

REVIEW

Reviewer: Prof. Dr Habil. Maria I. Dimitrova

of the dissertation of Vincenzo Filetti, Ph.D. candidate in the Philosophy Program taught in English at the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University, with supervisor Prof. Dr. Daniela Sotirova on the topic: **Philosophy via distance learning: theories and educational strategies**

The dissertation consists of 167 pages together with an extensive bibliography attached, which itself is 14 pages long. It is divided into 4 main parts, each containing subsections, plus an Introduction, Conclusion and Appendix. The bibliography includes sources in Italian, which is the native language of the author, as well as in English, which is the language of his study at Sofia University, plus some texts by authors who wrote in other languages and translated into English, as well as French sources in the original language.

The problems discussed in the dissertation are extremely relevant, however, as Vincenzo Filetti himself states, they have not been given attention, at least not enough attention, at the level of philosophical reflection and pedagogical discourse. In that sense, it is a pioneering work, and for that alone deserves encouragement. Vincenzo Filetti's analyzes and results of them refer to an area bordering philosophy and pedagogy.

Like the whole field of education, teaching philosophy also cannot avoid distance learning. It has even already become a routine. In the contemporary world, the process of education is far from being carried out only in close proximity between teacher and student, i.e. in living face-to-face communication, but also in overcoming long distances in the literal and metaphorical sense. The position of the dissertant, defended in his research, is entirely in support of the thesis that distance learning is not a disadvantage, but an advantage in the process of education, as it enriches it. Such a thesis could be even more consistently advanced if the opposition between the two types of learning – in the classroom and in the Internet – is avoided.

Philosophically speaking, the distance between teacher and student, when not understood literally, can never in principle be completely bridged. Moreover, the need for communication between them is due to this distance - without it communication would collapse. If we imagine how the student already knows as much as his teacher knows and in this perspective they have become equal, not to mention the cases where

the student has surpassed his teacher, then both have already gone outside of these social roles, and the process of training is complete. Of course, in this case we are talking about distance not in its literal sense but rather as a difference. And in the literal sense, for example as a geographical remoteness, or as another almost insurmountable physical distance, the training could not take place in direct proximity to each other being a contact between fully present people, but is inevitably mediated by some apparatus and machine-presented images.

The modern multitude of technological instruments and devices undoubtedly helps and makes communication more accessible but sometimes more superficial too. In the dissertation, the intervention of digital technologies is taken as a target of discussion. Without doubt communication mediated technically is extremely important for changing all spheres of life, including education. But it should be emphasized at once that, by opening up new possibilities for the preservation, processing and transmission of information, digitalization as such, left to exist in itself, is meaningless, devoid of purpose. It acquires meaning and significance in the decoding and interpretation of the compressed data in view of the needs and desires of people interested in them. As the very root of the word "information" shows, and independently of the different types of data, information is the necessary condition for the emergence of any form. Today, the invention and use of informational technology very quickly gives a new image to the entire human world. Philosophy, whose aspiration has always been to discover or constitute meaning, in this case again cannot overlook the searching it in this all-encompassing digital reformation. But is digitalization really all-encompassing and has no boundaries to it? Is it not valid only for the formation and modification of things, but not valid for people? Can humans be reduced to numbers? The last question, I think, is rather rhetorical and has a definite answer: no, as long as humans remain humans.

People not only build, maintain and transcend the forms of the world, but also transcend themselves in their personal biographies and in collective stories. This transcendence is not only the work of individuals, isolated from each other, but is the support of each one, always carried out in practice through the intersubjectivity understood in the one-for-the-other mode. In such a course, the teacher-student relationship is emblematic. However, it must be emphasized that if this connection is deprived of the living presence at all, when reduced and depleted only by virtual connectivity on the Internet, it loses its most human dimension. And hence the conclusion that not only distance learning complements and enriches the classical one, but also that alive meeting between the teacher and the students is absolutely necessary - without it the authenticity of education cannot be ensured.

The dissertant has set out to define the new paideia that uses the tools of digitalization and to discuss some philosophical and pedagogical aspects in the teaching of philosophy. It is guided by the belief that the process of digitalization of education has already shown its technological strength and its pedagogical weakness (Is it not more appropriate to use the expression digitalization "in education" instead "of education", because in the second of these cases we are talking about the whole process, including digitalization of the participants in it, and this implies depriving them of subjectivity?)

Despite declaring some reticence about the technological power of digitization, Vincenzo Filetti still gives the readers of his work the impression that he is to some extent overestimating it. We will not agree with what is said in the dissertation that the computer is a real "philosophical machine" that can constitute and launch a new philosophical paradigm for reality, suggesting that all magnitudes are finite and discrete if they can be encoded by bytes. And besides, the claim to create a "digital philosophy" is in vain namely because philosophy which would be digital is an oxymoron. Digitalization of philosophical materials – texts, presentations, videos, blogs, etc. – of course, is not for rejection, but even is welcome. However, thinking, and still more so thinking about thinking, i.e., about meaning, can hardly be recognized as *"understanding the essence of an entity consists in identifying its algorithmic information content, i.e. the computer program that returns, on the screen, the shape of the entity considered; moreover, after the advent of the computer, know the physical law that regulating the becoming of a phenomenon is equivalent to identifying the process computational system that simulates, on the screen, the evolution of that phenomenon."*(p.81) We will refer to specialists who find that if it is not included in a relevant program, the operation to replace B with A cannot be carried out by artificial intelligence, although it is assigned the operation to equate A with B; it can replace A with B wherever A occurs, but because he does not understand the meaning of equality, it cannot perform the reverse operation of replacing B with A. The computer and artificial intelligence cannot think at all as they only automatically copy and execute instructions of programmers. All possible examples confirm the aphorism that artificial intelligence is "a combination of too much artificiality and a complete lack of intelligence." This is valid even in cases of its "self-learning" and "self-development", when deviation and transformation into a new scheme is envisaged, because these operations happen without any "intent" on the part of the machines. Indeed, what incredible stupidity people show when they attribute to the devices of digital technical systems "sensitivities" and "intellectual capabilities" unparalleled by humans – for example, when we say that they know our wants and needs better than ourselves, because Google corresponds very precisely to what we think when we are staring at images on the Internet, and our smartphones without rest hear when, where, how and what we say. Or when it is said that the memory of computers is incomparable in its potential to that of the human brain, it is overlooked that "memory of computers" is only a metaphorical phrase, since they

literally cannot have even an analogue of memory at all, but only disks for mechanical data recording. The important question is whether smartphones and Google themselves hear and see, and not just some people through them.

The Italian philosopher Floridi, who was no doubt an authority for the dissertant and to whom he referred, used the term "infosphere". It denotes the simulacrum of reality created through digital technologies. Virtual reality changes our existence because, according to Floridi *"we are not isolated entities, but rather interconnected informational agents, who share a global environment with other biological agents and engineering artefacts, ultimately constituted by information."* (p.13) and more of that *"Our intelligent behavior is called upon to confront that of engineering artifacts that adapt ever more effectively to the infosphere"*. (ibid.) Vincenzo Filetti, like Luciano Floridi, believes that we may be the last generation to distinguish between online and offline, as these two positions are practically almost merged. In such a case, however, philosophy must respond to the radical changes created by the digital revolution and cope with the difficulties it causes, and this is only possible by making a new start after eradicating everything that has been done so far and the implementation of a complete updating. The radically new philosophical approach requires philosophical questions to be answered using the resources of algorithm analysis, because then the nature of the problems will be better understood. The philosophical questions, according to the dissertant, are open, and any answer would be great without hoping that we can choose someone as a better one or expect that there is a single correct answer. The philosophical method is *"the conceptual design, i.e., the art of identifying and clarifying open questions and of designing, proposing and evaluating convincing and clarifying answers"*. (p. 15) The openness of the questions lies in the disagreements that the questions themselves arouse. These, questions and disagreements, together form a never-ending stream, the current of which continues with new questions and new often inconsistent answers. Their philosophical character implies that they all relate not directly to facts and logical-mathematical resources, but indirectly to the knowledge of other sciences, to their questions and decisions, including the latest ones such as neuroscience, cognitive sciences and sciences such as those related to multiculturalism, secularism, etc., setting the guidelines in research.

If I am allowed to add again that the order by quality, which is essentially the evaluation, preference, grading, elaboration and application of concepts, etc., is not within the capabilities of information-digital devices and artificial intelligence, as they are rather adapted to multiply the amount of information; they are programmed to take over the data and copy without making a choice or arranging in any other order than the one set. Nor can they, without programmers, make any generalizations, analyses or syntheses, dislocations or analogies, create metaphors or aphorisms, let alone write if not whole philosophical treatises, then at least philosophical articles.

According to Russell, and then according to the analytical philosophical tradition of which he was the progenitor, philosophy asks questions to which the sciences have not yet found the answers, and thus philosophizing has a heuristic function in terms of knowledge. But if the presentation of questions, as Heidegger defines it, though in a different context, is "the piety of thought," it is doubtful that philosophy is reduced only to piety, even to its own piety. Rather, it is extremely audacious in asking and is a personal affair, and this leads the dissertant on page 64 to radicalize the problem by wondering whether it is at all possible to teach philosophy. He declaratively abandoned the "mechanics of classical teaching" in order to rely on the "symbiosis" of the classics with digital learning. For him, the Internet is not a place restricted, for example, like the classroom by the walls in the school, but a new, expanded, potentially endless dynamic of relationships. The network does not place barriers to going forward and going back, navigating in another direction, and ending up in another time and space and then start again a new surfing. Moreover, in the infosphere the Self, i.e. each person, becomes multi-layered and multilinear, related not to the text but to hypertext, not to isolation in one context, but to multicontextuality, connectivism and polyphony (by the way, all these terms in use by Vincenzo Filletti). According to the dissertant, this creates the prerequisites for students in the process of online learning to be co-creators in the acquisition of knowledge. For him, the dichotomies between man and machine, between material and virtual reality, between truth and untruth, etc., are no longer distinctly divisive and do not set demarcation lines in life and thought, because they themselves have become inexplicably obscure. The bottom line, then, is that we are witnessing a cultural revolution dominated precisely by Internet technology. According to the dissertant, this creates a platform for a real debate in which we are all involved anyway, and digital education is left entirely in the hands of teachers to use distance as a positive principle rather than as a disadvantage in the training of learners without age difference.

We cannot but agree with Vincenzo Filetti's concern that the risk of trivializing the technological advantages provided by digital learning is peeking around every corner. In the work it is rightly noted that we feel a lack of reflection on such important topics as communication and connectedness of people. Levinas is mentioned, but the dissertant did not take advantage of his philosophical messages. As the deepest human motive and meaning of the attitude of teaching and learning, Levinas points out the care and responsibility of the teacher for the student. But the dissertant rather trusts and makes a concession to other authors. For example, he had mentioned that Heidegger refers to the fact that the essence of the technique lies in discovering the truth about Being not only about Dasein's relationship to and in the world, but also about Dasein's relationship to and with others. Levinas, however, revised his lesson as the technique may discover the truth of being, but it cannot discover the truth about proper human relations.

If learners participate as co-creators in the process of their studies, but in the production of more and more information, it will be without meaningful orientation. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is the supreme nonsense. The knowledge that teachers teach is useful and formative not first of all in view of the growth and enrichment of knowledge – this is not the first and last purpose, but in view of shaping the learners as humans who themselves can bear the responsibilities and care in turn for the others. Unlike Levinas, however, the dissertant believes that responsibility can be shared and distributed among people, information media, and artifacts. For Levinas this is absurd and out of the question.

Vincenzo Filetti is well aware that too much information leads to satiety and indifference. But he does not develop this issue. And another important question arises about the infosphere, but the dissertant unfortunately does not touch it at all, namely whether the information in society is accessible to everyone and always, whether it is not in the hands of those who direct the information flows, so that the approach to it is controlled. Neither Floridi nor his follower Filetti saw the infosphere as a man-made meta-reality, but a reality which is alienated from him. On the contrary, they present it as an environment of which we are all parts, as are machines, robots, platforms and other artifacts. Of course, the laws of the whole apply without exception to all parts, even when it is believed that this whole is not a closed totalitarian system, but an open dynamically changing environment. The alienation and hypostasis of virtual reality are all the more powerful and unremarkable the more these laws, or rather rules, are experienced as a new freedom.

The dissertant offers a brief history of modern didactics, focuses on education and upbringing from the Roman era, passes through the 19th and 20th centuries and reaches all the way to the birth of e-learning, discusses historically different models of teaching philosophy in a number of European countries, as well as in the Anglo-Saxon world, in order to move towards something like modeling teaching through the Network. At the end of the second chapter of the dissertation, mention is made of the possible trauma of the digital image, or rather of the many digitally presented images to which each individual in the network is reduced. People are turned into objects and this is an inevitable effect of digital communication, but such a transformation can be experienced as trauma. We would add with bitter irony after the small reference to Sartre included in the dissertation that the traumatized ones will be mostly the philosophizing defenders of the human in man, and especially those who are familiar with existentialism, Marxism, personalism, etc. But even Heidegger, with his understanding of technique as a contributing factor to the revelation of Being, would hardly agree that technogenesis and anthropogenesis coincide. On this point, however, Vincenzo Filetti agreed with two French thinkers on whose theories he relied. The dissertant stands behind the notion that technology shapes people's lives in order to suggest that since we have reached communication and information technology in technical evolution, and since man cannot

remain what he is, we should expect that "technical organology" will configure him in a way that determines him. According to Vincenzo, there is a "coalescence" of young people born after 2000 with digital devices.

And to get back to digital learning, which is offered not only to young people but to people of all ages, the dissertant tackles another topic - he talks about phenomenology of students connected digitally. They have the opportunity to communicate, to have a dialogue. In the dissertation, an attempt was made to apply as an explanation of this phenomenology primarily the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur. I wouldn't see this attempt as too successful. Translation, narrative, dialogue, text, etc. and other linguistic forms are involved in order to explain how the hermeneutical terminology could be applied but without a strict philosophical insight into them. The student-teacher attitude is discussed in the light of other models and methodologies with an effort to answer the question of how a methodology of philosophy can be drawn up, which can become part of philosophy itself under the new conditions of philosophizing. I would recommend to the dissertant, but only if he is seriously interested in this issue, to deal specifically with Hegel's dialectics. It, as well as research on it, including critical ones, is available for free use on the Internet. However, as the dissertant says, following a scientist in neuroscience: *"The internet has the power to cause fundamental changes in the mental structure. ... Intensive use of the internet has neurological consequences."* (p. 160) We would say rather as a joke, and not only desirable and positive ones.

In the dissertation the use of Internet is praised as the outstanding advantage of creating flexibility in building new connections between neurons and their multiplication, to develop new abilities and skills, to expand competence in turning the virtual environment into a field for problem research, for assistance and making not only individual but also collective decisions, for the development of spaces of virtual meanings, of communication and sharing, including the resources of digital surfing and navigation, following and creating countless trajectories. But all this is mixed with a joke, since achieving all these remarkable results through a single movement, such as, say, touching the screen with your finger, is unlikely to lead to the expected heights in the elevation of natural intelligence.

* * *

The doctoral degree is educational-scientific in its specifics.

As for the first, that is, educational portion, we can see that in educating the doctoral student in the philosophical doctoral program, it has been achieved not a little, given that the bachelor's and master's degrees awarded to him earlier by other educational institutions are not in philosophy. He has acquired a taste for the great names in philosophy, but sometimes he follows the ideas of representatives of the sciences who, by

extrapolating their conceptions from their respective fields, claim to make almost epochal philosophy.

Regarding the field of pedagogy, in the face of Vincenzo Filletti we see such a trained theoretically analyst, which is rarely found.

Appreciating the scientific side of the dissertation text, we cannot ignore its multi-layeredness and multilinearity - exactly what, according to the dissertant, should be the writings that circulate and are available on the Internet. But unlike the recommendations to the network texts made by the dissertant himself, it is good that he has a "center of gravity", which is why the levels do not disintegrate, and the directions do not scatter.

The very topic on which the dissertant is working is really serious - philosophical reflection is undertaken, necessary both for the field of education and for other social spheres, huge numbers and serious problems have been raised. In the academic community, it is known that the very wording of the issues is already half work done. I am convinced that problems can be formulated in other ways, but only after more reflections-challenges like the dissertation here proposed for discussion and evaluation.

Based on what has been said, I will vote in favour of awarding PhD degree to Vincenzo Filetti, given that the labor that has been done is not at all easy, and it is not small in volume.

It seems, in his self-assessment, Vincenzo Filletti did not quite adequately bring out the contributions. He has settled on the new ideas that have caught his attention and which he has explored. However, it is necessary to highlight more clearly its own achievements concerning novelty.

08. 10. 2023

Reviewer: Prof. Dr Habil. Maria I. Dimitrova