Void in Onlife Age, Aspects of De-Realization and Disconnection

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Abstract: *The hyperconnected world brings to light new challenging questions for the human condition, in virtue of the interaction between the blurring borders of the offline and the online regions. In my paper, I'll discuss whether the experience of void, so deeply related to psychiatry for being a symptom of a wide range of mental diseases, still makes sense within the Onlife domain (Floridi, 2015), in the fourth revolution of mankind. An existential condition related to the rupture of the relation between self and the environment, void is a well-known phenomenon of de-realization: this is the key passage for the present investigation. In the Onlife world, this concept should be revised, in virtue of the enlargement of the realm of the 'real'. Hence, the new ontology of the hyperconnected society leads to a more comprehensive idea of emptiness, from which we can move for a better understanding of the common need of 'filling the void'. Through the lens of General System Thinking, that better fits for studying complex phenomena and their interactions, I'll show the analogies between real and digital world for what concerns filling the void, a behaviour that – especially within the digital domain – can originate states of anxiety that lead to disconnecting from the web. I'll conclude that the Onlife world provides a highly valuable perspective to grasp the pathological aspects of de-realization.*

Keywords: *void, de-realization, disconnection, digital world, reality, internet addiction, mental illness*

1. THE EXPERIENCE OF VOID AS A PATHOLOGICAL AND AN EXISTENTIAL TRAIT

A key-word for approaching several emotional frames, void always refers to a negative trait of the human condition, within the lens of the Western culture. Taken in this peculiar sense, it should be distinguished by the notion of empty space, at the very heart of philosophical debate since Parmenides and from the concept of vacuum in modern quantum mechanics of quantum physics.

Differently from the Buddhist perspective (Burton, 1999; Johansson, 1980) which tributes to emptiness the capacity to unveil the very essence of reality, through meditation (Epstein, 1989), the Western approach to void primarily underlines its pathological features. This human condition deals with a constellation of diseases which are the traditional concerns of psychiatry, like depression, schizophrenia (Lysaker and Lysaker, 2010; Kean, 2009), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (Kernberg, 2000), Personality Borderline Disorder (Elsner, 2017) and the Alimentary Behavior Disturbances (Null and Bernikow, 2001) just to quote some of the most relevant psychological/psychic pathologies (DSM-5, 2014).

In this paragraph, as a point of departure for the investigation, I'll sketch some circumstances, either pathological or not, in which void is experimented. As a premise I would underline that void, as well as vacuum and emptiness, are terms generally used as synonyms in describing or referring to the same feature, although vacuum is primarily a key term of quantum mechanics and emptiness widely refers to the mathematical domain.

Emptiness can be said a symptom of mental illness as well as a peculiar being-in-the-world. Broadly speaking it can be interpreted a dissociation that involves «the rupture of the normally expected integration of psychological functions and the social presentation of the self» (Kirmayer, 1994: 92) and gives rise to an uncomfortable perception of self-identity. The interior emptiness, as a consequence of an intimate impoverishment, does not allow a veritable interaction with the world of life (Fisogni, 2019 a).

People affected with mental disorders feel disoriented, as they wouldn't have earth under their feet. How do they sense this peculiar void? In the psychotic experiences, as Binswanger noticed (1960), there is a loss of intentionality: the person perceives reality, because of her/his

being-in-the-world, but the intention – the movement of the Self – is reflexive: it is properly directed towards the person, not primarily to the world.

As an experience of failed relation with the environment that occurs in the self, pathological void is also an intersubjective feeling that can also involve subjects in a twofold way: a person who deals with a psychotic subject (the therapist, a friend, a relative) can perceive a distance between himself and the individual affected by a mental disease. Psychiatrist and phenomenologist Binswanger finely described this frustrating experience like the one of an empty crater (1960).

The feeling of emptiness can occur frequently also in particular circumstances of fragility, fear, anguish. In early infancy this experience is widely attested (Fisogni, 2011, 2012, 2015). The weaning phase, for example, makes the child experimenting the dark side of being in the world, that's to say the absence of a stable point of gravity where to feel secure. The degree of anxiety that the child experiments when the mother is absent is at the origin of the anguish attested in the human being since the first year of life.

Strictly related to de-realization, the child's anguish «adds up to the disappearing of the world, an absolute disappearing, a total absence of good». The baby, in other words, realizes that «in his universe, *the good does not exist* anymore, the child misses it» (Bernardi, 2007: 92) (Translation is mine).

In the wide range of the evildoing phenomena, within the moral domain, personal void is intended as a consequence of the loss of being, a de-potentiation of the human agency (Fisogni, 2009; 2013). The Dutch intellectual and Holocaust's victim Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) carefully sketches in her *Diary* and *Letters* a deep, experiential account of the origin of evildoing as an intimate emptiness of the person (Fisogni, 2019 a). She noted that both the Nazi persecutors and the victims were generally affected by the symptoms of a weakened self. For both, prisoners and criminals at the highest grade, the relation with the world of life was labelled by indifference, hence the rupture with the existential frame brought to light the constellation of symptoms that belong to intimate void (frustration, indifference, uncomfortable being in the world). Emptiness was generally at the origin of a state of depression and desperation that led prisoners not

to react to their persecutors, like lambs to sacrifice. Worth noting the link between void/emptiness also affects spiritual life. A case study of this particular discomfort is given by sloth, a term that translates the Latin *acedia*. A capital sin for the Catholic faith, it is often underestimated and confused, with laziness, so that it is usually referred to as the inability of doing anything. Thomas Aquinas gives us some accounts of it in a number of his essays. The more proper definition of *accidia* given by Thomas is *tristitia aggravans*, a kind of sorrow that prevents souls from operating. Spiritual inactivity due to the perception of emptiness reflects on physical inactivity. It is probably this psychological interpretation to make sloth not fully perceived in all its spiritual complexity.

The death of a spiritual soul, at the light of the Aquinas' thought, it is a concrete possibility, if we concede that it is the centre of any activity, in virtue of its being an openness to good. It is properly the experience of good, provided by relation to the world of life, that enriches or impoverishes a human being.

2. VOID AS A SYMPTOM OF DE-REALIZATION IN REALIST ONTOLOGY

Although briefly sketched in its essential traits, the anthropological condition in which the experience of void is accomplished refers to emptiness as a lack. In depression, severe mental diseases, personality disturbances and even in the very ordinary phase of weaning, as seen before, the human subject experiments de-realization as a loss of relation.

On the phenomenological ground, an immediate discomfort is felt by the self, which is affected by an intimate dryness, as a consequence of the detachment from the world of life. De-realization, then, could be also interpreted, on the philosophical perspective, in terms of de-ontologisation or as a loss of being. Through the realistic perspective of classical ontology, a being is something that exists concretely, as an object. It follows that any existential experience of void may be equated to the de-potentiation of the transcendental relation to the domain of ordinary life. The condition of de-realization – although it refers to a domain of diverse phenomena related by family similarities – could be seen as a consequence of a failed relationship with the world of life.

Strictly dependent on the idea of absence, the concept of *horror vacui* – the Latin formula for the fear of the void, finely refers to the urge «to

fill an empty space with all kind of details» (Mortelmans, 2005). Although it mainly concerns the domain of art, the aesthetic frame allows a better understanding of void as a consequence of de-realization, because it brings to light the connection between the human subjects and their being-in-the-world as Heidegger theorized. The author of *Being and Time* (1927) moved also further his classical explanation, investigating the concept of anguish, another main symptom of mental discomfort finely thread with the existential condition. In *Was ist die metaphysic?* (1929) he assumed that anguish is a feeling related to the objectification of the absence, as something that cannot be seen nor thought, except through a negative emotion. Differently from fear, anguish is experimented as a lack of motives from which the discomfort originates. In this sense, we can conclude, it would be incorrect to equate anguish to the *horror vacui*. The "fear of void" remains something potentially objectifiable: it may overcome by filling a room with things or a white sheet of paper with words. Anguish only exists by itself as absence.

On the contrary, the Buddhist theory of void looks at emptiness as the more authentic essence of existence: while it «negates our delusory reification of reality», it is not itself «an alternative reality in which we should dwell» (Davis, 2015: 191). According to the dependent origination philosophy (Bartley, 2011; Lipner, 2010) the nothingness of void brings to light the lack of independent substantiality of phenomena (Godman, 2008) or "the non-intrinsic being-this" (suunyata), an idea appearing by the 100 B.C. in the Commentary by Nāgārjuna (Khensur, 2012; Jones, 2010).

3. THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE HYPERCONNECTED WORLD

The Onlife domain, the very topic of the present paper, is the frame in which the most various and different phenomena of the hyperconnected world take place. Coined by Italian philosopher and Oxford professor Luciano Floridi (2015), the term refers to the ambiguous profile of the blurring environment that is part of our everyday experience. In the Onlife region, the real and the virtual worlds are hard to separate. They are continually implicated as dynamic units that constantly interact, giving birth to phenomena that do not belong separately to one or the other ground. Nevertheless, examining the phenomena of Onlife age means to deal with a systemic environment, where continuous

interactions occur within a process of acquiring and losing properties (Minati, 2019). Hence, we refer to contemporary phenomena in which also the experience of void in the Onlife age may be included. As Floridi assumes: «One of the major transformations is the shift from the primacy of stand-alone things, properties, and binary relations to the primacy of interactions, processes and networks» (Floridi, 2015: 335).

Moving from this premise, and considering how strictly offline and online systems interact, it follows that General System Thinking (GST) fits for the phenomena that inhabit the Onlife world better than other theoretical perspectives belonging to the traditional linear thinking. Elaborated by biologist Ludwig Bertalannfy in 1967, now the leading theoretical approach to the complexity, also in virtue of its inter-disciplinarity, GST grounds on the idea that system is an organization of parts connected by relationship, which has properties that its parts do not have (called emergent, ore second-level, or systemic properties) (Urbani Ulivi, 2010). Independent of the nature of its elementary constituents, systems are related to their surrounding environments while remaining irreducible to its components, nor are their main features explainable from the characteristics of single, and isolated parts. The systemic approach allows to re-write old and worn concepts innovatively. This is the case of the intimate, deeply personal experience of the void, for example, as I intend to argue briefly.

In the Onlife age, this frame should be revised, opting for a more comprehensive view of ontology, according to the arguments sketched by Urbani Ulivi (2019) through the systemic approach. The disembodied region of the digital, in the hyperconnected world, not simply strictly interfaces with the offline region, in reason of the continuous passages from one to the other system, but introduces a radical change in the ontological perspective.

At this point of the paper, a twofold question arises: does make sense, in the Onlife world, to talk about de-realization, if we consider classical ontology only belongs to the 'real' world? I argue that, although the offline and the online domains have radically different features, a comprehensive ontology of both cannot only be thought at the light of General System Thinking but may be highly considered for the grasping the phenomena of the Onlife age. The keyword is *connection*. As we saw before, the transcendent relation of the self to the objects of

the world-of-life gives rise to the essential trait of realist ontology, which consists of the I-You relationships. De-realization is basically the consequence of the detachment of the two poles (I-You, Self-objects) where the experience of self is grounded, whose consequence is the existential discomfort. It seems that the 'category' of de-realization cannot be applied to the digital, for being the virtual world ontologically at the opposite of the so-called real world or the world of life: the absence of concreteness of the entities that fill Internet, for example, might be seen as the major limitation for a comparison to find similarities between the two regions. However, it is properly the very idea of connection that grounds all the activities of the online world to incline us towards an unexpected, close interactive familiarity between the two shelves of the Onlife dimension, the real and the virtual.

1) No experience of the virtual is ever allowed without a connection with the offline world, which plays the main role in moving the subject into the digital dimension. Any digital device, a smartphone as well as a computer, should be linked to the network for working.

2) No one can be really connected with the digital without the involvement of the whole person: touching the screen of an Ipad or talking to a voice-controlled personal assistant, far from being a mechanical gesture, is the consequence of some practical operations that depends upon intention, the concept theorized by Anscombe (1957). In other words, anyone who has access to the device should be finely aware of the passages that allow him/her to activate the Ipad and to join the network.

3) The language of the Onlife frame is made by continuous interactions between offline and online: this peculiar movement always gives rise to 'concrete' situations and phenomena. For example: if I have to reach a place, I can check the train timetable in the web, to take the train; if I go online banking for paying some fees, it is because I intend to do that operation. If I watch at a video, it is because I prefer not to go to the cinema for relaxing at home or in the waiting room of the doctor. In any case, the offline world is never detached from the online ground. It is the point of departure or the final end.

5) Worth noting that a completely virtual world like the Second Life environment failed after the global enthusiasm of the very beginnings (Essid, 2011). At the light of the previous considerations, I argue that it depended upon the frustration provided by the lack of veritable exchanges with the world-of-life that the online domain determines in the interactive dimension of the Onlife frame.

4. DIS-CONNECTIONS: EXPERIENCES OF VOID IN ONLIFE AGE

At this point of the paper we can realize that connection is not simply the 'buzz word' (Jauréguiberry, 2014) that profiles the digital environment, but the interrelation that threads together the offline and online domains. Hence, being connected should be seen as the essential trait of the systemic relation existing at the very heart of the Onlife world. If we assume this point of departure, we do not simply ground on a very stable basis the possibility of comprehensive, multiple ontology of a melted environment with blurring borders. Furthermore, we can valuably highlight on the pathological/dysfunctional aspects of dis-connection and understand them properly. As de-realization for the offline domain, from an analogical point of view, dis-connection refers to the realm of digital discomfort in relation to the online reality.

This passage is really crucial. In fact, what I want to underline is that the phenomena of dis-connection are never strictly digital in a strict sense, but always deal with the world of life. It follows that a new perspective could be opened for either 1) philosophy, in search of an innovative ontological perspective and 2) anthropological sciences like psychiatry.

In this paragraph, I'll seek to explore, through the lens of General System Thinking and at the light of the comprehensive idea of connection/disconnection, some disturbances dealing with the Internet addiction, where the experience of the void comes to the surface in a very special way. I'll briefly sketch four phenomena related to Onlife world (Internet addiction; social disconnection; digital connection; voluntary/temporary disconnection), then I'll discuss them.

1) Internet addiction is a spreading phenomenon all over the world and is especially experimented by adolescents (Przybyiski and Weinstein, 2017). The native digital generations have an immediate acquaintance with the digital environment, as well as with the peculiar language of it. Correlated to the hours that children and teenagers spend online (UNICEF, 2017), making a wide range of activity – from doing their home works to chatting with friends,

from gaming to listen, to download music or watching a video – the Pathological Internet use (PIU) refers to a maladaptive Internet use (MIU). What does basically mean? In the PIU (Poli, 2017) daily activities are mainly concentrated online, either in terms of space and time. This attitude, as researchers proved, becomes highly relevant in the case of «low parental involvement and parental unemployment». Although «pathological Internet use (…) seems to increase» and «several authors have reported a significant co-morbidity of PIU and mental and psychosomatic disorders» (OECD, 2018: 124-125), nevertheless the PIU does not appear as a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Disorders (DSM) and it can be included, at large, within the diagnostic concept of dependence. A case in itself, in the PIU belongs to online gaming, whose addiction can imply the need for psychodynamic wards for adult patients (Lagenbach and Schutte, 2012). As the research conducted in Germany revealed, online gaming addicts adolescents and is associated with several psychological and mental diseases, like aggression, low sociability, decrease of self-efficacy and lower satisfaction with life.

2) Social disconnection is a twofold term that brings light on new forms of isolations. On one hand, it stands at the opposite of the Internet addiction and mainly refers to the unwilled lack of the connection to the network, at the origin of the "digital divide". This condition describes a gap between rich and poor countries or social classes. However, the digital revolution, associated to the increased opportunity of cheaper digital devices (computer, smart phones) is having a positive impact for many countries where low-income population is not allowed to join the digital community. Worth noting that, «presented as a synonymous with progress» for its bringing down barriers all over the world, «ICTs were so full of promise that not being connected was soon perceived as an injustice» (Jauréguiberry, 2014: III). A second very idea of the digital divide is basically due to the cognitive/cultural capital and comes from the incapacity of the user to become acquainted with the change of technologies or with the social opportunities provided by the online environment. Both the two notions of social disconnection deal with the experience of loneliness, an intimate, relational void that is classified as a bigger risk factor than obesity and

the equivalent of smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day(Latson, 2018).

3) Digital connection vs social disconnection is a very problematic topic within the Onlife age because it assumes that web connectivity limits the opportunity of a warm, veritable, highly human exchange in the everyday world. As we saw before, social disconnection is mainly perceived as an uncomfortable condition for those who suffer from the digital divide due to poorness or limited cognitive capacities of using the devices. From another perspective, emotional well-being seems to be underestimated by those who abuse the connection. A recent study that examined the consequences of relying on phones for a special need (e.g. looking for a building) proved the central importance of feeling socially connected for gaining a worm relation with the others. «Participants in the phone condition felt less trusting toward others than participants in the phoneless condition». (Kushlev, Proulx and Dunn, 2016: 69, 70)

Digital connection as a source of intimate frustration of the Self, as a consequence of lower interactions with the offline/real world, has been deeply investigated by Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato sì. On the Care of the Common Home* (Pope Francis, 2015). On the anthropological ground, he noted that the interrelation with the digital devices might arise a «deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relationships» and «a harmful sense of isolation» (Francis, 2015: 33). Whenever the lack of reality is given, something happens to the human person. The limit of the digital space is not the only case taken into consideration by the Holy Father. He also throws light on the phenomenon of the sharp divide between centres of power located in affluent urban areas and far removed from the poor with little direct contact with their problems. This lack of physical contact – Pope Francis underlines it in § 150 – can lead to «a numbing of conscience» of which the consequence relies on «tendentious email exchanges which neglect parts of reality» (Francis, 2015: 35). Pope Francis' text suggests that the voluntary closeness to the environment may give rise to a wide range of spiritual diseases of which the symptoms do not radically differ from the ones of mental illness.

4) Voluntary/temporary disconnection is a more and more frequent response of the digital users to the pressure made by the online activities

which belong either to work and social life. The difficulty to cope with an increasing number of emails to which answer, messages and inputs that fill the smartphone can give rise to the typical burn-out condition. Similar to nervous collapse, this depressive state generally leads to leave the network; a decision due to the incapacity to deal with the digital pressure. As Jauréguiberry notes, disconnection «in this case is purely reactive» (Jauréguiberry, 2014: XIII), not properly voluntary but automatic. Generally, it means that the person overwhelmed by the pressure of the digital stops working. We can properly think of a voluntary disconnection in the cases someone cannot cope with a too intense social network activity or with the addiction to check the smart phone continuative. The decision to reduce the online activity for a while, after being permanently connected with, is definitely perceived as a breath of fresh air in the existence; however, disconnection is never radical, as seen before for the burn-out cases. Pathological aspects are given in this second frame: the digital addicted users, when quitting Facebook or other social networks, refer to give up with a sort of ritual that limited the quality time. Once reduced the connection, generally, people feel right with themselves and re-discover to have something "better" to do with their day. More widely the "digital detox" reminds that life is not meant to be lived primarily through the smart phone (Barnes, Pressey and Scornavacca, 2018).

5. FILLING THE VOID, A COMMON TRAIT OF OFFLINE AND ONLINE DOMAINS

After having argued that void as a loss of reality makes sense also in the Onlife region, according to an enlarged, more comprehensive idea of ontology, I'll move to discuss analogies between void as de-realization (offline/real world) and void as dis-connection (Onlife/offline melted together). A topic that asks to be carefully explored in virtue of either the role of the digital devices played on our lives and the interest that the phenomenon involves in social sciences, especially for psychiatry because of the pervasive role played by anxious states.

6. THE CUT-AND-PASTE POWER OF THE DIGITAL AND ITS COMPULSIVITY

The more relevant common trait concerning the experience of void, in the world-of-life as well as in Onlife world, deals with the loss of reality, perceived as a limitation of possibility and an uncomfortable condition for one's flourishing. Depressive symptoms linked to void – being

low, feeling blue, a lower reactivity – are revealing of the intimate weakness of de-realization. The boredom, felt like an inauthentic form of living, in existential philosophy (Kierkegaard, Sartre) assumes the blurring trait of void, which consists of feeling life in terms of emptiness. Hence, to deal with this discomfort, existence is being filled with pleasures and objects. This attitude of *filling the void* is exquisitely anthropological, as the aesthetic of *horror vacui* (fear of void) proves it. In the Onlife world, we find something very similar, although expressed by the very particular language of the virtual.

The cut-and-paste is, in fact, properly the cleaving power of the digital (Floridi, 2017). The operation consists of bringing together and separate, coupling and decoupling the materials which are at disposal in the network. The online world gives the user the perception of unlimited power over its contents, allowing a (generally) free use of materials (texts, videos, music) that can be customized through the cut-and-paste. Recent phenomena of evildoing, like the far-right extremist attacks (Fisogni, 2020) were supported by written copycatted manifestos and the same criminal phenomenology of the shootings was the consequence of a cut-and-paste operation. Gamification of terror is furthermore a benchmark of this trend, which is finely revealing of the interaction between offline and online domains.

7. SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, THE ANXIETY OF COPING TOO MUCH WITH OTHERS

Filling the void is crucial in the Onlife domain, as well as in the 'real' world because of the relation in which consists of the very essence of human beings. As seen before, in the paragraph of de-realization, the more acute experience of the pathological void is made when the transcendent experience I/You is weakened and the subject perceives himself an object among objects (Binswanger, 1956, 1960). The same existential frame is recalled, within the Onlife world by the interactions that take place in the social networks (Instagram, Facebook, Linkedin, Tik Tok) a benchmark of how «human psychology is "hardwired" toward a desire to fit with others» (Sreenivasan and Weinberger, 2016 online).

Differently from the human condition in the offline world, this interrelation can be at the origin of an intimate frustration: the incapacity to cope with dozens of emails, texts dropped in Hangout, invitation to share, comment and put

"I like" to the others' messages. This anxiety, as it has briefly noticed in a previous paragraph, is very often at the origin of the voluntary, temporary disconnection from the online activities. With no doubt, this is a very problematic trait of the Onlife domain and a peculiar aspect at the same time. Why such an ambivalence? Why do people are spasmodically in search of a social relation within the web and can be overwhelmed by the relations themselves? In the world-of-life, attitude is really different. One can decide to have a certain number of friends and social connections and to limit, or to enhance his relationships. The social networks work differently. A sort of bulimia of followers and friends affects those who join Facebook or Instagram, because is the number of contacts that make the social relevance of the user, as well as his social reputation.

Both the reactions – the need to be viral and the discomfort of the contagion – are rooted into the inclination of filling the void, which characterizes our interactions within the digital more intensely than in the 'real' world. It is the cut-and-paste side of the processes, in analogy with the cut-and-paste of the contents. What does it properly mean? Joining the digital, especially the social spaces of the virtual, brings the subject to experience his self as a barycenter of processes, of relations.

The Onlife Manifesto finely underlines this peculiar interactive attitude fueled by the digital. I quote the full passage, before discussing it: «We believe that it is time to affirm, *in political terms*, that our selves are both free and social, i.e., that freedom does not occur in a vacuum, but in a space of affordances and constraints: together with freedom, our selves derive from aspiring to relationships and interactions with other selves, technological artefacts, and the rest of nature». (Floridi, 2015: 11). I especially note two ideas that are particularly valuable to grasp the *horror vacui* of the digital: 1) the need to build interrelations and 2) the ethical argument that lies behind this attitude. To fill the void with human relationships as well as with melted exchanges (humans/devices) is considered a moral issue, for inclining the ethical conduct towards political fairness. What is relevant, in this innovative theoretical/existential frame, is the argument on which is grounded the need of being connected, a behaviour that fully corresponds to ontological relation with the world-of-life in the 'real'/offline world. In both environments, vacuum is perceived as a

disvalue, as well as discomfort for the individuals who are social by nature, in virtue of the inclination to the others. However, the very idea of freedom that is strictly related to the two existential frames evolves. As The Online Manifesto notes regarding the self in the political realm, two contradictory accounts are facing: «(…) the self is deemed to be free, and "free" is frequently understood as being autonomous, disembodied, rational, well-informed and disconnected: an individual and atomistic self». (Floridi, 2015: 11). At large this passage recalls Foucault's analysis of the public space where the theorist claimed that humans «do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light» but «we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely super imposable on the one other» (Foucault, 1984). Hence filling the void is a twofold concept: in the offline basically means to build spaces for themselves, where to host others, within a respectful distance of the selves; in the digital frame are the processes among individuals to be highly meaningful, also in terms of political perspective. The distinction results of great interest because it highlights on the frustration of the digital I sketched before: the need of disconnecting from the network that occurs when the user is overwhelmed by the 'social' interactivity.

In ordinary life, within the world-of-life, space provides a distance that allows the self to be in relation to the others maintaining its proper profile. When this opportunity is not given, as it happens in the online world, because of the disembodied reality that dwells it, the self is exposed to the risk of the objectification, that's to say, it may live that experience of failed transcendence masterfully described by Binswanger. What the online domain brings to light is properly the discomfort of the self as a consequence of too intense interactions with the otherness, in the absence of a space of respect. A coordinate that does not belong to the virtual environment, which paradoxically offers the highest degree of spatiality – for not having borders – as well as the absence of those sites which are, as Foucault argued, unpredictable.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This paper was aimed at a better understanding of the experience of intimate, personal void, a relevant phenomenon of the human condition, which is also a symptom of a constellation of

psychological as well as mental diseases. The provoking question posed by the Onlife age – where offline/real and online/digital domains are intertwined – was the following: does the notion of void still make sense in the contemporary age, so disembodied from 'reality', in relation to the increasing role of the virtual? Moving from the idea of an enlarged ontology, grounded of the analogy between de-realization (real world) and dis-connection (digital world), at the light of General System Thinking, I argued that not only the question posed before makes sense, but furthermore, it can be the key to explore the digital anxiety. This phenomenon is highly underestimated in diagnosis term if you consider – for example – that the Pathological Internet Use (PIU) and the Maladaptive Internet Use (MIU) are considered addicted behaviours, not specific pathologies. This investigation, therefore, suggests that the web domain, and especially the social networks, where the relation between users are faster and more pervasive, provides the very lens to look at void-as-a-pathology. The use of the Internet and the familiar approach to the social networks, then, have not only impacted to face-to-face interpersonal interactions but have extended the pathologies related to being-in-the-world, primarily the experience of emptiness as a mental discomfort.

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