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The Metaphysics of Electronic Being

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Abstract: In his article "The Metaphysics of Electronic Being" Michał Ostrowicki discusses the electronic environment as a sphere of being. To this end, the notion of the "electronic sphere" is used as a subject of ontological analysis. Ostrowicki postulates that the problematics of the electronic sphere represents a part of ontology and designates it as "ontoelectronics." He makes a distinction made between an electronic image and an electronic being, thus indicating that they differ from each other in their existential status and thereby deny any metaphysical equivalence between the two. This distinction between an electronic image and an electronic being is postulated as fundamental to the problematics of metaphysics of the sphere of electronic being.

Michał Ostrowicki [aka Sidey Myoo]

The Metaphysics of Electronic Being

I postulate that the electronic sphere in today's world directs intentionality into electronic matter, creating conditions for satisfying human needs and requirements. Thus, the physical world seems to lose some of its values, while the electronic sphere enriches and develops. We might say that it grows in parallel to the physical world: therefore, what is important is not the fact that it creates capabilities and new possibilities unattainable in the physical world, but rather that the electronic sphere becomes real (see Turkle 29-73, 186-208). We do not use the terms "virtual" or "virtual reality" and "real" or "real world." These terms are historically determined and are acquired notions which would be inadequate to describe the electronic sphere. The notion "virtual" is combined, mainly, with such notions as "artificial" or "simulated." Thus my use of the concept of the sphere of electronic being is in such a way as to render notions which have connotations with unreality or non-reality not suitable or not useful. "Reality" is used in so many different ways and has so many philosophical implications that its meaning seems almost obscure. Instead, I use the notions "physical world" and "electronic sphere" or "electronic *realis*." Ontoelectronics — a designation I propose — is to describe the electronic sphere as a kind of reality, and thus I focus on the ontology of electronic beings and the existence of a human within them. Ontoelectronics may be regarded as a part of ontology useful for research and investigation into the electronic sphere of being, thus constituting an object of analysis. Ontoelectronics has become comparable with other forms of the philosophical problematic of beings, but in ontoelectronics we tend to elicit the properties and nature of electronics as a kind of reality. In other words, the description of the electronic sphere changes from "useful" to "existential," and thus we begin to talk about the electronic sphere as being included in real human activity, where people and subjects acquire reality and value (see Rajchman 501-02).

I use the concept of "electronic *realis*" suggesting the notion of the electronically created environment as something objective and real. Similar to my electronic *realis* are notions proposed by Myron Krueger ("artificial reality"), Michael Heim ("virtual realism"), and Howard Rheingold ("virtual community"). These notions stem, in general, from regarding the electronic environment as being more artificial in meaning or connected with technology or social structure. The electronic sphere has an ontological, although general sense, and describes a perspective of analysis of electronic beings similar to that of the ontological analysis of the sphere of ideas or the physical (real) world. The electronic sphere describes electronic matter as an alternative for other kinds of reality. A human can be directed into many kinds of surrounding reality and is not concerned with only one sphere of being but is able to recognize a variety of beings, together with their ontological differences. Thus, I am interested in how the electronic sphere of being becomes real and what kind of ontology is needed for its description and I use the concept of electronic *realis* to underline that the kinds of human activity taking place in the electronic sphere are comparable to those which belonged previously to the physical world. When a particular activity is transferred to the electronic sphere and becomes real, it changes its ontological status in relation to its previous existence in the physical world. The content of the activity does not change but its sphere of being does. Further, electronic *realis* is employed in the sense of the electronic sphere, when electronic objects become reliable and obligatory for someone.

The problem of the reality of the electronic sphere has been settled mainly in relation to the so-called "real world." First, certain philosophies, beginning from Platonic metaphysics to later ontological analyses of the real world are inclined to doubt its existence. Second, the non-physical aspect of reality was closely related to humans, that is, the metaphysics of spirituality or the ontological status of ethical or aesthetic values, even art. From this perspective, when we are unable to posit metaphysical judgments concerning the existence of the physical world or postulate its metaphysics, we can inquire about or search for other kinds of realities. If in metaphysics we cannot, with certainty, declare the ontological status of the physical world, how can we stress its "realness" in contrast to the "non-real" or "artificial" nature of other spheres of being? (see Welsch 175-81). When we consider and examine the phenomenon of the electronic sphere, it becomes evident that in this sphere some kinds of being are real, such as information, communication, human inter-action, and can be regarded as an ontological subject of analysis, especially when this kind of reality becomes comparable to and as valuable as,

or even more important than those found in the physical world. Thus, the electronic sphere is understood here not only as a continuation of the physical world, but as constituting an individual and distinct sphere which is ontologically different from the physical world.

Features of ontoelectronics are connected with phenomena observed and described by commentators at the beginning of computerization, spreading to cyberculture from the 1970s onward (see, e.g., Heim, "The Essence of VR," *Virtual Realism*). Notions such as interactivity (connected with alinearity) and immersion (meaning a kind of power which can redirect human intentionality from the physical world into the electronic one), telemacity (which treats the electronic environment as a source of sensual experience), and telepresence (which concerns discourse involving images) are all known and are usually applied to describe the electronic environment, especially when it is merely regarded as a means of communication or an extension of the physical world. But it seems inadequate for the ontological description. The problem is, how did these phenomena appear? What is the essence, meaning the ontological status, of the electronic sphere which can be used to describe such phenomena? Ontoelectronics has acquired its own subject of description: we have two kinds of spheres of being, the physical and the electronic, and two ontologies. Thus I am interested in differences in categories of ontology as they apply to the electronic sphere of being and in distinctions between them arising from these ontological differences. It appears that the general problem of the ontology of the electronic sphere stems from a comparative understanding of physical and immaterial beings. The electronic sphere differs from the physical one in its material status. Throughout history, humankind has changed the physical world, in a sense transforming nature into an artifact. Human creativity considered the quality of physicality and mind was able to overcome physical matter. Thus, it could be said that the human world began in the human mind, in consciousness, or simply as an intuition which initiated the transformation of physicality giving it a new form and adapting it to human needs. However, in contrast to the physical world, where humans transform nature to artifact, in the electronic sphere they can create without the mediation of physical matter. There was no difference in materiality during the historical process of the transformation of nature, only in its form: creation and the transformation of physicality were based consistently on one kind of matter. In the case of the electronic sphere of being, we speak of the immateriality, therefore we can speak of beings whose existence is immaterial, in contrast to physicality.

The human transformation of physical matter may be compared to a search for the diversity or even destruction of the material of nature and its recreation in a new form of physicality: the human world. Electronic matter is transformed not by hands or tools, but, rather, as the result of an intentional act. For humans, physical matter is limited and its finite quantity seems to be synthetically and *a priori* perceived. Electronic matter, on the other hand, seems inexhaustible: being generated at the same rate as that of technological progress, it would appear to be limitless. Both these kinds of matter provide material for the creation of human reality: electronic or physical. Neither is philosophically defined, but both could occupy the same plane when described in terms of natural science (on the level of corpuscular description, it appears that electronic and physical reality are similar in nature but different in appearance. Given the uniformity of matter on the quantic level, i.e., in terms of quantum physics, it may be possible to postulate a monistic description in which both these realities could be described in non-material terms. Electronics provides unprecedented access to a form of matter different in quality from the physical and allows the kind of creation which is impossible in the case of physical matter. The question is, then, how much do we need a physical dimension at all? When we observe the process of implementation of various kinds of human activity in the electronic sphere and the appearance there of human content in immaterial form, we can argue that humans modify their attitude and consciousness and, whenever possible, tend to use electronic forms for certain processes, for example, information, education, communication, and self-expression. This may be referred to as a process of adapting cognitive categories of the mind to non-physical matter, for example, by experiencing thinking telematically in immaterial categories.

Electronic and physical spheres differ from each other in their relationship to space, and even time. Humans are accustomed to space as being determined or described by philosophical or physical time-space. Electronics provides a different understanding of space and time, which is particularly apparent in the alinearity of connections or accessibility: humans and things can be found more easily in the electronic sphere than in the physical world. There, space is not measured in physical terms but is

non-dimensional as a category of the physical world and could be described in terms of displacedness and alinearity. Humans act upon the electronic space while moving in physical space. This may be referred to as space relativism, that is to say, physical space determines human space, whereas electronic space is determined by consciousness. Just as consciousness of the physical dimension inclines a person to move in it, so experience of the electronic space inclines us to move in it. Electronic space, by its alinearity, seems non-parallel to and atemporal with the categories of three-dimensionality and time of physical space. Humans exist in electronic space not in the sense of belonging to it, but as its center, in a dimensionally indeterminate place which could be called the centralization of space in the electronic sphere. Time is more difficult to describe because of its connection with human biology. It is possible that, in some cases, time in the electronic sphere can be determined in a psychological sense—connected with self-acceptance and the intensity of one's activity. In this sense, especially in connection with human identity, time could be defined relatively, not only by one's biology, but by an embodiment in electronic identity.

We can speak of a place in two meanings: the first concerns physical space (which can be described as hardware, a structure, and a space located on a computer's disc) and the second meaning refers to the place in the electronic sphere where one begins one's activity. The first aspect is connected with a description of the physical world, and is related to the general question of matter in the physical world. The second describes a place in the electronic sphere as a personal place or places which have become important for someone (see Healy 62-64). It can be deeper than mere communication (for example, email or websites) when we talk about a place where people meet frequently to work or realize real desires, as in the 3D electronic world. The problem of place results from differences in developing technologies. It has its origins in our electronic contact, for example, using communicators, where people are visible by virtue of being logged on, giving rise to a specific kind of frequent, everyday contact. Such people do not need to talk with each other for months on end (or even at all); however, the mere fact of coming together on Skype, for example, gives a feeling of mutual presence and closeness. This kind of experience cannot be created in the physical world. Such situations produce unique relationships, which people do not regard as utilitarian, but, rather, in which they value each other. It is possible that we will never lose contacts created in this way and that our Skype contacts will always be with us whenever we are logged on. Instant messaging or 3D environments or blogs became places where people meet, and sometimes even need such places to be part of their world. Places in the electronic sphere bring people together, frequently through shared interest, without any regional or global limitation and such contact can also be ones of deeper, interpersonal relationship comprising human values which might be rare, or even unique for someone in the physical world. With technology, people not only create places in the electronic sphere, but also change the places they spend time in, such as where they work or live; in this sense, people sometimes leave a place in the physical world. These places in the electronic sphere can be more accessible than those in the physical world and bring together a variety of people who would find it impossible to meet and get to know each other in places in the physical world. Places in the electronic sphere can become valuable and significant for a person, always open for anyone wanting to enter and be present.

Further, an anthropological perspective comprises relations between humans and the electronic sphere of being. Anthropization involves the redirection of intentionality when a human finds the electronic sphere as one of real interest. It is connected with a transfer of subjects, work, and frequently personal emotional life (see Dyson 85-93). These relations confirm two other processes: the process of implementation and the process of accommodation. The process of implementation describes a personal, subjective perspective of the electronic sphere, which creates the electronic *realis*, while the process of accommodation describes an objective perspective of how the electronic sphere "becomes saturated" and grows by accommodating every possible kind of human activity. Those two processes build a further, more general process, namely, the anthropization of the electronic sphere. By the anthropization process the electronic sphere is enriched with human values. Continuous interchange between the human and the electronic sphere produces qualitative changes, by means of which humanity and the electronic sphere become closer to each other. The process of implementation is also interesting because it is increasing constantly, thus assuming an ever greater importance in everyday life. When people transfer activity in the electronic sphere, they strike an existential balance between

the physical and electronic worlds. This balance provides an opportunity to develop one's identity and thereby to experience and develop one's existence (see Popper 355-70).

Feelings in the electronic sphere are found to be real. The electronic sphere could be specific in its essence to accommodate a spiritual expression of humanity. The immateriality of the electronic sphere accommodates humanity, perhaps because it lacks a physical dimension and can therefore accommodate naturally non-physical human features. Thus, spirituality migrates effortlessly into the electronic sphere, where spiritual values are common and widespread. The existential aspect of the electronic *realis* elicits truth about a human and his/her real intentions and provides space for their realization. This aspect is connected with some others, such as the process of incorporation, when someone identifies with their electronic body, especially in a 3D electronic environment, and creates his/her place in the electronic *realis*. Electronic embodiment allows the possibility of changing one's electronic body and the acceptance of an electronic body can, for some people, be easier than accepting their biological body.

A further process may be described as taking place when someone tries to change their life in the physical world on the basis of strategies of behavior and appearance acquired in building their electronic self-portrait. People not only create values in the electronic sphere, but also discover that these values become real and important to them (e.g., Facebook). It can enable someone to get feedback going from the electronic sphere into the physical one. It is possible for someone to change his/her life in the physical world through experience in the electronic *realis.* Here, I omit this difficult and provocative subject because it is too broad and sensitive and borders on the psychological sciences. However, I posit the possibility that the values of the electronic sphere can have an impact on one's life in the physical world. Moreover, having an electronic identity allows the use of social strategies which can change relationships between people in the physical world. Electronic *realis* provides many opportunities to correct what has been done before.

Evolution runs faster in the electronic sphere (which stems from the connection between humans and technology) interweaving human and technological evolution. The evolution of the physical world, based on nature, proceeds more slowly and only partly determines human evolution. Technology accelerates human evolution and has a determining effect on humanity. This technological aspect of evolution leaves humanity ever more closely enmeshed in electronic interconnections, continuing a process which has been ever present in human history, from the first fire in a cave to the silicon processor. There is also a historical difference in how generational succession is seen. I note that the present-day understanding of generational succession can be defined in terms of technology and that the process is not necessarily and solely a biological one. The period of generational succession in the era of electronics is shorter than before: it could be said that, in terms of changing technology, a new generation occurs every few years. Thus this aspect of ontoelectronics could also be described as a cultural perspective of the technological factor in everyday human life.

Processes of ontoelectronics suggests that the electronic sphere as something difficult to describe even when using notions describing electronic images. The role of an electronic image can be to provide a key to understanding the difference between the essence of an electronic image and a being. An electronic image is a representation of the physical world: it constitutes a medial reality and may be defined as a category which cannot be considered to exist, in a comparable metaphysical sense, in the physical world and the electronic one. Electronic images as a category of simulation are derivative and artificial and have no ontological dimension as do the beings which are the source of the image. Thus, electronic images are non-existent in the metaphysical sense. The products of those media which depict the physical world lack any metaphysical dimension and are merely images or simulations. Understanding media in this way is inadequate for an analysis of electronic beings. The subject of images tends towards treating the problematic of the electronic environment in terms of effectiveness or simulation, and such an approach could lead to regarding human activity and the electronic sphere as unreal, rendering an ontology of electronic beings impossible. Electronic beings arise in the electronic sphere: they are not images of something preceding them, but are created originally in the electronic sphere and thus constitute electronic *realis*. A discussion of electronic images and electronic beings reveals a fundamental difference arising from their connection with the physical world or the electronic sphere. Electronic images define the physical world and electronic beings define the electronic *realis*. This problem concerns two situations: first, a person faced with a medial image is di-

rected to the physical world and second, a person is directed to the electronic world, thereby not dealing at all with an image of the physical world but purely with the electronic world.

My argument is that when speaking of the nature of an image, particularly television images, the perceiver is the recipient of information. Generally, this kind of direct media cognition move us towards the physical world and have a representational function, using images of people and things. The difference appears when something that exists on a computer screen ceases to be an image and becomes a more tangible being, for example in electronic 3D worlds. Here, the image and a being acquire an electronic nature, but the former presents or makes a simulation, while the latter creates a being or identity in the electronic sphere. There is a difference between an image of someone and his/her identity created independently of any image, that is, their electronic identity. The former has its origin in the physical world, the latter in the electronic sphere, as seen, for example, in the colloquial word for an electronic identity, "avatar." In those media which depend on images, we can still find a contrast between an "original" and a "copy" (i.e., Baudrillard's concept of cimulacra). Medial information which creates an image of the physical world is no more real than it is unreal: categories of true and false do not apply; however, it can be described in terms of existence and non-existence, which is to say, it does not have any metaphysical status. People accept media such as television without knowing how much of it is real or having any way of checking it. Metaphysical consequences arise from an analysis which does not speak of an electronic image but of the electronic *realis* where electronic beings are created: "when I have an image of a pen, I understand it as an image of the pen, but when I can speak of an electronically created pen, I change my understanding of this pen: the pen and the possibility of writing became real and it ceases to be an image or a process of simulation, but becomes a real, electronically existing pen, and the process of writing is real too."

When someone creates a context for themselves in the electronic sphere, independent of his/her identity in the physical world, this creation is neither artificial nor simulated. In this situation, one acquires an identity together with a view on life, but not by a transformation of one's image in the physical world, but by creating an identity *de novo*. This is not an image of someone but an electronic identity directed into the electronic sphere of being, not the physical world. When we speak of the metaphysics of the electronic world and people's attitudes towards it, we are here describing a situation where all intentions and actions are directed into the electronic sphere and are not sustained in the physical world. I am referring here to uses which are electronically created or which we have created ourselves, especially in 3D environments such as Second Life. There it is possible to acquire objects like houses and clothes, things which also have a financial value in the physical world. Someone's electronic identity can be so close and personal that he/she does not want to create a new one. The electronic ownership of buildings and other possessions is created from electronic matter, people and objects are treated as real and useful, and are really experienced: they are not simulated but exist in an alternative reality. I speak of the electronic sphere of beings as a human-populated world in which people do not discern differences in the essence of objects but only in their matter. It is obvious that an increasing number of things and activities are being transferred into the electronic world, creations which are increasingly distinctive and shape everyday life. The electronic world can be regarded as a sphere of human existence, a growing and developing reality which has the capacity to become fundamentally important, not only as a shared means of global communication, but also as shared human existence.

In sum, the non-physical electronic world spreads invasively and as such may be regarded as part of human evolution. For years we changed the physical world into a world of human artifacts, but throughout history human activity was focused on the physical world. Today, humans are creating a new kind of reality: the electronic *realis*, which is becoming a human world, a growing alternative kind of reality, the reality of the electronic world.

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