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Conjectures about the digital change

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I. Conjectures: Preliminary remarks

1. For (philosophical) reflection under conditions of great uncertainty, the form of conjecture seems especially suitable. The conjectures presented here are primarily an expression of diagnostic speculation, but also refer to the secondary consequences of the immediate effects of digital change. They are (and can only be) food for thought and discussion, and they document what is possibly only a preliminary state of thought on the part of the person expressing them.
2. First of all, some important terminological information: I use the term "cultural goods" to refer to all artefacts that serve to disseminate or transmit information or contribute to the further development of a culture's understanding of the world and itself. The term therefore includes, among other things, all works of art, but also the holdings of archives, collections and museums, academic publications and the like.

II. Some consequences of the digital transformation

1. Objects can be reproduced in previously unimaginably simple ways at previously unimaginably low costs and with previously unimaginably high fidelity.
2. Data and information, and therefore also digital reproductions of artefacts, can be disseminated globally in an essentially unlimited number with little effort and without specialist knowledge.
3. People and their actions – also and especially their reception of information and data – can be monitored in previously unimaginable breadth, density and intensity at comparatively low cost.
4. Many (cultural) goods coveted by many that were previously rival goods (e.g. literary, scientific, musical and other works) now become non-rival goods. Goods whose consump-

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tion by one consumer prevented or impeded their consumption by another thus become goods that can be provided to any number of consumers at the same time without this leading to higher provision costs. This is both a blessing and a curse, an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, the transformation of rival goods into non-rival goods opens up the possibility of making coveted goods accessible to many more people. At the same time, however, it leads to economic upheavals that are hardly inferior to those of the industrial revolution.

2. On the one hand, digitalisation is enabling and creating dynamic and potentially democratic forms of access to cultural goods (including immaterial goods that exist exclusively in cyberspace or can be accessed using digital technologies in a way that is historically unprecedented), while on the other hand, the use of digital technologies is simultaneously creating new forms of access restriction and access control that interfere with the options and rights of use of individuals and particular social groups.

3. The production and reception of cultural goods is increasingly tied to technological prerequisites that can be characterised as second-order access conditions. Of course, the modalities of availability and accessibility of cultural goods have always been linked to technical and institutional prerequisites and to conditions such as access to museums, archives or collections or publication by publishers. However, in the "age of access" (Jeremy Rifkin) characterised by the digital transformation, new monopolistic and oligopolistic economies are creating new dimensions of dependency on licensors and technological infrastructures, which not only create specific conditions for the reception of cultural goods, but also for the production of artefacts of all kinds. The example of art makes it particularly clear that as a result of the digital transformation, the production and preservation of cultural goods are now often tied to new conditions relating to access to technologies and software. Under certain circumstances, this can be much more effectively and possibly even globally restricted or completely prevented than access to most other materials and tools that artists have always used. This is because the software technologies that have been given a key position by the digital transformation are characterised not least by the fact that they are tailored to such specific requirements that they are very difficult to replace with other software. However, access to them can also be withdrawn arbitrarily or for quite banal economic reasons, and this can happen at very short notice and with global effect: all it takes is for the owner of a specific technology to want to prevent others from using it or for a software company to go bankrupt and the software used to produce artefacts no longer be adapted to the technical conditions of future hardware. Artistic creation, like the production of artefacts in general, can therefore be dependent on access conditions (and thus on the decisions of third parties) to such an unprecedented extent that central concepts of art theory and copyright law, such as authorship or artistic autonomy, appear problematic.

4. Photographic images can be forged with a perfection that has hardly ever been achieved

before; this makes it considerably more difficult to detect forgeries. Photographs are highly valued as evidence in everyday life, but also in fine proceedings and in court. However, digital photographs can be altered much more easily than analogue ones, and in many cases it is much more difficult (and in some cases even impossible) to clearly determine whether a digital photograph has been altered or not. This opens up new possibilities for the artistic use of photographs and even enables new forms of artistic expression and art criticism such as photographic caricature. However, it also makes it easier to deceive people about facts through manipulated photos, whose supposed evidential value often leads people to believe that things have happened that have not happened or have not happened in the way that a manipulated photo appears to prove.

2. Using AI-controlled software, artefacts can be produced largely automatically that are suitable as 'evidence' for untrue factual claims and can make people around the world believe falsehoods. Just think about the fact that it is already possible today to use face-swapping techniques to provide supposed image evidence that a person has carried out an action that they have not actually performed. Artificial neural networks that automatically generate such fakes can be used to create so-called deepfakes (falsified representations of sections of reality with the help of AI).

III. How the digital transformation may change the human understanding of the world and ourselves

1. The digital transformation adds a fourth offence to the three offences of man diagnosed by Freud: Man is not the centre of the universe (cosmological offence), he is only one animal among others (biological offence) and not even 'master in his own house' (psychological offence). Nor is he characterised by a capacity for reason that is superior to every other form of rationality in every respect (artificial intelligence offence). I suspect that this fourth offence to man will lead to man, as an *animal semper se cum aliis comparans*, comparing himself and his cultural 'achievements' even more quantitatively than before with those of other people (and cultures). Achievements that cannot be effectively measured and compared quantitatively may therefore be appreciated less in the future. This conjecture may seem more plausible if one realises the following: if there are no significant qualitative differences between objects of comparison, the aspects under which comparisons are made are regularly reduced to quantitative aspects. Comparisons are then generally limited to measuring, counting and calculating and to recording and entering comparative figures on a scale or in an Excel spreadsheet. Comparisons that are limited to quantitative aspects therefore suggest that there are no significant qualitative differences between the compared objects that could not be captured by determining comparative fig-

ures. This is the crux of every ranking, of every quantitative evaluation of cultural goods, for example on the basis of audience ratings or sales figures: The complexity of comparing cultural goods is reduced to the complexity of the result of a sporting competition, which can be depicted in world rankings and Bundesliga tables.

2. The digital transformation as such and the undeniable success of the use of artificial intelligence in many areas will probably lead to the assumption that the complexity of natural and world events, which seems increasingly difficult for humans to master with their traditional means, can best be mastered through networked dual decisions and operations. The influence of dualistic, Manichean, bipolar ideas on our understanding of the world and self-image will therefore become increasing, and this also should have an impact on the actions of individuals of individuals, groups and states. I suspect that this will in particular reduce the willingness to compromise, to come to terms with the shades of grey that are an inseparable part of life, and that political rhetoric and politics that limit themselves to painting black or white will increase. Ironically, this can also be observed today in many people and in many statements that are critical of the bipolarity of the digital world by calling for more plurality and diversity. For them, too, the world of beliefs seems to be bipolar with just a right and a wrong side.

IV. How the digital transformation changes and might further change cultural practices

1. The transformation of previously 'rival goods' into 'non-rival goods' means that for many people, especially 'end consumers' and 'end users' of data, digital information and other cultural goods, access to such goods is in many cases becoming more important than their ownership. However, this does not mean that property rights are no longer important. Rather, the global oligopolisation of so-called 'intellectual property' is the prerequisite and the basis for generating profits in the digital economy.
2. The regulation and control of access to data, information and other cultural goods is becoming a very lucrative business model and therefore the subject of global oligopoly formation (which e. g. in Germany is even partially subsidised or promoted by legislative measures by the state).
3. The control of access to and handling of cultural property by states and private individuals jeopardises (among other fundamental freedoms) not only the freedom of art and the freedom of science, but above all the freedom of expression.
4. Authorship is being devalued on the one hand and reinterpreted on the other in a way that includes, in particular, control over (digitality-based) means of production that are

required for the production of cultural goods and other artefacts.

2. Some cultural goods and practices might become more accessible for people with certain impairments. (But will they?)
3. Privacy could once again become a luxury good that is at best granted to the privileged (especially rulers and the rich), as it was the case until modern times. (It is surely no coincidence that none other than Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg declared privacy to be an expiring model fifteen years ago).
4. The importance of written texts for interpersonal communication is likely to decrease, while the importance of visuality and orality for interaction is likely to increase (think, for example, of photographic 'diaries', as many of us produce them today with our smartphones).

V. How the digital transformation may change philosophy

1. Academic philosophy will (have to) develop new evaluation formats. (But this will be the least of the challenges that philosophy will have to face). In the near future, it will probably no longer be possible to evaluate the quality and originality of a thought and a philosophical endeavour primarily on the basis of written texts, and at some point perhaps not at all. This will force academic philosophy to develop new forms of articulation and manifestation of philosophy and philosophising. The originality of a thought will probably play a less important role as a quality criterion than it does today. I think it is quite conceivable that in future, instead of the quality of written texts, we will make the ability of people to make a contribution to a co-operative form of reflection that promotes this the basis for evaluating academic philosophising. Philosophy and philosophising could be more strongly characterised by visuality and visual and visualising practices in the future. However, we will probably have to develop forms of better visualisation so that the depth of differentiation and the precision in the distinction and description of consecutive relationships and other relationships of argumentation logics that written philosophy has developed over centuries do not get lost.
2. Oral texts could become more important than written philosophy. Artificial intelligence can of course also produce oral texts – anyone who drives a car or uses *google maps* has known this for longer than ChatGPT has been around. But there is one respect in which an oral text is less substitutable by artificial intelligence than a written text: Oral text enables the experience we have when we listen to authentic speech. I suspect that this is the trump card of oral text practices.
3. The digital transformation already seems to be fuelling societies' and citizens' forgetful-

ness and ignorance of complexity and is likely to do so to an even greater extent in the future. Acceptance of the social alimentation of professional philosophising may therefore decline, but the demand for philosophy, which consistently understands itself and acts as a warning against forgetting and ignoring complexity will increase.

2. Philosophy will look for new tasks and be given new tasks. I suspect that, among other things, it will be given the task of training people (and developing criteria for this) to recognise when it is appropriate to distrust the results produced by AI-supported processes and when it is not; when we are dealing with false evidence (we should expect that such seemingly paradoxical terms will soon be in vogue) and when not. Philosophy that takes on this task could sensitise us to the fact that such mistrust of the results produced by AI-supported processes is by no means always appropriate, but is sometimes of crucial importance.

3. Philosophy is probably the most flexible, opportunistic and therefore the most viable of all academic disciplines (with the possible exception of medicine). It knows how to relinquish tasks when it has completed them and other, more specialised disciplines can handle them better, and it knows how to find tasks that other disciplines avoid because they seem too simple, too tricky or unmanageable. If there's one thing we don't have to worry about in the digital transformation, it's most likely the future of philosophy.