ruminating on the notion) is belief that the grace and power of the real body and blood of Christ are present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

The later way of describing virtuality suggested the virtual part was the part in front of you, what you could see and feel, regardless of what was behind those images. This is the virtuality used today to describe the digital worlds of computer simulations and cinema – virtual realities that appear on the surface just like the ones they are meant to copy but (so far) lacking the tangible depth of the real we still inhabit.

It is this flip in the understanding of the word that gets at why it sits at such a crucial point of tension in postmodern social critiques: does the potency of a thing lie in what it is or in what it appears to be? Can regimes of truth be seen or are they subcutaneous? If the 'realness' of the copy surpasses that of the original which one is real?

In my view, the philosophical arc of virtuality moves from what can be called the 'realist' understanding of the first and second definitions, and towards the 'nominalist' understanding outlined in the third definition. The challenge of the present, and the impetuous for this paper, is the idea that one way of thinking about virtuality has become so pervasive and dominant in the west it threatens to exclude any alternative ways of thinking virtuality in any sphere. This can be an explanation for the antagonism felt between Digital Age societies and sacred traditions like Christianity that have their own notions of virtuality undergirding their claims to transcendence, and the isolation and individualism of the Digital Age contra the communal and local ethics of postmodernity that resist the coercion of digital media.

To suss out these suggestions, this paper is divided into three parts. The first is a short study of the philosophical concept of virtuality. This section will begin with the speculative and theoretical approach Heidegger took in exploring the idea and move through toward a more historical and genealogical analysis of its inception in Scholastic Theology. The second part is a focused attempt to describe what is meant when contemporary western society is said to be in a 'Digital Age'. I believe to understand the Digital Age one must understand how it is glued together by some shared understanding of virtuality. So, in this section, selected ideas representing post-modern and post-humanist though are interwoven to demonstrate how one definition or another of virtually is key to their critiques. The third and final section attempts to bring the conclusions of the first two sections into dialogue with some of the debates in the

theological schools of Radical Orthodoxy and *Nouvelle Théologie*. The intention in this progression is to weave together postmodern theory with theological inquiry by showing how they both identify a widespread, nominalist virtuality as a root of contemporary social malaise and spiritual diremption.

I believe much of the malaise or disconnect identified by philosophers and theologians as indicative of our inhabitation of some new 'digital' or 'electronic' paradigm are different ways of describing a fundamental mis-recognition or misunderstanding at the everyday level of the way virtuality shapes our way of being. This is often described as an untethering between the way we imagine things holding together now and the way things did only a short while ago such that the prevailing sense of being in the Digital Age is one of being detached or adrift with no moorings, structure, or meaning. In the paper I will go into various suggestions of why I think this has happened, but perhaps more significant is that this disorientation reveals a kind of rupture with previous ways of understanding virtuality that makes different ways of thinking hard to get at.

Inspired by John Milbank and Graham Ward here, I believe it necessarily follow that the nominalist virtuality undergirding the Digital Age of the contemporary west is not compatible with some of the most basic theological claims of Christianity. These two and their acolytes are known for several fairly specific theological claims and a particular understanding of Christian history that, while I do not agree with entirely, I am sympathetic to in a couple ways important for my thesis here.

The first is their emphasis on the importance of the idea of analogical distinction to the tenability of Christian theology in general. This, in their view, begins with an analogical distinction between the Divine and created things, and it extends to the separation of forms that lead to individual beings. The use of the term 'analogy' has deep roots, but its meaning is still apparent in this context. When it is said God loves us this is different than saying we love God both because God's love is qualitatively different than ours and also because we are different from God. Our love is an analogy of the source, the Divine love, but it is not the same. They are separated not by a matter of degrees, but by their very essence. Any blurring of lines between things by saying all things emanate univocally from source and are only differentiated by degrees of separation smacks to me of nihilism because it devalues things in themselves.

Thus, I think the extension of their point to the discussion of how we distinguish between things in the world is incredibly significant, and I use it throughout this paper to argue for the kind of analogical ontologies they write on voluminously.

Second, it is their view of a 600-yearlong antagonism between authentic Christianity (which in their view is some kind of Thomistic, pre-reformation, anglo-catholic liturgical form) and a growing alternative religion now commonly called Secularity that prompted me to wonder if there was another way of describing the tensions, frictions, disconnects, and general sense of being out-of-place that comes with being religious in the post-industrial West. I think they're right to sense something is out of sorts, but they are not the only ones. It is a sentiment shared across fields by thinkers I will cover in this paper like Jean-Francois Lyotard, Kathrn Hayles, and Charles Taylor, though each has their own spin on it. Mine is simply that what they are all circling around in their own ways is a disagreement they have with the broader western world in how it defines what is real, how it understands virtuality.

This antagonism between the virtuality present in the contemporary Western and the Christian social imaginaries is, perhaps in an unrefined way, manifested by a simple gut feel that one cannot possess the full goods of both the digital world and the sacred – something of one world must be left behind to fully inhabit the other. The Church is threaded into the fabric of the society it is immersed in. The church is 'incarnate' in the world, made of the cultural raw materials of the world, and is thus imbued with the same kinds of imaginaries and malaise of the world. But the Church is an ontological reality, and thus if it is to be a part of a Digital Age dominated by a nominalist understanding of virtuality it will only be there in part. And if only in part, then not at all.

Underlying this paper are a few key assumptions and delimitations which I will address here, but I will also attempt to delve into these more thoroughly as they arise in their natural context in the body of the paper. Any elisions or omissions are not intentional but represent the limited knowledge of the author and scope of this research.

First, this is a paper about a modernity in which the author and presumably the audience are thoroughly immersed. Any discussion of the theme of virtuality will be situated within a milieu in which

virtuality is the dominant mode of thinking, according to the claims in this paper. As such there is no 'outside' perspective from which to examine this idea or the phenomena ostensibly associated with it. Either there is distance between the subject of study

The second is that any current theory or history of the idea runs the risk of merely reinforcing the idea's own significance since those histories are writ within a field of power which emphasizes the importance, even necessity, of virtuality as THE mode of being in the world. Histories like this construct a narrative in which there is an inevitable continuity that results in the way things are, in the kind of virtuality we have, and thus sees no need for critique or correction.

To that second point, I suggest rather than a continuity with the past that there has been a break with it. This is a difficult claim to prove, but because of this rupture it seems there may in fact an outside we can get at – not beyond ourselves, but just beyond the edge of our thought to another way of being. I propose this is best resourced from Theology, and that it might present us with an alternative mode of virtuality. An alternative mode I expect will show itself in a re-emphasis on the question of 'what is real?' and make a strong argument for why a reality full of ontologically distinct beings and things analogically related to a divine source is worth clinging to.

The paper will follow this trail by first exploring the history of the term so to better understand what is meant by the suggestion that we are in a social imaginary of virtuality, and how we become situated in this way by a discursive cultural 'rupture'. I will connect virtuality into several recent critiques of postmodern and 'post-human' thought, and in conclusion offer constructive theological reflections in an attempt to both reconceive of virtuality and imagine the Church in relation to it. With this course laid out ahead, we begin.

II.   A brief history of Virtuality from prehistoric art through Scholastic Theology

1.

Virtuality is not new. Immersive experiences meant to transgress the temporal material of the body are as old as the cave art in El Castillo or Chauvet (Van Huyssteen, 2006, p. 209). In these caverns, the eyes are drawn vertically up the cathedral like walls to the vaults and arcs above. There is no light, save for the flicker of fire or torch shimmering against the rock face. Here, a record has been preserved for over thirty thousand years of human thoughts and dreams, of culture and a sense of self. It is impossible to fully inhabit the minds of these ancient artists, but even thirty millennia on there is a recognizable imagination in their work (Headley, 2016, p. 55).

What is perhaps most striking about these works is, from Indonesia to Argentina, and spanning nearly twenty thousand years, the images themselves are strikingly similar – hands stenciled onto cave walls with a reddish-brown paint, outstretched and held high; powerful animals streaked in thick black charcoal; all the bodies, of hunters and prey, intermingled, often overlaid in scenes serialized by generations of artists (Marchant, 2016).

On those walls, bodies are represented as malleable and permeable, open to transformation and inhabitation by animal and spiritual forces. Features of the geological formations themselves molded into bodies; clay and rock turned into flesh. Stalagmites stretched into arms and legs, nodules and fractures formed into eyes and ears, bulges in the rock face painted as chests or shoulders. There is no discontinuity presumed between the representation and the real in these sculptures. Indeed, painted deep in the shadows and nooks of caves, the figures seem to float unfixed in the air; less static paintings than stereoscopic visions forever hanging in the darkness (Chippendale and Nash, 2004, pp. 118 – 120). Even if this is merely *art pour l'art* as we might call it today, it is an expression of the consciousness of the artists and is therefore a tangible representation of their psychic experience. Of course, art never stands alone. It is always caught in the web of meanings, ritual expressions, self-identities, and imaginative leaps of a people (Headly, 2016, p. 56). It is 'meaning-making' as 'doing' rather than 'knowing'.

For Heidegger, this interplay of temporal and a potential reality was not constrained to the caves and rock faces of prehistory but is in fact the ongoing question of human intellectual development from the earliest Greek philosophers to the present. Judith Wolfe (2014, p. 138) writes:

"…Heidegger comes to see the entire history of metaphysics from Plato and Aristotle onwards as a systematic neglect of Being. Following their first great metaphysicians, Europeans forgot or repudiated their original receptivity to the self-revelation of the world, instead erecting frameworks of representation and (causal) explanation that progressively remade the world in the image of its beholders."

In several works, but most exhaustively in his *Question Concerning Technology,* Heidegger attempts to make the connection between art and imaginative expression and the tool-making of early civilizations. For him tool making is something beyond a merely rational enterprise producing an object purpose-made for a specific task. The tools themselves, though inanimate and purposeless on their own, are expressions of the *telos* of the bodies of the user (Zimmerman, 1990, pp. 194-195). And it follows then that the Artisan tool-makers were engaged in the same expressive, imaginative activity as the cave painters, extending malleable bodies further out into the world with axes, spears, and trowels (Ibid., p. 139). Heidegger explores this idea at length in his *Question Concerning Technology*.

Heidegger (1954;1977, p. 13) begins *Question Concerning Technology* by suggesting, "…technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology…", rather, "the essence of a thing is considered to be what the thing is." And the essence of what technology is, the genetic kernel shared by all forms of technology is not technology itself but is more closely related to the idea of *poiesis,* of "bringing-forth" (Ibid., p. 6). He continues (Ibid., pp. 6-7):

…it is of utmost important that we think bringing forth in its full scope and at the same time the sense in which the Greeks thought it. Not only handcraft manufacture, not only

artistic and poetical brining into appearance and concrete imagery is bringing forth, poiesis…

For Heidegger 'bringing-forth' is not only a blossoming, an incarnation of what once was not, but is something deeper, a revealing or unveiling. As he says (1954;1977, p. 7):

> …bringing-forth bring hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment. Bringing-forth comes to pass only insofar as something concealed comes into unconcealment. This coming rests and moves freely within what we call das Enbergen. The Greeks have the aletheia for revealing. The Romans translate this with veritas. We say 'truth'…

In the ancient root of the word technology, *techne,* there is the suggestion that the 'bringing-forth' powers of tools are closely linked with what today we would understand as the role of poetry or visual art; crafts that are meant to reveal the why of the world rather than simply manipulate it for a utilitarian end. Thus, *techne* is translated as 'craft or 'art' (Wheeler, 2017) but also as knowledge (Tabachnick, 2004, pp. 90 – 111). It is meant to tell us about the world and ourselves as much as it extends our bodies in it. The 'real' world is not just 'out-there', but it is suffused in our bodies and is penetrated by our movement in it. Today we have circumscribed what is human from what is nature, and nature has been untethered from anything beyond the physical, tangible stuff it is made of. But Heidegger reminds us of an older way; that the essence of a thing is not what a thing is in the world, but in the way it is. Its *begindlichkeit* among all the other things is an embedding deeper than the mere topology of the material world.

These technologies, these arts, were not only a way of manipulating the dirt and rock and vegetation, they were a way of being-in the world, and this gets at how foundational the idea of virtuality was to the old ways of thinking. It is not new to think that we can transgress the physical, mundane world. It is only new to think the world is mundane and must be transgressed. For the ancients, the virtual was a

world already present. So, as it has been for tens of thousands of years, the latest digital technology is, "…no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing."

2.

The Greeks described nature as *physis*. This word is often translated today as 'nature' or physical world to contrast it with the metaphysical, but for Plato and Aristotle it was best understood as the 'essence' of things. This was meant to contrast with the mere appearance of a thing in the world (Guthrie, 1962; 2003, pp. 55-56). The essence of nature is that aforementioned genetic kernel shared by all things in nature. Yet that essence is not simply the least common denominator relating all natural things. It is something more. Here the discussion gets a little heady: *physis* is the force within nature by which nature makes itself. It is its own source of motion, to borrow the Aristotelian terminology. In this way *techne's* motion begins beyond itself and brings it to being for an end *(telos)* also beyond it. Yet humans are a part of the *physis*, and as such our being is propelled from within nature by natural power. Technology, *techne*, then is not a distinct category from *physis*, but participates as an extension of that same power that energizes nature.

It is important to grasp that this was not about creating a metaphysical synthesis of nature and self; there was no ravine between the natural world and human self that needed to be transversed. There was continuity between the elements of nature, and humans were made of those same elements. Nature was not a 'machine' that needed to be manned and maintained (Hart, 2013, pp. 57-58). In a way difficult for us to grasp today, virtuality in these contexts did not describe the space between humans and things or humans and other selves in a space that competed with the empirical 'real', rather it was another class of the real set alongside the actual. This is what technology is meant to disclose, not the alternative real of the virtual, but a virtual that exists subordinated to the real and alongside and complimentary to the actual of linear time and space.

The etymology of the word itself is helpful in understanding this point. In the Middle Ages the idea shows up as *virtualiter*. This term is coined and employed extensively by Thomas Aquinas, and then by subsequent Scholastics, to distinguish something uniquely present in *essentialiter*, *materialiter*, or *actualiter*

(Grimshaw, 2014, p. 411). This understanding is an attempt at resisting any false collapsing of ontology into epistemology where the state of a thing is a just a matter of logical semantics (Sepp, 2010, p. 343). There needed to be a 'way things are' that was not the product of this nominalism but was an actual state of things. But how did they possess this state when it could not be seen, could not be extracted from the tangible substance? The ancient root of the mediaeval terminology can give us some clues.

Virtualiter was actually a neologism borrowed from the latin *virtus.* This is the same root from which the modern word virtue is derived. In the Roman world, this word was understood as describing the way the 'potency' of an essential nature was possessed as a latent, potential power that could enable virtuous action. The picture evoked here is the way a seed holds within it the power to become a tree (E.g. Metaphysics, IX.6. 1048a.31–1048b8). So, it is said that the tree exists *in virtus* in the seed, and in the same way courage or temperance exist virtually as a part of the essence of the virtuous person. So *potentia* is the power, the efficacy, the capacity to accomplish change, to bring something into being that is not present in actuality but exists in virtuality (Marmodoro, 2013, pp. 1-2). All beings then are a 'real' synthesis of both potency and act (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1950, p. 147). Therefore, virtuality is the state of things existing in potency, in power, but not in immediate actuality.

These ideas flower in the scholastic discourses of the High Middle Ages. It was there the idea of an essence invisible but effective came to be exclusively called *virtualiter,* or virtuality, because it was there that the idea took on imminent theological importance: how did the essence of God get into the stuff of the world in the incarnation of Jesus Christ? How does God act in power invisibly through the substance of nature in the Eucharistic elements (Robertson, 2017, p. 316)?

3.

The *Index Thomisticus* lists 56 uses of v*irtualiter* and its cases across forty-five of Thomas Aquinas' texts (Busa, 2017). Without the time or space to go into the kind of depth Aquinas deserves, generally it can be said that he employs the word in close accordance with its root in the ancient idea of "*virtus/virtutis*" (Grey, 2012, pp. 407-408) as a way to understand the distinction between the concepts of *potentia* and *actualitas* purported by his Greek forerunner, Aristotle (Grimshaw, 2014, p. 411). He first uses the term in

Summa Contra Gentiles II.56, and later develops differing conceptions of divine virtuality in *Summa Theologica* I.8, I.19 regarding incarnation, and I.105, and human virtuality in *ST* I.75-77 regarding goodness. But his development of the term in discussions on *ens essentialier*, *materialiter*, and *actualiter* firmly established *virtualiter* within the temporal relations between beings and things in the world (Grey, 2012, p. 418) as "incorporeal contact", latent knowledge, and the agency of God in creation "present to that upon which it works" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 11. 56.; *Summa Theologica*, 1. 75. 1.; Ibid., 1. 8. C.). Aquinas writes:

> Elements exist virtually, not because of a potential to separate form the mixture, but rather because they contribute their special powers to the mixture, without appearing as distinct substances… being is virtual when it does not fully and explicitly appear, yet is the locus of a real power or efficacy. (*Summa Theologica*, Ia 76. 4 ad 4.)

Also, through its close relation to his conception of grace, Aquinas alluringly opened the possibility that *virtualiter* could be redirector toward the universal of theology, or, at least, re-construed within the specific analogical framework for which he is celebrated (Nichols, 2002, pp. 91-109). Again, turning to Aquinas' Summa Theologica:

> The grace of the Holy Ghost which we have at present, although unequal to glory in act, is equal to in virtualiter… So likewise by grace the Holy Ghost dwells in man; and He is sufficient cause of life everlasting… (Ia 114. 4.)

It is within the well-formed recent discussions of analogy v. univocity concerning Aquinan and Scotian forms of participation that the idea can be better understood. It has been suggested there is a great break that occurs in the years after Aquinas that is precipitated by Dun Scotus regarding a philosophical disagreement over the relationship of the categories of the Universals or 'common natures' like Divine Ideas, Divine Perfections, and Divine Being itself (Cross, 1998) and how these 'donate' their

being to *ens* (Cross, 2014). Attempting to avoid going too deep into the mire here, Scotus disagreed with Aristotle and Aquinas that 'being' is said in many ways (Milbank, 1991;2006, p. 15), and he rejects as unnecessary any power needed to achieve unity through the analogical relation of a thing to the primary sense in which it is said (Scotus and Wolter, 1961, pp. 3 – 9). Additionally, Aquinas and Scotus's use of the word diverges with regards to elements in a mixture, specifically in Aquinas's distinction between power existing in something *in virtualiter* as opposed to *in esse* or *in actus* (Pasnau, 1997, pp. 172-173).

The argument being that these moves by Scotus, which were a genuine attempt to, "find a place in theology for an analogical attribution of words like 'good' to God in an eminent sense" (Milbank, 1991;2006, p. 305), resulted in a collapse of the distinction between *esse* and *essential* (Ollivant, 2002, pp. 87 – 88) and produced a 'flat' nature in which formally unified reality is no longer distinguishable from, and indeed is in a univocal framework with, the experience of reality as such (Hiem, 1993, p. 131). Based on this logic, John Duns Scotus gestated the arrival of a particular understanding of virtuality with his novel employment of *virtualiter* to describe the condition of "being an essence... in effect but not in fact, not actual" (Sepp, 2010, p. 343). For him this was to distinguish *ente 'virtualiter'* from *ente 'in quid'* (Scotus and Wolter, 1961, pp. 7-8), but the effect was inadvertently paving the way for *virtualiter* to be understood as a mere 'pseudo-reality'" (Grimshaw, 2014, p. 411). Milbank (1991, p. 305) suggests that in doing this it presents transcendental terms like 'good' not in the aforementioned sense of being present in potentiality but not actuality, but as placeholders for an infinite sense of a term that God possess in the same way it is said of us. In short, this either sets up terms such as 'being' as greater than God, which Scotus of course rejects. Or it means that these are mere names and ontology collapses into epistemology.

Here is where the idea gets transported out Scholasticism into the subterranean framework of our everyday thought. Scotus was massively influential on a number of philosophers and theologians (not least of which is Heidegger, who I have been employing favorably), but perhaps most notably in the 20th century, this univocal reframing of 'the virtual' is employed by Gilles Deleuze (1968;1994, pp. 52-56) to presents the virtual as the relationship between the possibility of the real beyond the actual of the physical world (1968, p. 96). Scotus notion of *virtualiter* not as an impoverishment of material reality, somehow

beyond or behind it, but its extension or augmentation (Paasch, 2012, pp. 156-157), is synthesized by Deleuze into a 20th century thesis of *virtuality* which rejects any system in which the real is coterminous with the actual (Deleuze, 1968;1994).

It is possible that a Thomistic restatement of *virtuality* as the condition of 'being an essence... in effect but… not actual' (Sepp, 2010, pp. 7-8) could resist the production of an infinite void between beings and Being as such within Scotus univocal metaphysics. In the final chapter of *Cities of God*, Graham Ward (2000, p. 256) hints that a project of critical, theological assessment of virtuality in the Digital Age might successfully, "...argue for the establishment of an analogical world-view in which the materiality of bodies is maintained..." in the hopes that, "analogically contextualized, the internet and the virtual communities it establishes, could then supplement our social relatedness..." (Ibid.). In this type of arrangement *virtualiter* and the 'virtual' world it describes would be analogically related via *methexis* to a higher order 'real' and set alongside an 'actual' with which it also participates. Thus the 'real' is everything, and there is no virtual beyond it to transcend to. It is only if we already see all of nature as a unified whole (which for Scotus included and was upheld by Divine being and the Divine ideas, but which was quickly severed from this Divine suspension by the vastness of the infinity that separated the zenith from the earthly world at the base) that we end up make the philosophical move of reducing 'being' to information patterns that can move unaltered between any existent substances ala Scotus' univocity. But why does this matter, what effect does this 'univocal' version of *virtuality* have on our present notion of the self?

III.   Virtuality and the Digital Age

<div align="center">1.</div>

To answer the very specific questions about scholastic metaphysics posed in the previous section, perhaps it would be best to first answer a more general question about the present: what does it mean to say we live in a Digital Age? Almost everyone would agree in some sense we do. Western culture is increasingly and, in some cases, now exclusively mediated by digital technology, and his technology has become so entangled with society learning to interact with it is something that happens in infancy alongside speech and walking. Like other fundamental social practices learned in childhood, such as

reading or bathing, an inability to utilize digital apparatuses in socially appropriate ways with at least a minimum degree of proficiency perches someone precariously on the edge of the social body, at risk of exclusion from mainstream, everyday life.

So, in one sense, to say this is a Digital Age is to say the dominant means of creating and interacting with contemporary culture – of being educated, making art, conducting business, forming relationships, etc. – is via hardware devices that manipulate electrical signals with a 'digital' language to produce images. But perhaps this definition does not go far enough? Perhaps the changes inaugurated by the development and mass proliferation of digital technology run deeper than simply additions to the list of objects and activities possible in a society?

Heidegger suggests social interaction is best understood as *dasein*. Often translated as "being-in-the-wold" (Sembera, 2008, pp. 74 – 75), this term gets at the sense that being a conscious participant in a society is more than just knowing the things making up the society – objects, language, traditions, etc… – it is about a 'know-how' (Wrathall and Malpas, 2000, p. 53) which connects these objects to the implicit, background understanding of how thing are meant to be used, arraigned, who uses them and when that is shared by people in a particular community (Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015, p. 45). Jürgen Habermas inquired deeper into this idea of a background understanding. He termed it the *Lebenswelt* or 'life-world' and suggested the 'know-how' of *dasein* forms on this *lebenswelt* almost like electrolysis plating forms a sheen of nickel or chrome on substrate (Habermas, 1985).

This concept shows up in similar ways in a number of major thinkers works, from Heidegger's "pre-ontology" (Blattner, 2007, pp. 18 – 20) to Gadamer's "dialogical fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1960; 2013), but more or less it can be defined as the self-evident or 'given' set of knowledge implicitly understood by everyone in a shared culture that undergirds their subjectivity, experience, and communication. The 'know-how' associated with Habermas' *lebenswelt* is a kind of centripetal pressure that is exerted on the disparate and discursive materials, ideas, and activities of a group that holds these things together 'just so', pulling them towards a cultural center.

That things are the way they are in relation to each other is not the product of some *a priori* organizing principal, but the logic of how and why things are being apparent only after they are arraigned in this and that particular way (Wittgenstein, 1922:2001, p. 5.632). In short, we only know the way things should be after things are and we are in relation to them. If we were to remove some key parts of the material world of a culture, all of a sudden, the old 'being-in-the-world' doesn't stick together quite like it used to. And if the change is profound, the stickiness can become revulsion. The proliferation and utilization of digital technology is so extensive in some places that it would be impossible for these societies to exist as they do without the presence of cyber-digital technology, and participation in these societies is not possible in a meaningful way without access to and competency with digital technology.

Consider the following: uploading a photo to a social media site like Facebook. An activity like this would be fairly strange to watch someone perform if you didn't have an implicit understanding that the phone was connected to the internet, and that on the internet there was a page on a site where a person can store photos of themselves, and that this page on this site was connected into a vast network of other pages where uploading photos was considered a normal activity. The invisibility of the connective sinews of the internet make it a good analogy for the invisible background Habermas calls the *lebenswelt*. One move only makes sense against the backdrop of the other system. You can imagine someone making all the same clicks, pushes, and swipes to get a picture ready to upload, but without a social media like Facebook they are an incoherent dance of finger movements.

The meaning behind the act is inconceivable without the Internet and a specific social media destination. If the Internet didn't exist, no amount of investigation or observation would unveil those pushes and swipes were supposed to make a picture from a phone visible to millions of people by uploading it to a vast network of tele-connected computers. But the Internet, like the smartphones connected to it actually is quite tangible. It as an apparatus with a visible presence only feigning invisibility. You can find the wires and dishes and switches and serves that constitute it. Even the bits and bytes that become the images on our social media sites are actual electrical impulses and microscopic engravings on chips somewhere. So, the analogy between the internet and *lebenswelt* falls short. For beyond

these positive objects there is a negative impression, a concavity stamped in the background that is necessary for the Digital Age as a whole to exist and maintain a stable coherence.

2.

Taylor's method he employs broadly across his writings is a useful tool for navigating this idea of the background knowledge needed to sustain a coherent existence in the world. In a sense, his method is a kind of archeology attempting to unearth the ideas buried in the substrate of history and language that pile up to just below the surface of the present. His concern is not with what are the 'right' or 'wrong' ways of understanding, but rather how people come to imagine themselves as being right or wrong. He is interested in how these notions work their way into the level of the everyday to form a part of the substrate of social identity Habermas called *lebenswelt* or 'life-world'.

This concept shows up in similar ways in a number of major thinkers works, from Heidegger's *pre-ontology* to Gadamer's *dialogical fusion of horizons,* but more or less it can be defined as the self-evident or 'given' set of knowledge that is implicitly understood by everyone in a shared culture that is the backdrop against which their subjectivity, experience, and communication plays out. This unspoken 'know-how' is a kind of centripetal pressure that is exerted on the disparate and discursive materials, ideas, and activities of a social group that holds these things together 'just so', pulling them towards the cultural centre. I am suggesting freedom is understood in this sense; not so much as an explicitly spoken action or idea, indeed sometimes it is contradicted by what is spoken, but that freedom is a shared idea that both precedes an individual's understanding of it in time and exceeds their practice of it in space and must be understood as a broader cultural backdrop.

This idea of an epistemological backdrop, an implicit, background understanding to which the notions of being and self-hood and the whole *lebenswelt* of the everyday world are tethered forms the cornerstone of Charles Taylor's larger work. He terms this backdrop the 'social imaginary' and describes it as follows:

"…broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they

think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people

imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on

between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper

normative notions and images that underlie these expectations… the social imaginary is

that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared

sense of legitimacy." (2003, p. 23)

In a way, what Taylor does with this notion is combine the 'unspoken' pre-ontology of

Habermas's *lebenswelt* with Gadamer's dialogical "horizons of meaning". In doing this, I think what he

adds is an ethical axis to that "unspoken backdrop" that suggest the discursive beliefs, self-conceptions and

tangible material practices of a time and place can be understood best by locating the ends of flourishing

the given society sets for itself – i.e. how do people in the society understand themselves as living a 'good

life', and how do they target this end in their activities?

In this way. a social imaginary is very similar to Habermas' *Lebenswelt* but with an extra

dimension; an 'ethical thrust towards human flourishing'. Taylor links ethical thrust in the everyday into

the backdrop suggested by Heidegger's notion of 'pre-ontology' which he rearticulates as a "context of

understanding" which forms a "largely unfocused background" (Taylor, 2007, p. 3).

It is at this point where Taylor can be seen going further than Heidegger and Habermas. For him

a social imaginary is the combination of these background ideas, and the explicit ways these are worked

out and directed in the everyday life of the people possessed by it:

Heidegger described the inescapable temporal structure of being in the world… this is the

structure of any situated action, of course, however trivial…. but it applies also to this

crucial issue of my place relative to the good. (1989, p. 47)

Taylor expands on this in another work:

> [social imaginaries are] the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (2003, p. 23)

Understood in this way, the technologies permeating the Digital Age are much more than mere objects alongside all the others in everyday life. Digital technology has become a part of the background life-world itself. In other words, it is not the thing being held in place by the cultural pressure any more. In advanced technological societies, it is the actual pressure. It functions as a part of the governing life-world that conditions and positions the objects of knowledge in an unarticulated 'know-how' that makes the world. Quite simply, people in a Digital Age do not merely live alongside digital technologies, they live immersed in a world created and delimited by it.

This is a point I think must be stressed more forcefully in contemporary discourses about technology and society. Without realizing it, our situatedness (*befindlichkeit)* has changed. We are immersed in a new world, and as such the old techniques of understanding will simply not yield meaning. Digital technology like the Internet is not simply another object to be mapped onto the grid of the old objects. Instead it represents an altogether new grid on which new things and ideas must be mapped, and as such it forces a radical reevaluation of the old objects and the grids of knowledge that conditioned them.

3.

The Digital Age has given birth to a global society in what seems to be an interminable symbiosis with digital technology, and now there is very little left of Western culture that is not pervaded by some digital device. The eschatological promise of this technology is the augmentation and extension of human bodies and experience infinitely though space and time (e.g. McLuhan, 1964; Baudrillard, 1981; Lanier, 2010; Lévy, 2001; Manovich, 2001). Beyond being mere prostheses enabling for greater strength like a

lever, more efficient movement like a wheel or mental capacity like a book (Havelock, 1968), these digital technologies purport to be prostheses of the mind. They dissolve space and time into a flat, virtual world of special effects. They come pre-loaded with a new world ready to be instantly indwelt, no more tilling, damming, or razing required. But in the way knowledge works if inhabited then also known and 'cultivated' in a particular way – and inhabit them we have.

Technologies like cell-phones and Wi-Fi and Facebook have a significance that goes far beyond their instrumental use. "They are not neutral, punctual objects; they exist only in a certain space of questions, through certain constitutive concerns" (Taylor, 1989, p. 50), and as such participate in a web of meaning through the dominant socializing apparatuses of a time. If this is indeed the case, then the mass adoption and pervasive use of digital technologies is not only the neutral result of a drive toward productivity within a particular economy of things, but these participate in a much larger narrative that "touch[es] on the nature of the good that I orient myself by and the way I am placed in relation to it" (Ibid.). Thus cell-phones, Wi-Fi, Facebook, all of the iterations of technologies like this within a society are nodes amidst a social imaginary.

So, to say we live in a Digital Age is to say our awareness of being in the world is embedded in a framework of digital objects which gives us our sense of being, and this sense, "is holistic: you can't break it down into a heap of particulate grasps; and… it is inescapable: all particulate grasps suppose it" (Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015, p. 23). The feeling of being in the world is the product of more than merely self-identity emerging from an articulation of self-recognition, but this sense of self emerges as an imaginative act from within an unarticulated background of digital materials and online power structures. But how did we come to be in this Digital Age? What is its relationship with what comes before? I have already hinted that I think it represents an altogether new situation, and in what follows I will explore this further.

IV.   Virtuality and Post-Modernity

1.

A glance at census statistics in western countries brings to light with striking consistency a steady decline in the practice of and membership in the Christian religion in these populations (Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project, 2015). Historically Protestant nations have seen the most precipitous drop, but the decline extends even to Western Roman Catholic nations like Spain and France. Numerous reasons for this decline have been proposed, and a recent study suggests an intriguing correlation with another social statistic. It seems, as nations become more economically developed the population becomes less religious (Gao, 2015). Simply put, there seems to be a negative correlation between religious belief and economic development. Economic development, at least how it is measured at present, is closely linked with the presence and pervasiveness of traditional capitalist practices such as private ownership of production, voluntary exchange of goods, waged labor, private wealth accumulation, and free-market competition of enterprises. And these also are linked to a proclivity for or against certain religious practices as well (Grier, 1997).

Extrapolating out from the data a bit, it could be said there is a negative correlation between Christian practice and the maturation process of a capitalist economy. The more and better Capitalism is practiced, the less (or perhaps worse) Christianity is practiced. Any economic system is as much a product of the social imaginary of a people as a religion. It is a means of exchange and valuation of labor and materials. If this thesis is indeed accurate, it suggests either a radical rebuke or alternative to of one of the founding texts of modern social theory: Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.*

In the opening paragraph of his book, Weber (1905; 2002) asks a straightforward question: given equal time and essentially equal resources why have the Protestant nations of Europe faired significantly better in economic terms since the Reformation than the Roman Catholic nations? Viewed the other way around, taking into account certain inequalities in the starting point of resources and social development, why was it that areas of historically greater wealth and latent capitalist tendencies became the epicenters of Protestant religious reform? His conclusion was the capitalist economic system which began to coalesce

in the mid 17th century had its origins in Protestant populations because of certain unique theological teachings that 1) encouraged people to practice 'secular' vocations with as much zeal as a religious calling, 2) valued frugality bordering on asceticism, and 3) emphasized attaining or proving one's personal salvation through righteous living, with few virtues being more desirable than hard-work (Weber, 1905; 2002, p. xiii).

Weber's thesis has come under heavy criticism through the years, especially his readings of Protestant and Roman Catholic theology, but the minutiae and veracity of his argument are not my concern here. Rather, it is the general fact that there was a such a strong relationship between a form of Christianity and the economic situation of certain countries in 19th century Europe that he could reasonably posit a theory that not only were the two culturally connected, but they were in some sense producing each other. Even today that idea, broadly speaking, would not be an outlandish starting point for a socio-economic study. At present eight of the ten countries with the highest per capita GDP's in the European Union are historically Protestant, and eight of the ten countries with the most developed economies in the world according to the UN Human Development Index would also be called historically Protestant (UN Human Development Index, 2015).

Set side by side, Weber's thesis of congruence and the current statistics of a decline in Protestant Christian practice in the West's most developed economies presses another question: why is it that a hundred years ago Max Weber could suggest Protestantism was a necessary (albeit uncoordinated and unplanned) prerequisite for Capitalism to emerge, whereas today in the countries which Capitalism has, in a sense, most successfully emerged, does it seem the Christian religion is largely being abandoned? Or framed another way, if a hundred years ago Capitalism and Protestantism co-existed in some productive way in the same societies, why is it today it seems a society cannot sustain both an advanced capitalist economy and pervasive Christian practice?

The answer could be societies simply don't, even though they could. It might be the decline of Protestantism is the effect of a different set of forces than the spread of Capitalism, and the two were never connected in the way Weber purported. Of course, there are always alternative ways of parsing the

sociological data. What I am concerned with is not simply the change in practice, but in the change in the way the people in Western societies conceive of themselves such that on the one hand Weber saw a fundamental unity between the two systems, and on the other there seems to be a rapidly spreading disunity. It is not just that where once the two were symbiotic they are now detached, and people are just giving up on religion. It seems more like there is now choice between the two where there once was not (Taylor, 2007, p. 12). There is a sense on the ground in everyday of life in the 21st century that if one wants to fully engage with the progresses of the modern West, to freely eat of the fruits of Capitalism, something of Christianity must be left behind, and if one wants to be immersed in the sacred it necessitates a certain retreat or restraint from being totally saturated in technological culture.

Theologically this is understandable. Encoded in the very suggestion of 'The Church' is the idea Christians are supposed to be *ekklesia*: "the called-out ones," "… a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own special people" (The Bible, 1 Peter. 2:9). Yet Christian orthodoxy has always taught that in a mysterious way the world, with all its peoples and cultures, is the womb in which the Church is being knit together. There is an eminent significance to the world the way it is, and in the same way the Word is made flesh of the material world so too is the Church, the body of Christ, being made flesh of the same substance. As such, there is a natural tension between the pull of Christians having to struggle long and hard to integrate their faith into their society, and the temptation to step out and create a new society of their own à la John Calvin's Geneva experiment (Avis, 1981). Recalling the previous reading of Heidegger, in accepting this situatedness, the being (*dasein)* of the Church within a time and a place it is also clear that there is some way in which, as Paul writes, our *"…salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near"* (The Bible, Romans. 13:11). The divine economy of redemption though Christ is "continually unfolding *in* the world…" as Graham Ward (2002, p. 59) writes, and therefore to understand *heilsgeschichte* it is necessary also to understand the way it is interwoven in with the ever-evolving strands of culture, identity, language, and so on (Moltmann, 1981, pp. 148 – 150). To suggest then that there has been a change in the way that the Church relates to the

culture it is embedded in, especially to propose a new antagonism or rift, is a development with deep theological implications for how the church postures itself towards the world.

<div align="center">2.</div>

So then, what of the change, what caused it? I think there has been a transformation that goes deeper than the material practices of a society. It is not only that less and less people are going to church while more and more people are using digital technology. This visible balance shift between Protestantism and Capitalism is only a side-effect of one kind of metaphysics supplanting another. I am not trying here to do a complete sociological or anthropological study of how these get worked out across Western culture, though I think someone could, I simply wanted to frame them against a larger canvas of transformations in the 20th and 21st century because I think it is there this notion of a balance shift and what caused it will become clearer.

Despite the insistent claims of Western modernity to think and speak with a disenchanted 'secular' voice across an imminent plane of existence, and thus history and cultural development to be the impersonal movement of a mechanism of cause and effect, the Digital Age remain undergirded by a metaphysics of transcendence. This argument forms the core of a proliferating multi-disciplinary range of monographs such as Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011), Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007) and *Sources of the Self* (1989), Stanley Hauerwas' *With the Grain of the Universe* (2001), John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990), Gillian Rose in *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) among many others.

The oft rehearsed secularization story being that the sciences, "sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains" (Harvey, 1990, p. 13). Although there was a shift in both the lexicon and the subject matter cultural discourse late in the Enlightenment, the assumption of this thesis, concurring with the assessment of some of the best and most recent historical and cultural studies, is we have not 'released the pressure of the sacred' (Milbank, 1991;2006, p. 9) only to find ourselves filled with a more authentically secular 'disenchanted' human identity. Rather, our present selves, forged in the innumerable 'revolutions' of the

eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries carry within them an un-deconstructable kernel of our predecessors spiritual and metaphysical identities (Rose, 1996, p. 21). The secular, scientific 'materialist' mind of the present is not at odds with nor unapproachable by the 'idealism' of previous religious generations. There is not a neutral ground-zero that has been arrived at where competing philosophical systems cam fight for supremacy before the great judge: Human Reason. Rather, both exclusive humanism and devout Christianity are fabricated from of a range of materials and ideas at certain times and places and are directed towards certain ends.

Though the various stories of the secularization of the West and the recession and impending return of religion are circuitous, inconclusive, and at times inexplicable, there are features of the western intellectual landscape that allows us to posit a relationship between the economic arrangements of society and its theological (or anti-theological) commitments (De Vries and Webber, 2001). The principal reason being they so obviously share cultural space within the philosophical system I am proposing since they are both constructed and sustained by the social imaginary. Whatever the specific connections (which would have to be explored in a much larger study than this) the decline of one and advance of the other indicates that a change has occurred that is not affecting two massive features of the everyday practices of Western society equally.

As easy as it would be to jettison Weber's theory as the product of a more speculative age of social theory, his initial hunch is supported by current trends. It is simply the case the majority of countries with the most developed economies, and (according to the current metrics of how these things are measured) therefore the ones who have most extensively deployed Capitalism, are by in large historically Protestant. It is also the case that the countries with the most developed economies are the ones which have most extensively abandoned their religion.

It is entirely plausible whatever we recognize as Capitalism today would have evolved convergently even without the Reformation, and the material and political factors seeding capitalist practices such as the division of labor, mass public education, and the development of modern currency were present long before the Reformation swept through Europe. This critique has been the most common counterpoint to

Weber's thesis since its publication, but it does not fully sidestep his claim. Weber acknowledged the possibility Protestantism and Capitalism may not be generative of each other, but instead might be branches of a deeper root; namely, the re-emergence of 'rationalism' at the end of the Middle Ages (Kalberg, 1980, pp. 1145-1179). In this case the 'spirit' of Capitalism is one and the same with the 'spirit' of Protestantism. It doesn't matter which came first, just that they operated most successfully together. But the question remains, why is it that two social forces that once existed symbiotically have now become seemingly incompatible?

One reply might be that really there is no 'Protestantism' or 'Capitalism' per se. These are just generalized categories inclusive of a range of discursive and disparate practices and ideas easily adapted into alternative categories. What we colloquially know as Protestantism and Capitalism today are simply old names given to new organizations and social impulses. Though this might seem provocative and attractively simple as an explanation, to make this theory work one would have to flatly deny any real ideological forces at work; interrelated causes and effects of decisions that can be seen and understood after the fact in a way at least analogous to the understanding of those present at the time and place of their origin. It would mean what the Reformers themselves saw as an organized reaction to the theological and political conditions of their day was, in fact, merely a figment of their collective imaginations. It was an arbitrary naming and relating of random events that only had a 'real' connection in their minds.

For a similar reason that this 'idealist', "it's all in our heads" explanation falls short, a fully materialist answer is unsatisfactory. Extrapolating on Frederik Engles, Lukács (1923;1971, p. 47) writes:

> In his celebrated account of historical materialism Engles proceeds from the assumption
> that although the essence of history consists in the fact that 'nothing happens without a
> conscious purpose or intended aim', to understand history it is necessary to go further
> than this. For on the one hand, 'the many individual wills active in history for the most
> part produce results quite other than those intended–often quite the opposite; their
> motives, therefore, in relation to the total result are likewise of only secondary

importance…' The essence of scientific Marxism consists, then, in the realization that the

real motor forces of history are independent of man's (psychological) consciousness of

them.

Swinging the pendulum to the opposite side, a strict materialism acknowledges the objective reality of the

forces on the ground but desiccates the human beings involved of any agency, of any genius to think

beyond the determining material conditions of production and consumption. This Marxist-materialist

reading of history suggests any relationship between Capitalism and Protestantism as a reflection of their

ideological commitments was incidental to their material relationship. Their spirit, "has its material in the

masses…" (Lukács, 1923;1971, p. 16) and the 'production relations' determined by property ownership

and the organization of labor.

A materialist history acknowledges no first order causes beyond the economic exchange of capital,

and as such any relationship between the social imaginaries of these societies is superimposed onto the

already existing material practices of the group. This renders historical moments such as the twin birth of

Capitalism and Protestantism as essentially meaningless today since the old material conditions that

seemed to make them can never be recovered.

The brilliance of Weber's work was not necessarily in the novelty of his proposition, but in his

attempt to unify the idealism of Kant and Fichte with the materialist histories of Marxism and the British

utilitarians like Mill and Bentham (Swatos, 2005, pp. 33-35). Weber (1905; 2002, p. 90) thought of his

work as, "a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in

history." Charles Taylor, certainly one of Weber's most direct heirs in the late 20th Century expands on

this project in his monumental *A Secular Age.* Taylor (2007, p. 212) rejects any false dichotomy between

materialism and idealism as rival causal powers suggesting instead:

…what we see in human history is ranges of human practices which are both at once,

that is, 'material' practices carried out by human beings in space and time, and very often

coercively maintained, and at the same time, self-conceptions, modes of understanding. These are often quite inseparable… just because the self-understandings are the essential condition of the practice making the sense that it does to the participants. Just because human practices are the kind of thing which makes sense, certain 'ideas' are internal to them…

In other words, the material practices of a given time and place must be undergirded by a certain kind of self-conception, and set of ideas, that allows these to 'make sense' to the people in that society. Taylor unifies these ideas and materials as the previously discussed idea of the social imaginary.

So, it was, for a time, *de rigueur* to suggest that the decline of religious belief came as the rationalizing forces of the Enlightenment – like capitalist economics and, ironically, Protestant theology as well – disenchanted the world bit by bit, released the pressure of the sacred, allowing a pure materialism to evince from behind the clearing fog. This naturalism was buttressed by the scientific and industrial revolutions, sufficient in itself to articulate a vision of human flourishing untethered from any 'other' worlds of gods, fate, or magic. However, this jejune story is easily supplanted by a more compelling history. This story recognizes the Enlightenment humanism that is concomitant with the secularization of public life across the Western world not as a neutral ground zero, the simple the absence of the enchanting forces of religion and myth, but as an alternative system of knowledge with its own mythos and internal consistency circularly instantiated by the institutions, laws, scientific statements, regulatory decisions, architecture, etc… in a given time and place. In a sense then, religion, and specifically for our purposes Protestant forms of Christian practice, are functionally the same things as ideological systems like enlightenment humanism and economic modes like Capitalism – they are a way of being in the world. Secular humanism is not the natural 'real world' underneath the structure of the imaginary of enchanted religious belief, rather it is its own imaginary fabricated by myth of human rationalism.

3.

Relating this back to Weber' point: Protestantism and Capitalism once existed side by side as attendant systems of belief with either identical or at least very similar metaphysical commitment internal to them (or Capitalism was still so nascent it could not yet accommodate a whole social imaginary in itself). Whether or not the ideas that amalgamate into the practice of Protestantism precede or are concurrent with the practices called Capitalism is irrelevant at this juncture. What is important and perspicuous is 1) the practices were once covalently bonded by a set of shared or congruent ideas and, 2) they no longer share this bond.

I think this diremption can probably explained in different ways, but I propose that around thirty years ago something changed such that whatever it was that once made Capitalism and Protestantism biotic was dissolved and replaced with some new, incompatible metaphysical structure, some alternative social imaginary. Assuming the Internet and Christianity are built on two different metaphysical systems, their relationship can be visualized statistically by simply comparing a graph that amalgamates the decline of religious belief with one that shows internet adoption rates. For example, in the United Kingdom in 1985 63% of people polled in the British Social Attitudes survey claimed to be Christian. That number held steady until 1990. In that year there was a 4% drop. By 1995 there had been another 4% drop, and another 3% decline by 1998. Following a brief period of religious revival in the early 2000's the decline continued so that by 2009 the number of people in the UK who identified as Christian had declined to only 46% of the population (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2016).

Now compare those figures to the internet adoption rates in the UK. Prior to 1990 the number of people on the internet in the UK was limited to a few thousand researchers at universities and laboratories. In 1991 Pipex became the UK's first internet service provider and .2% of the population paid for access to the world wide web. By 1995 roughly 2% of the population had internet access. In 1998 the adoption rate was 13.7% of the population. Interestingly, from the year 2000 to 2003, the last year of the mini religious revival, the internet adoption rate took a precipitous leap from 26.8% to 64.8% Today over 94% of the population in the UK has Internet access (World Bank Data Archives, 2016).

This is not meant to be an exhaustive sociological analysis, merely a way of showing Christian religious belief is declining most quickly when the permeation of the internet is increasing most quickly. Statistics like this can be replicated across the West, even in countries like the United States which is an outlier in terms of the number of people who still claim to be Christian. As has been said, it is important to remember that the adoption of a technology, of a new material way of interacting, brings with it a set of ideas, a way of being in the world. So, it could be said then that as belief in Christianity is declining, belief in the Internet is rising.

The Internet itself is born of Capitalism. It cannot simply be the Internet is a new form that breaks entirely with the old. In a sense, it could be said that the Internet is the final product of Capitalism, the end of material history in that the Internet makes good on Marx's (1894; 2005, p. 138) suggestion that the ultimate goal of Capitalism is that "not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of the commodities…". The result of this evaporation of the material world is the thinning of any metaphysical relationship between people into constructed nodes temporarily existing for the rapid exchange of capital. More will be made of this point later, but what matters at this stage is to grasp that this transformation unleashes capitalism it from its tether in the material world, and in some way, unbinds it from the earthy social imaginary it once shared with Protestantism.

The Internet may be materially related to Capitalism in that it is born of capitalist practices, but, recall Taylor's words: there must be a relation of internal ideas that makes the thing possible. I think this is where the snip happens. The Internet brings in its 'material' existence a new way of thinking about the world, of ordering relations, of understanding being and presence, of imagining oneself and others and our future possibilities, that is at odds specifically with the Protestant Christian imaginary that purportedly gave birth to Capitalism.

This effect began at the epistemological level, and then fed back into the ontological practice, this, in turn reinforced the ideas underneath as reflective of reality, and so on in a loop. Virtuality as a way of knowing became so vital to the objects reifying it, the two became indistinguishable. The transformation of the epistemology undergirding Capitalism is a phenomenon suggested in a variety of different texts and

at different times. From the Frankfurt school of Adorno and Benjamin, to Foucault's archaeologies, Guy Debort and Jaques Ellul, and more recently by thinkers such as Frederik Jamison, Kathryn Hayles, Daniel Bell, Charles Taylor, Mark C. Taylor, and Manuel Castells, these all share a sense the there is a move from physical capital and mass production to a spectral capital of 'information' exchanged in a virtual world. This shift comes with a new way of being in the world, a new sense of virtuality that brings the background understanding into the foreground and resists any system that might undermine its order of things.

The antagonistic posture of Protestantism and the Digital Age would not be possible if there was not a single, finite ground for which both are competing. The social imaginary is not an infinite space of possibility. Though each has different narratives, different answers to ultimate questions, clearly both share these questions. As such the conflict between the two is not essentially over the answers, but over who can lay rightful claim to the questions themselves. Simply stated, there are massive assumptions at the everyday level of the social imaginary that undergirds both Christianity and life in the Digital Age. This leads to a problem of legitimization – who declares what is or is not a valid question, what is or is not knowable and worth knowing. At the poles of these systems is the nature of reality as it is perceived, represented, and legitimized.

V.   The effects of a nominalist virtuality as the impetuous behind post-modern critical theory

1.

The name most commonly given to the modes of thought, institutions, art forms, and social movements of the last fifty years (though the forms and the name itself have been in use since the early 20th century) has been 'postmodern'. This broad term is meant to suggest a range of changes that broke the present age apart in distinct ways from the high modernity of the early 20th century. If the old modernity could be couched in a single term it would be 'progress'; a firm belief "in the infinite progress of knowledge and in the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment" (Habermas, 1981, p. 4). David Harvey (1990, p. 13) expands on this idea:

Enlightenment thought [that] embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought that

break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. I was, above all, a secular

movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social

organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains. It took Alexander

Pope's injunction, 'the proper study of mankind is man,' with great seriousness. To the

degree that it also lauded human creativity, scientific discovery, and the pursuit of

individual excellence in the name of human progress, enlightenment thinkers welcomed

the maelstrom of change…

Modernity sought the advancement of humans through the instruments of human reason – rationalism,

empiricism, idealism, and phenomenology – and to this end it deployed the works of Descartes, Kant,

Hegel, Marx, etc.

If modernity was founded in the dissolution of the old, 'unified world' conceptions of religion and

classical metaphysics, then postmodernity was founded in the dissolution of modernity's hyper specialized

worlds of science, morality, aesthetics, and finally the body itself. In this sense, Graham Ward (2009, p.

75) describes postmodernity as a kind of language; a lexicon of ideas like, "'flux,' 'flows,' 'libidinal

economies,' 'deferral,' 'undecidable,' 'nomadic,' 'khora,' 'erring,' 'deterritorialization,' 'aporia,' 'body

without organs,'" and these are meant to emphasize the way in which society has responded to the

universality of modern progress by destabilizing and complicating the 'big' stories of modernity with the

small stories of postmodernity's local, communal, and 'at-hand.' Or, more pessimistically, as Zygmunt

Bauman (1991, p. vii – ix) writes:

"[postmodernism is] a state of mind marked above all by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-

dissolving destructiveness…. Postmodernity does not seek to substitute one truth for

another, one standard of beauty for another, one life ideal for another, one standard of

beauty for another, one life ideal for another. It splits the truth, the standards and the idea

into already deconstructed and about to be deconstructed."

It deconstructs them because it conceives of them as merely arbitrary arraignments of information, and

here is where the Digital Age and its particular conception of virtuality must be linked with

postmodernity.

The disintegration of the structuralism of the first half of the twentieth century is the quintessence

of all the ruptures that came with it – in politics, economics, education, art – and what was, it seems in

retrospect, most crucially at stake in this maelstrom was what 'knowledge' was and what the 'self' is in

relation to knowledge. Fredric Jameson's introductory essay to the English translation of Lyotard's *The*

Postmodern Condition (1979:1984, p. vii) echoes this reading:

> Postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a
>
> dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic
>
> organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured: a new
>
> social and economic moment… which has variously been called media society, the
>
> 'society of the spectacle' (Guy Debord), consumer society… the bureaucratic society of
>
> controlled consumption' (Henri Lefebvre), or 'postindustrial society' (Daniel Bell).

In any of those categories there can be concocted a demonstrably apt description of the present condition

of the western[ized] world, but I think what Lyotard does here which is particularly useful for what follows

is go beyond the categories and get at the Subject of postmodernity rather than its objects.

Lyotard's work is well known so I will only dwell on it briefly, but I believe its insights are proving

to be more and more perspicuous with each passing year. In its time, the Postmodern Condition was

intended to be a short exploration of how knowledge is manufactured and controlled under the banner of

'science' and 'innovation'. Today it stands as portend of the collapse of the grand teleological and realist

narratives of history, society, and ethics. What Lyotard intuits, and what perhaps only a theorist of his age

could have seen, was not the sudden death of these old metanarrative systems, but their gradual

replacement with theories of knowledge based on symbolic representation, 'post-referential

epistemologies' whose goal is performative and aesthetic. For Lyotard (1979:1984, p. xxiv) the net result of

this is:

> …the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology
>
> (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There
>
> are many different language games-a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to
>
> institutions in patches-local determinism.

And in a knowledge system whose language is manufactured binary code, there is a recursive way in

which the idea of 'knowledge' as formed by malleable particulates in localized, arbitrary, game-like

arraignments actually creates the space for a domination by these systems. This is a concern reiterated by

more recent computer theorist. Indeed, one of the pressing questions is how knowledge persists if it is

infinitely mutable. Writing in the New York Times in 2012, Stanley Fish notes:

> …when another scholar worries that if one begins with data, one can 'go
>
> anywhere,' [Stephen] Ramsay makes it clear that going anywhere is exactly what he
>
> wants to encourage. The critical acts he values are not directed at achieving closure by
>
> arriving at a meaning; they are, he says, 'ludic' and they are 'distinguished … by a refusal
>
> to declare meaning in any form.' The right question to propose is not 'What does the text
>
> mean?' but, rather, 'How do we ensure that it keeps on meaning' — how … can we
>
> ensure that our engagement with the text is deep, multifaceted, and prolonged?

To this same point Lyotard (1979:1984, p. 4) warns:

Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set

of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as 'knowledge'… knowledge

is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be

valorized in a new production.

But knowledge of what? And to what ends? Lyotard (Ibid., p. 18) continues:

…what is meant by the term knowledge is not only a set of denotative statements, far

from it. It also includes notions of "know-how," "knowing how to live," "how to listen"

[savior-faire, savoir-vivre, savior-ecouter], etc… Knowledge, then, is a question of

competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of

truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical

qualification), of justice and or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of sound or color

(auditory and visual sensibility), etc…

This recalls a point made at length earlier: being in a place, a time, a culture, and being

surrounded by objects, is a totality of existence far exceeding the mere list of things, the lexicon of

'denotative statements'. And yet, in mass culture the presentation of knowledge is so conditioned by the

facts and logic of digital systems there is a presumption that is not a way of knowing, but Truth itself. The

Internet has become a metanarrative. Yet regardless of how fine the grain, how perfect the representation,

digital media remains media. It is a language that pictures the world by arranging discrete units in certain

ways, but for these to 'mean' they must be connected to the world they represent in some way (Nusselder,

2009, p. 21). A crisis arises not with representation, but when representation becomes knowledge.

2.

Katheryn Hayles (1999, p. xi) worries this transformation of knowledge has already led to what she calls an "erasure of embodiment", and "'intelligence' becomes a property of the formal manipulation of symbols rather than enaction in the human lifeworld." In a riff on Lyotard's work she terms this condition of society as 'post-human'. Where postmodernity attempts to deconstruct and supersede the metanarratives and universal systems of modernity, post-humanity by way of digital augmentation disassembles the structure of humans, and thus their world. She gives this definition:

> What is the posthuman? Think of it as a point of view characterized by the following assumptions…. First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Forth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. (Hayles, 1999, p. 3)

There is a great deal to explore here. We have already touched on the change in how knowledge is imagined existing with questions like, 'is knowledge a thing in the world pressing in on the mind?' or. 'is it in the mind constructing and organizing the world?' But what Hayles links this change to is a certain low view of the body and embodiment. In the 'post-human' world, the substrate is inconsequential. Information is thought to be intangible and so is imagined passing between any media with ease, bodies or

no (Hayles, 1999, p. 1). This devaluation of the body also devalues the results of the Divinely ordained evolutionary process that produces bodies. It writes off the natural laws and processes as accidents that need to be organized and overcome, and thus restates the original sin of attempting to supplant Divine order with human order (The Bible, Genesis. 3:1–20).

The third point Hayles makes in this thought seems to be the most prominent feature of 'Digital Age' discourse on post-humanism, cybernetics, virtual realities, etc. The irony of viewing the body as a prosthesis or instrument that some immaterial 'self' embodies and learns to manipulate, the post-humanists run aground on the very Cartesian mind/body dualism (Hart, 2013, p. 60) these advancements allegedly supersede. The Achilles heel of the fanciful notions of a post-modern, post-human disillusionment of knowledge and bodies into a cybernetic cyberspace is they assume, "the material sufficient conditions for thoughts of all kinds is within the cranium…." (Taylor, 2007, p. 31). The Irony being, "the inside/outside geography, and the boundary dividing them… is reproduced in this materialist fantasy" (Ibid., p. 32).

Continuing on, Hayles suggests her fourth point is the most relevant. Any attempt to reconfigure the body and the self would be in coordination with the machinations of the power-structures dominating the culture. To imagine the body in such a way that it is potentially seamless with machines is just that – an imagination, a fantasy hoping, recalling Lyotard (1979:1984, p. 18), to turn bodies themselves into a product for consumption. As Hayles (1999, p. 11) writes:

> …if one sees the universe as composed essentially of information, it makes sense that these 'creatures' are life forms because they have the form of life, that is, an information code. As a result, the theoretical bases used to categorize all life undergo a significant shift.

This shift must come not only as a new idea, but as a new material mode of being. Seeing the world in a certain way – and this is both the critique of 'post-humanist' theories and the principal point

they attempt to elide – is the product of material concerns as well as a way of imagining ones-self in relation to these, and all this in relation to some ends or good. Technologies of virtuality are constructed as a discursive arrangement of ontological assumptions. These ontological assumptions become plays of power in practice, limiting and prescribing the "way the world is". In doing this, plays of power become 'relations' between people in a society and the objects in a society. In this way, objects like digital technology are woven into the fabric holding a society together because they function as nodes in the power relations implicit in any ontology.

Technology is not primarily mechanical nor is it independent of the conditions in which it emerges. Digital technology is caught up in the forces producing what is called knowing and it is the idea of knowing that becomes the knowledge one must know. This is not simply to suggest that certain apparatuses arrive at certain times to fulfill some instrumental purpose, that they are invented within certain distinguishable contexts and are reflections of a particular political or economic need at that time or place. All this is empirically plausible, but it is superficial. Rather, Hayles (1999, p. 18) proposes:

…living in a condition of virtuality implies we participate in the cultural perception that information and materiality are conceptually distinct, and that information is in some sense more essential, more important, and more fundamental than materiality.

Put another way, the way a thing appears is *not* exhaustively and substantively what a thing is (Pickstock, 1998, p. 257). It follows then some examination of an object – be it a human, a mind, a technology like an iPhone – by itself is in the first place impossible, but also will yield no clues about its essence in a particular web of relations. In this way, it could be said that a technology is always a sign referring away from itself. What appears to us technologically is not the sum of what is possible.

3.

Any history like what I am suggesting will encounter what Foucault describes as a *récits:* constructed stories meant to explain the present (Chatelet, 1979). He describes these as:

> An apparatus… essentially of a strategic nature… a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces, either developing them in a particular direction, blocking them, stabilizing them, utilizing them, etc. The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. (Foucault, 1980, p. 196)

The practices and objects of a given time are very much caught up in a set of governing ideas, definitions, and metaphysical understandings of how things relate and are to be ordered. The added difficulty in deciphering this is any social arrangement is always in service of some subcutaneous system invested in obscuring the capillary ways it engulfs society and what powers it props up. As Foucault (1969, p. 216) writes:

> I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose rule is to avert its power and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to avoid its ponderous, awesome materiality.

To 21st century ears, the word virtuality undoubtedly evokes 'virtual reality' as envisaged in literature and film: computer generated worlds populated by fantastic and menacing creatures and minds, places of pure possibility freeing their subjects from the laws of physics or culture or enslaving them to new forms of domination. And it should, for these two are deeply intertwined. From the novels and stories of Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, and William Gibson to cinematic portrayals of miraculous 'holo-decks' in StarTrek or The Matrix's tale of humanity's enslavement to machine ruled digital dream worlds, contemporary Western culture is replete with stories of virtual reality. Indeed, the scenario in which a holographic chamber replaces reality may seem to be a concern precipitated by the recent emergence of

digital technology, but this question of what is real and how that can be known is a question at the very tap roots of Western thought. Indeed, it could be argued this preoccupation with 'reality' as such is what characterizes western thought from its Eastern and Southern counterparts.

In this way, I think these old fantasies and fears are being made tangible again by the rapid proliferation of devices that do what the old mythologies purported. However, the technologies that produce these 'special effects' did not suddenly arrive as the material byproduct of some inevitable progression of engineering, some outcome of the evolution of machines, opening access to a new 'virtual' reality set alongside the temporal reality (Heidegger, 1973, p. 93). As has been explored, there is a particular metaphysical understanding required first; a particular way of imagining ourselves as being in the world proceeding the question of how that vision is reified.

If virtuality is undergirding our ability to participate in the digital world it would mean that idea is itself a part of a genealogy of knowledge that can be traced and deconstructed in ways that might reopen the current conceptions. As Hayles (1999, p. 20) proposes:

> It is no accident that the condition of virtuality is most pervasive and advanced where the centers of power are most concentrated… if we want to contest what these technologies signify, we need histories that show the erasures that went into creating the condition of virtuality, as well as visions arguing for the importance of embodiment.

So though 'virtual reality' is often thought of as the devices and material practices enabling the creation, manipulation, and inundation of users with images, and the way the users imagine themselves as being postured 'in' or in relation to these worlds, *virtualiter* and virtuality are more like categories that describe the elusive sinews that bind the material technologies with the background canvas of ideas, interrelations of power, self-conceptions, etc. that make the 'virtual' worlds of these devices a possibility.

A primary concern behind this project is the way the idea the word virtuality has been transmitted into contemporary thought. Or, how certain understandings of what the term meant had become

axiomatic in the conceptions of categories such as language, mind, and the social body in both the theory and theology of the Digital Age. Proposing, as I have just done, that there is some 'meta-narrative' thread traceable back through all instances of culture, even if it is delimited to the one strand of western human culture, flies in the face of perhaps the only sacrosanct position of all post-modern theories – no metanarratives. However, I think Jamison (Lyotard, 1979:1984, p. ix) offers us a way to sidestep this. As he writes:

> This seeming contradiction can be resolved, I believe, by taking a further step that Lyotard seems unwilling to do in the present text, namely to posit, not the disappearance of the great master narratives, but their passage underground as it were their continuing but now unconscious effectivity as a way of thinking about and acting in our current situation.

The 'underground' here is the backdrop, the unwritten, unspoken canvas on which modern identity is articulated and without which it becomes incoherent. I would agree with this wholeheartedly both as a way of understanding the how virtuality is still present in our thinking, and also a way of seeing post-modernity not as a 'deconstruction' of structuralist hegemony but as an overlay, a *récit*, a facade meant to obscure the beneficiaries of the way things are construed as being true and false.

Lyotard was not so much concerned with metaphysics as such, but the question of how knowledge is to be defined in a world devoid of any kind of metaphysics. If the dominant mode of exchange is 'information', then knowledge becomes a commodity to be traded, repurposed, renamed, and resold without any reference in reality. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, and instead becomes another discrete packet of capital in constant state of motion between forming and dissolving nodes of power. What Lyotard feared was, in a world where information is the commodity (or where all commodities are information), power relations would only exist invisibly in the digital world. The reflection of these in the

real world would appear as chaos, indecipherability, the very indifference or resistance to any meta-narrative explanations.

<div align="center">4.</div>

The reorientation so many have identified with the spirit of our age is inaugurated with the introduction of this new mode of virtuality does not come without some consequence, even some violence. In the mid-nineties, cultural theorist Paul Virilio (1995, p. 1) was already prognosticating the malaise of an all-pervasive techno-digital culture:

> The specific negative aspect of these information superhighways [the internet] is precisely this loss of orientation regarding alterity (the other), this disturbance in the relationship with the other and with the world.

This disorientation is understood by Graham Ward (2000, p. 250) to be caused by the construction of relationships based entirely on the "production and consumption of information." Establishing a community based on the "endless exchange of signs divorced from embodiment…", leading to a "social and political aphasia." Ward's use of the term 'aphasia' points specifically to the loss of the ability to speak to and of 'the other' as the peculiar symptom of the techno-Digital Age. This diagnosis stands in stark contrast with the pseudo-eschatological promises of these new technologies.

Concurring with Ward, Simon Critchley (2007, p. xvii) writes, "We seem to have enormous difficulty in accepting our limitedness, our finiteness...." These dreams of transcendence are seen in few places more potently than the epiphanic fantasy of the 'dissolution' of the body into a new reality of beings as atomized, catalogued, and infinitely mutable points of information (Cubitt, 1998, p. 20). Continuing, Critchley lucidly surmises this 'post-human' way of thinking of virtuality in the Digital Age, "Our culture is endlessly beset with Promethean myths of the overcoming of the human condition…" (1998, p. 20). This promethean myth is what Derrida described as a 'fantasy of pure presence' (Arac, 1986). If the task of Enlightenment Modernity was to create a system or philosophical structure which would allow for

access behind the sign, Postmodernity has not emerged as another one of these apparatuses, an heir to the modernist dream, but as a bomb; the detonation and destruction of those structuralist philosophical monuments.

Some revel in a nietzschean joy at the demolition of the old modern fancy of unmediated access to the sign's transcendental signified. In his essay 'Awakening from Modernity', Terry Eagleton (1985, p. 194) writes, "We are now in the process of wakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the postmodern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself." This echoes the rapture of Rorty (1979, p. 315) in 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature', who described the postmodern project as, "an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled."

Others lament the loss of the real as it vanishes in the vacuous interplay of *différance*. In his melancholy 'Simulation and Simulacra', Jean Baudrillard decries the "cancerous proliferation" of the simulacra – a condition of estrangement between sign and signified so intense the sign has no relation to any reality whatsoever. George Chryssides (2016, p. 129) sums this position up well:

> In our own generation of digital simulation… this distinction begins to falter and finally
> collapses altogether, as we are now capable of producing infinite simulated reproductions
> that are not only indistinguishable from the now long lost original, but are in many cases
> more intense, more perfect, digitally enhanced supra-real re-creations…. the entire
> system implodes into a vast circulation of signs.

A malady Žižek (2000, p. 23) succinctly reiterates as, "…an artificial promise of a substance that is never materialized." In either case, the pressing question is what can and should follow in the wake, and the answer may lie between these extremes in a new way of being in the world that is, as Graham Ward

(2000, p. 46) posits, both "prophetic and avant-garde" that can speak out of this post-human, postmodernity simultaneously in critique and of redemption.

VI.   Relating some of the debates in *Nouvelle Théologie* and Radical Orthodoxy to the questions raise by Virtuality

In the Digital Age, society is, in nearly every conceivable way, increasingly and in some cases now exclusively communicated through digital technologies. As Katheryn Hayles reminds us, the effectiveness and pervasiveness of this social transformation relies on an underlying assumption that whatever being is in the 'real world' and whatever it is doing, and thereby whatever the communities and selves coordinated and shaped by this conception are, its powers must be transferable to and transmittable through the materials of digital technologies. Jean Baudrillard (1981:1994, pp. 60-61 and 135-136) suggests the root of this assumption is a surreptitious nominalism in which language is pure representation, a constructivist and voluntarist game that reduces logic, morality, and metaphysics itself to mere byproducts of grammar.

If we are situated within a framework of understanding like this (and I think we are) how do we speak theologically in the Digital Age. How does one speak from an alternative intellectual position in an age suffused with a particular notion of virtuality? Of course, the coherence of this question is premised on a litany of assumptions: What does it mean to 'speak theologically' at any given time? What it is to 'speak'? What 'Theology' itself is? How speech can be 'theological'? To even ask is to suggest a coherent categorization of a place, a time, or a society that call be called 'digital' which is set apart from proceeding and parallel times. It may at first seem pedestrian to suggest doing Theology in the Digital Age is at all different from any other age, but my intention with the analysis of the preceding sections was to convince you it is. If it is, and if because of that rupture and transformation there has been some negative effect on society, some 'aphasia' that must be corrected, then what remains is to determine whether the language of Theology can still speak into that society; if it can heal the detachment and flatness of the post-human in the Digital Age.

As was said at the start, as a theologian my primary concern in this inquiry was what being in a world shaped by virtuality in such an overwhelming way does to the task of Theology? If, as I was

suggesting, the original idea of virtuality was germinated in the rich theological soil of the Scholastics, then it seems Theology might have some alternative resources, some deeper roots, to draw on that might set them beyond the present cultural conception. The root of Christian theology is "the Word made flesh" so it seems it should have some say in a world where the primary maladies are speechlessness and disembodiment.

What then is the task of Theology in a world shaped by the particular understanding of virtuality which I have suggested, because of its pervasiveness, enframes (*gestall*) the present language and limits of our culture? Or more broadly, how, as a Theologian, can I think about the reception of virtuality as a specific way of imagining one's self in the world, when I am a part of the very specific world coaxing me to question the notion of virtuality? Am I so deeply embedded in a particular mode of thinking about virtuality any conception I have of it is already internal to it?

Virtuality certainly conditions the project of Theology, but it does not own it. If anything, what the evincing of the Digital Age has shown is that there remains a foundational incompatibility between the metaphysics of Christianity, reified the everyday life of believers and articulated by Theology, and the metaphysical commitments undergirding the arrival of the Digital Age. This comes not only as a rupture between Christian practice and inclusion in the social imaginary of the broader culture, but also as a break, a discontinuity, between the Pre-Digital and Digital Age. This break has produced certain undesirable effects in the broader culture, and also it seems set off everyday participation in the culture as oppositional to participation in worshipping Christian communities. There is a sense full participation in the Digital Age is only possible if something of religion, and in particular Christianity, is left behind. Or that if one wants to be all the way in on Christian practice then there is a necessary retreat from the technological culture. But a tumultuous kinship between culture and Christianity should be nothing surprising.

If the Digital Age is a constructed system of belief one has to 'convert' into it should be no surprise an alternative way of believing and being might be incompatible with it, but I think this simple view misconstrues the nature of the church. It sets up the Church, the community of the faithful, as a kind of

culture unto itself. But Christianity it is not supposed to end culture, nor even supersede it. Christianity is supposed to be the fulfillment of culture. It is the fullness of whatever 'Age' or social imaginary or lifeworld it finds itself in.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 3:

…is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (The Bible, Romans. 3:29)

In this passage Paul completes a two-chapter long explanation of why specific Jewishness is still significant despite not guaranteeing any special status (Ibid., 2:29). He extends his exposition to suggest it was the way this people continues to exist that upholds both the legitimacy of Christ as the result of God's previous dealings with his people (Hays, 1980, pp. 107-115). And he goes on to suggest this is also a guarantee God's new covenant with this larger group will promulgate as a new society (The Bible, Romans. 11:22-23). The Kingdom of God is the fullness of all the branches of the tree which began as "a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. And though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches" (The Bible, Matthew. 13:31-32).

The Church is the people of God in a system of relations that models (*bild)* the world (Ward, 2009, p. 28). It models the world in a way that perfects and reifies it. It is a Divine community existing eternally in the mind of God (The Bible, Ephesians. 1:3-4) as the mystical body of Christ (Ibid., 1 Corinthians, 12:12-17), but also in space and time as the "concrete, propositional and divinely controlled 'thematization'" of this Holy body (Kilby, 1997, p. 73). And, in the words of Stanley Grentz (1994, p. 24), "…the Bible asserts that God's program is directed to the bringing into being of [this] community in the highest sense – a reconciled people, living within a renewed creation, and enjoying the presence of their

Redeemer." The Church is the people of God living in the mysterious Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the place where the people of God dwell as 'The Church', which is simultaneously in the world and the mind of God (The Bible, Luke. 17:21).

Theology then is both language about and directed to this 'peculiar' people (Ibid., 1 Peter. 2:9), but also the language of this people. It is speaking in the native tongue of The Kingdom. If so, it both pictures that world in the way language does, and forms that world in which the subjects live (Wittgenstein, 1922, pp. 5.6 – 5.632). What I mean is, that '*Theos-logia'* is not simply words or propositions about things, a field of scientificity, it is a way of being-in-the-world where the ever-present Kingdom of God is pressing in, imposing, imprinting the textures and shapes of that heavenly reality on the minds of the Faithful. Thus, the language of Theology is a kind of lithograph of the etchings and stipples that contact with the Holy 'Other' engraves on us. It is not the Holy itself, rather it is "tracing round the frame through which we look at it" (Wittgenstein, 1953:1967, p. 48e).

In his exegesis of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* Louis Marie Chauvet (1995, p. 19) offers this definition of the sacraments, "The sacraments not only signify, but also cause grace. In this way, 'grace' is not a concrete thing among other things, but a mode of being which transforms a human being." Karl Rahner helps us further this notion by claiming the sacraments do not merely causing grace by symbolizing it, rather, they cause it precisely in their effectual symbolizing of it (Kilby, 2007, p. 41). Here Catherine Pickstock (1997, p. 253) picks up this definition in an eschatological way, describing the Eucharist as, "…that which is not simply left behind but participates in the hidden mystery it signifies."

Turning back again to Rahner, this idea can be expanded further by an understanding of the Church as the 'meta' sacrament which both possesses a "divine interiority" different from its visible, earthly reality, yet also is the "real, permanent and ever valid presence of God in the world" and "that which effects this presence" (Rahner, quoted in Healy, 2000, p. 29). Finally, appropriating Von Balthasar to try and visualize this, it could be said the sacraments presently effect within nature the reality of the 'super-nature' to which all nature is itself a promise (1990, pp. 400 – 401).

In this way the Church is the Holy Body of Christ being made into the *corpus mysticum* by its participation in the Eucharist (Wood, 2010, p. 63). As the Apostle Paul describes it:

> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (The Bible, 1 Corinthians. 10:6-7)

This Body of Christ, the Church, is present in the world not merely as a historical-political or ecclesial body, but as *corpus verum,* a unity that is the true sacrament of grace by which God is redeeming all things back to himself (Wood, 2010, p. 65). As Milbank (2014, p. 14) suggests of Von Balthasar's vision, "…he saw the 'middle' sphere [between nature and grace] of continuous event and sign is precisely the sphere of culture." Finally, Paul reminds us, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation…" (The Bible, 1 Corinthians. 5:18), and this ministry simply cannot happen in a meaningful way if cultural bodies are superseded by the Church rather than fulfilled and, in a way, made fully embodied in it.

Within Christian Theology there is immense significance to the world as it is – nature as a gracious outflowing of God's purpose, not standing in opposition to God's purpose nor as a hollow reflection of some greater reality but graced and purposed and fully real all the way down. In other words, not to be evacuated for some manmade 'virtual' reality (Ward, 2012, p. 12). In *Le Surnaturel*., Henri de Lubac traces the historical development of the word 'supernatural', attempting to identify key ways in which its meaning shifts from the mediaeval understanding of supernatural in the context of the "natural and the moral orders" to a contemporary understanding of supernatural as "over and against what is 'natural' or nature itself" (Milbank, 2014, pp. 4-5).

The impetus for de Lubac in undertaking this study was to correct what he saw as misinterpretations in his day of the work of Aquinas and Augustine, and to answer a simple but

fundamental question of theology: how humans in a closed natural order can be drawn towards or directed to the supernatural order of grace (Leithart, 2006). Restated, if humans are pure nature then how can they have any *telos* beyond nature. His answer was simply that nature cannot be set apart from grace, the two intermingle and indeed nature itself is upheld by grace (Boersma, 2012). This means nature is always pressing outwards beyond itself towards its fulfillment in grace, and grace is always already present in nature.

This grace is felt as the restlessness seeking rest so famously articulated by St Augustine. As David Bentley Hart (2013, p. 58) describes it, "In the older model, the whole cosmos – its splendor, its magnificent order, its even vaster profundities – had been a kind of theophany, a manifestation of the transcendent God within the very depths and heights of creation."

The controversy of de Lubac's reassertion of the ancient position is it seems to undermine the gratuity of God's grace given to nature. One could read this as suggesting grace, and especially grace in Christ, is not something superadded to humans, but is something more akin to an awakening or sudden directing of an inner pull already in existence. De Lubac thought it necessary to take this position lest existence become a binary or two-tiered system. The poverty of this two-tiered way of thinking was that the lower 'natural' order – what might be defined as 'reality', what is tasted, touched, and felt, and generally understood as human nature – was a closed system, complete to itself, and therefore has a natural end as well.

Much like the 'nature' the post-humanists describe, it refers to nothing beyond itself. The other, higher 'supernatural' order was one outside of 'reality'. At some stage, and maybe simultaneous with the natural beginning of the world, the supernatural subsumed the natural and introduced a new a new purpose or *telos* to human nature. This purpose was felt, and then revealed through Scripture and the incarnation of the Christ, but the natural order remained, and remained intelligible without any need to avail of the revelation of the supernatural. Indeed, the *natura pura* is what exists at the foundational level of human experience, and the pull of this order weighs on our daily existence in a more tangible way that the

supernatural elevates us. What is required in this system then is some method, some means, some technology to overcome the gravity of the *natura pura.*

I contend this way out of nature is not meant to be the Church. Faith cannot be the engine that propels us from the actual up to a virtual 'super-nature'. If this is the metaphysical framework accepted by the Digital Age it is simply not one that the Church can authentically claim. The Church is not meant to get people out of nature, but to be the nexus point where heaven comes to earth and reveals nature to always already have been intermingled with it. As Philip McCosker (2006, p. 368) puts it:

> If theology is to escape the deadening abstractions of a dualist framework of nature and grace, this is because the essence of Christianity is not a system based on either side of the pair, but an overwhelming encounter with the person of Christ.

De Lubac suggests a schema in which the natural world, the 'actual', does not have an end in itself, is not cordoned off and impermeable, but rather has a burden of finitude, a veil that is porous and constantly being shot through with the light of the 'real' beyond itself (The Bible. 1 Corinthians. 13:12). de Lubac terms this as 'receptivity' (Healy, 2008, p. 561). Nicholas Healy (Ibid., p. 563) describes it this way, "Human nature is created for, and desires from its inmost depths, an ultimate end that exceeds Nature's desire." Thus, there is nothing more natural for Nature than to press through itself to the deeper expression of its own nature always present, already 'real'. In the same way, digital technology does not create a new 'virtual' space of existence beyond the temporal in competition with it, so we cannot imagine grace as a new space outside of creation. The supernatural of Grace presupposes a natural, and thus Christ's incarnation does create a community that surpasses nature to create a new dualism but fulfills it in a unity (Ibid.)

VII.   Final thoughts on the theological response to the untethering, disconnecting effects of virtuality

The present milieu is pervaded by digital technology. The hallmark of these technologies has been described for a generation by theorists as disrupting any sense of space and time (E.g. Dertouzos, 2009; May, 2009; Negroponte, 1995). Admittedly, it could be argued that a sense of space and time as being tied to the 'real' is a philosophical construction of the Enlightenment (Taylor, 2007, pp. 15-16). However, there is also a stream of thought which does not deny or try to untether from the 'outside' just beyond the edge of everyday senses, but instead sees significance in these senses of the real as pointing to or pulling towards the supernatural in their everyday operations. It is important that the everyday is real, because in being real it participate in a real beyond itself rather than it being merely a construction of the human mind (Taylor and Dreyfus, 2015, p. 93). This is not a new way of understanding, but a sense of it can be read as undergirding metaphysical systems since the classical Greeks. What might be a more recent development is the need to describe why and how we speak of things real and potent but not tasted, touched, or seen. Regardless of whatever anachronism there is in believing we *need* to justify things in this way, this paper argues the various ways of doing this are all takes on the idea of virtuality. What does this mean for the Church?

In what I would suggest is the most important argument of his important book *Cities of God* (2000), Graham Ward ties a sophisticated cultural hermeneutic in with a profoundly orthodox and Augustinian theology. First, echoing St Augustine's *De Civitas Deo,* he acknowledges that though human beings are sociable by nature, the fellness of humans leads them to feed their self-love in a frantic schizophrenia in which what appears to be an authentic pursuit of the good reveals itself to have a janus face of greedy desire for private self-pleasure. A *pleonexia* which is antithetical to both the social order of community the agap*e* of the *ecclesia.* Bill Cavanaugh expands on this, "…the effect of sin is the very creation of individuals as such, that is, the creation of an ontological distinction between individual and group" (1998, p. 184). But St Augustine wisely recognizes that human desires are so interwoven (*permixtum*) the love of self (*amor sui*) will inevitably begin to produce a simulacrum of what seem to be divine truths so that it becomes

more and more indistinguishable from authentic love of God (*amor dei*). Thus, the challenge laid out is in discerning between self-love and the divine love, and by extension whether the relations, "…between those in authority and those who serve them is *in caritate* or the exercise in *dominandi libido*" (p. 228). In other words, is power being enacted as a mode of manipulation, exclusion, and control or instead in mutual, self-giving love?

Ward continues, in an age when theologians were conflating the "…political with the ecclesial, Augustine both resisted the translation of God's kingdom into sociological, historical and political practices, and the temptation to identify the Church with the Heavenly city. The Church is also a human and earthly institution… [and] Augustine is aware that those who make up the ecclesial community are subject to the same desires and temptations of those espoused to the *civitas terrena*" (p. 229). David Foster Wallace lucidly surmised this sense in another way, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life… There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship" (2009, p. 7). This might be restated as 'everyone desires', and for Ward this choice is between a desire of self that excludes, isolates, and atomizes – leading to authoritarian imposition in which all are expected be formed into the one – and the desire for the real relations exemplified in the Triune God.

At present, a dualistic world-view persists both at the everyday level of perception and the lofty heights of philosophical and theological inquiry. This dualism imposes an inside and outside arrangement on the world, and in particular a divide between the real and a person's access to it. Contra the suggestion that everything is virtual, a special effect of the mind, I argue that everything is real. Everything that is, is a miraculous unveiling of grace not meant to 'got out of' but pressed into.

What the church offers contra the dualistic relations of the Digital Age, are relations which always includes a third party, always includes difference and therefore builds a unity of *koinonia* – a community of individuals united by a common love of the self-giving God of love. In Hauwerwaus's words, "the church is a polity like any other," (1983, p. 102) it is different because it is established by the Holy Spirit as the mission to reestablish the communion of non-oppositional difference, an analogical relation, founded in humanity's original unity through its shared *imago dei*. Thus, the Church, "does not exist to provide an

ethos for… social organization but stands as a political alternative… witnessing to the kind of social life possible for those who have been formed by the story of Christ" (Hauwerwaus, 1981:2010, p. 12).

      In recent years, continental philosophy and critical theory have become obsessed with the question of the structural relations between the religious category of the "miracle" and the aesthetics of the "special effect" (De Vries, 2001, p. 23). The suggestion is that when the material and technological history of the production of "special effects" begins to bleed into a philosophical and theological history of the "miracle", then—as Jacques Derrida, Hent de Vries, and Michael Naas have all suggested—neither religion nor technology are able to be thought in quite the same way.

      This gets at the crux of what's at stake in how virtuality is used. The basis of the special effect is the illusion: the idea that what is 'real' can be manipulated or the perception of the real can be manipulated to make something appear to be other than what it is. The basis of the miracle is the supernatural: the sense that there is more depth and more facets to the world that what human senses reveal. The hope of the special effect is that what is can be escaped, replaced, or overcome. The hope of the miracle is that the way things are is *not* exhaustively and substantively the way things will always be (Pickstock, 1997). Special effects can be undone. There is an impermanence to them. Miracles reveal creation for what it already is and what we hope it will persist in being.

      Ideally, Christianity should be the fulfillment or culmination of culture rather than its rival. Though this does not rule out the possibility of tension, it should be a tension building to consummation. At present, it seems that this is not the case. The irony in this state of things is Christianity and the socio-economic culture that produced the Digital Age were once suggested to be extensions of the same historical social impulse. Despite this widespread sense of Western, Protestant modernity as the dialectic culmination of Christianity, signs of a rupture were present early on. Attempts by thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx to put their finger on something alienating, something untethering in the metaphysics undergirding the social and industrial revolutions of early modernity did not augur well for the future.

      What I believe has become clear in the last three decades is Christianity's understanding of

transcendence and the transcendence presently offer in virtuality undergirding the Digital Age are incompatible. This paper has been an attempt to articulate what the differences between these two ways of thinking of virtuality are, what their genesis might be and how they diverged, and why the virtuality and accompanying pathway of transcendence held within Christianity is still vital in a culture so dominated by a rival way of thinking.

The Church and its theology in the Digital Age are, in their fullest sense, an alternative negotiation of time and space founded on a virtuality that leads to the claim of transcendence which says "…kingdom of God is among you" already (Ibid., Luke. 17:21), and yet continually points to an infinite horizon of a future hope that, "…even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day… preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (The Bible, 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

VIII.   Conclusion

In recent years, continental philosophy and critical theory have become obsessed with the question of the structural relations between the religious category of the "miracle" and the aesthetics of the "special effect" (De Vries, 2001, p. 23). The suggestion is that when the material and technological history of the production of "special effects" begins to bleed into a philosophical and theological history of the "miracle", then—as Jacques Derrida, Hent de Vries, and Michael Naas have all suggested—neither religion nor technology are able to be thought in quite the same way.

This gets at the crux of what's at stake in how virtuality is used in different epistemological systems. The basis of the special effect is the illusion: the idea that what is 'real' can be manipulated or the perception of the real can be manipulated to make something appear to be other than what it is. The basis of the miracle is the supernatural: the sense that there is more depth and more facets to the world that what human senses reveal. The hope of the special effect is that what is can be escaped, replaced, or overcome. The hope of the miracle is that the way things are is *not* exhaustively and substantively the way

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What I believe has become clear in the last three decades is an analogical and realist understanding of transcendence, the kind I think must undergird Christianity, and the transcendence presently offer in virtuality undergirding the Digital Age are incompatible. This paper has been an attempt to articulate what the differences between these two ways of thinking of virtuality are, what their genesis might be and how they diverged, and why the virtuality and accompanying pathway of transcendence held within Christianity is still vital in a culture so dominated by a rival way of thinking.

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