Virtuality as Mode of Being Human in Informational Society

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Abstract—**The article reviews a phenomenon of virtual reality as an ontological dimension of a human in informational society and social consequences of immersion of a modern human in a hyperreality. The virtualized reality, the hyperreality, forged by the virtual socialization, is by nature unstable and stochastic, which, in turn, encourages modern philosophers and social scientists to develop so-called "nomadic" ontologies in order to uncover its essential traits.**

Keywords—virtual reality; informational society; ontology of hyperreality; nomadic ontology; social philosophy; philosophy of communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Back in 1992 famous American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama complained, "Something strange is going on in the world today…absence of plausible progressive counter-narrative is unhealthy, because competition is good for intellectual ¬debate just as it is for economic activity. And serious intellectual debate is urgently needed, since the current form of globalized capitalism is eroding the middle-class social base on which liberal democracy rests" [1, p. 53].

Rapid development of virtual communication has substantially removed spatial and partly language barriers in the course of communication, exchange and information transfer. But it also removes every obstacle during distribution of the system of values, which accompanies development of virtual space, namely, the consumer system of values. This matrix of values resists the traditional importance of personal communication, is equal as the world of not virtual, but natural human feelings.

The verbal way of "real" (as opposed to "virtual") communication is limited by time frames and narrow spatial orientation. The possibility of providing information to practically non-restricted audience, dispersed across the entire globe, pulls together virtual communication with mass and information. At the same time transition to virtual space happens not only at the level of network technologies, but also within non-computer virtualization of social institutes.

Why does the globalized society come to such state when values of consumer society with enormous efficiency and speed devouring and digesting in itself traditional axiological systems were at the same time a guarantee of the deepest system social crisis of the globalized society?

II. FEATURES OF VIRTUAL MODE OF BEING

In post-industrial society, there is withdrawal from centralized distribution of information that it featured, for instance, in development of television in the direction of increase in the number of the channels addressed to various groups. The global Internet gives almost unlimited opportunities for access to individual-oriented information and for communication. Today the mass of people get the same flow of exactly the same information, but rather small groups of the population exchange the images created by them. Everything considering communication becomes less uniform. Therefore, instead of obtaining certain conceptual ideas, collected and sufficiently systematized data, we obtain short flashes of information. Thus, instead of uniform cultural space of people, the set of models of existence gets to the plane of a set of the valuable systems making a basis of the "demassed" information environment. "Post-industrial society demassifies the spiritual sphere, making it mosaic, splits up a daily occurrence for a set of "the vital worlds", to which absorption can be disconnected with social and status accessory of a man in any way." [2, p. 73].

Growing influence of the information and communication technologies causes splitting up society for a great number of small groups; thus, the person can be in that "fragment" of information space which is most interesting to him. If the TV is a communicative system with unilateral communication, then network computer technologies give the chance for bilateral, interactive communication of people in real time. In this regard, it is possible to note that, on the one hand, potentially unlimited number sustained of contacts and information exchange is provided for the individual, and on the other – this circle becomes isolated. But at the same time, it is necessary to notice the closest sector for this person. There are available real opportunities for the free choice of a preferable focus of interest and communication. Thus, specialization of culture and localization of subcultures imply that the person projects himself as the cultural individual. A multiculturalism of the contemporary times is built of a set of subcultures, which lay claim on becoming full-fledged cultures and to replace universal culture.

Such situation encourages many researchers like E. Toffler to claim that the process of demassing of people consciousness in post-industrial society takes place.

The social and philosophical analysis of the valuable sphere of information society – a consumption axiology – shows the following source of system crisis: deep rootedness of not only values and ideals, but also the life of the person in information society not in material, but in virtual reality. What is represented by "virtual reality"?

One of possible (albeit speculative) points of consideration of a phenomenon of virtual reality is based on the cognitive nature of this ontological structure. For instance, publicist S. Jones compares virtual reality to "a conscious dream" or "active dreams" ("active or lucid dreaming" [3: p.125-132]) as the virtual reality is a travel …, giving the chance to research self-reflection in new ways, in many respects like "a conscious dream" or "active dreams" [3: p. 125-132]. The world of virtual reality might be compared to the world of transcendental states of a shaman as both spaces have worthiness (and even form the system of the values extended to the world material), instability and the field for realization of considerable cognitive potential. But whether the set of fundamental features of virtual reality is exhausted by its comparison to the dreamland.

It is definitely not. The changes happening in the modern society and producing an impact on one's life, mindset and outlook promote formation of a special type of virtual reality as a new vital space of the person as a complete field in which there are individuals interacting among themselves.

Often the structure of communication of a social network is constructed in such a way that "click" in itself forms some kind of reflex having a positive reinforcement in the form of new, interesting information. That is, work of mentality of "the person clicking" substantially comes down to the behaviouristic scheme of "incentive reaction", while rational and logical interpretation of information is of not too great importance for the person clicking. It is expressed even in features of language of the Internet communication striving for the maximum brevity and sacrificing syntactic and grammatical norms.

"One of characteristic features of a social network is the sociability, which can be defined as the feeling of ease in social relationship of the personality based on possession of effective skills of social interaction. The trust phenomenon which is quite often considered as a product of stable social relations provides a basis for the social capital" [4, p. 21], becomes the cornerstone of a sociability.

Virtual communication thus forms a new basis of socialization, which possesses some new fundamental features.

"Change of an image of the world and a way of life under the influence of information and communication technologies is connected with formation of a new type of the identity of homo virtualis and a new type of society - virtual community" [5, p. 19]. On the one hand, virtual community, being deprived of attribute of extent, appears to be peculiar "communication without borders". Really, the only barrier which at first sight exists in virtual communication is a language barrier. Proceeding from that, in ordinary consciousness, a transition to virtual communication is considered as the benefit as does not tie the person to spatial restrictions inevitable for "traditional" forms of communication.

Thus, the virtualized reality or hyperreality, forged by the virtual socialization, is by nature unstable and stochastic, which, in turn, encourages modern philosophers and social scientists to develop so-called "nomadic" ontologies in order to uncover its essential traits.

The idea of the stochastic nature of social reality was proposed by B. Latour. He names the things as material objects and calls in question its equal rights with subjects having their own capacity of action. Therefore the objects become "actors". In other words, within the object basis of reality there are the processes of actualization and redistribution of "agency", areas and directions of social activity. Latour conceptualizes the need for "reassembling the social" based on his act-network theory. So, "... In this meaning of the adjective, 'the social' does not designate a thing among other things… but a type of connection between things that are not social" [6, p. 170]. Evidently, these ideas are to be projected on the ideas of nomadism as a special practice of social life [7: p. 1-5].

Philosopher I. Manakova characterizes virtual reality as follows:

"In post-industrial society the new form of virtualization, but not virtual reality per se as and before the person faced virtual in all spheres of the life experience is born. The specifics of the virtuality characteristic of post-industrial society are that it becomes hyper reality, the new vital space of the person replacing space of social reality" [8, p. 166].

I.e. in information society the virtual reality becomes vital space of the person, possessing not only axiological, but also ontologic measurement.

Consecutively we might pose a question: what is the essence of ontological dimension of virtual reality? One of main types of life in post-industrial society is information, and the movement of life in a general view can be described as the movement of information flows. For this reason, consideration of features of the movement of information flows will be a basis of the social and philosophical analysis of post-industrial society.

One of the main modes of life of the person in information society is the virtuality. Virtual life of the person is localized in space of hyper reality which elements are simulacra – the emancipated symbols (we will notice – the person is a hyper reality element too, therefore acts as a simulacrum). Life of the person in hyper reality is characterized by symbolical consumption. A considerable part of human activity, its sincere forces is subordinated to symbolical consumption. And through symbolical consumption substantially there is a self-identification and socialization of the person in information society, i.e. the axiology of information society is immanently tied to the system of values of consumerism. And as the consumed elements of hyper reality are simulacra, are torn completely off from things, the prototypes, feedback between the person and real reality can take the bizzare shapes dictated by hyper reality: the person who is fully living in virtual reality, and "coming back" to real only for the sake of maintenance of the physiological functions – or just for the sake of a variety, - will surprise today nobody any more. From real life of the person and process of an anthroposociogenesis are transferred

to virtual reality in the true sense of the word, together with the system of estimates and values, having come off real reality finally. This separation is shown also in the economic sphere: the financial sphere comes off economic. This separation is shown also social hierarchy: not the producer of things, but the master of simulacra is at its top now. Guarantee of its replacement by the globalized virtual reality and ideology of consumerism of traditional systems of values is the extraordinary aesthetic appeal of the first attracting the person as fire on a sacrificial fire of the Babylon tower-pit in the novel by Pelevin "Generation P".

The processes of transformation happening in post-industrial society are so large-scale that open huge opportunities before researchers. It is possible for this reason Francis Fukuyama who twenty years ago announced the end of history speaks about its future today.

In order to properly analyze the idea of virtual ontology we need to distinguish virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR).

Originally the term augmented reality was introduced by A. Sutherland in the 1960th during a research with students of Harvard University on cybernetic simulation systems, initially it was a set of stereoglasses for pilot training. He considered this type of reality as "system of imposing of computer graphics on images of the real world" [9, p. 73]. Experimentally the system was tested in the project, completed in 1968 for Bell Helicopter Company in which stereo glasses worked in couple with the infrared camera which is under helicopter bottom, the camera was operated by a pilot through moves of his head.

There is a clear distinction between AR and VR.

Feiner describes their distinction the following in the way: "Whereas virtual reality defiantly seeks to replace the real world, the augmented reality carefully supplements it" [10: p. 52-62]. This approach is closest to us, as during studying of this phenomenon about it we might find that today augmented reality gradually gets into everything, occupies every segment of modern culture. Future AR might discover numerous applications in medicine where the doctor will be able to impose data of X-ray on the patient seen by it; in automotive industry – the driver on a windshield will be able to see data about speed, road and possible obstacles; in science – at experiment will perhaps create three - and to observe measured models of objects to measure any parameters of the studied subject; in art – for hyper visualization performance or an hyper-interactive form of art where every single spectator might truly became an artist. It would be available in casual life activity: for example, reading an electronic book one might be able to visualize plot events in real-time 3D or the road signs might become interactive.

Nevertheless, no matter how tempting the perspectives of deep implementation of augmented reality are, how promising might its advances be, we must conclude that augmented reality does not constitute autonomous reality of its own.

Virtual reality is associated with creation of autonomous ontology of its own, and virtual ontology shares the one

attribute with lucid dreams: it is unstable. Therefore, in order to be reflected on, it requires proper philosophical ontology: a digital nomadic ontology.

There is an approach which might allow in-depth understanding of the digital nomadism's nature are established by the "objective-oriented turn" in interpretations of social dynamics' processes.

One of the best-developed conceptions was introduces by Graham Harman, who suggests a clear, laconic and comprehensive review of the object-oriented ontology (the OOO) He highlights the differences between his concept and the ideas of the actor-network theory by B. Latour where the objects and their features are determined by actions, communication, relations and traditional materialism (that is about objects consist of). G. Harman writes that the OOO uses the term "object" for definition of any entity which cannot be changed in terms of its components and actions [11: p. 12-14].

Preceding the further characteristic of such objects one can suppose the digital nomadism practices to be the leading and constitutive factor for such nontrivial object formations as "epistemic objects", symbiotic, polysubstrate objects (media ecologies), "non-human" objects [11: p. 17-21], "dark" objects.

The recognition of object-oriented approach prospects is both a heuristic constant and a compelling research puzzle. According to G. Harman, things act because exist but do not exist because act and the objects are alike the sleeping giants saving their vigor and not demonstrating it all at once [11: p. 12-14].

Mentioned above G. Harman considers the differences between the actor-network theory and traditional materialism and establishes the most adequate from his point of view approach to the objects' research. In object-oriented ontology all objects are ontologically equal and each one of them is considered to be a surplus, which exceeds the framework of its ordinary correlations, features and agency. The active role of objects is emphasized in G. Harman's theory, He argues that objects stop being passive receptacles either for human mental categories or social and constitute reality that does not include people directly [11: p. 25-29].

G. Harman emphasizes complexity of objects' demarcation and establishes three main strategies extracted from relevant theories and cultural practices for such procedure: a) undermining, when the objects are the components which constitute them; b) overmining, when researchers claim that an object is no more than a set of features or that an object no more than its relations or the registered actions; c) duomining, where the two approaches mentioned above are combined [11: p. 17-21].

G. Harman suggests the concept of immaterialism, as opposed to various materialistically focused theories in which objects are distinguished not in a reflexive manner.

Immaterialism accepts things at any level of existence and does not dissolve them in a basic, constitutive layer. Therefore, the objects are opened "outside" and by that they are rooted into the becoming reality due to being "from it-to outside-for itself". The essence of objects cannot be learned directly and therefore

often generates the unexpected effects. Additionally, there is no reality only "outside the mind" as though people were the only entities for which the reality is external. Since the objects are spoken about in terms of unpredictability and opacity, they cannot be reduced neither to their actions and the relations nor towards their elementary components [11: p. 25-29].

The scale of the digital nomadism's prerequisites and the existence of theoretical prerequisites form opportunities to specify ontological models of reality in the interpretation of nomadic processes. We should take in the consideration sociocultural circumstances and actual context of cultural and historical dynamics of scientific knowledge. Consequently, the ontological models can be constituted in the contexts of the non-classical ideas of scientific rationality. These ideas are related to the ontological conceptions of dynamic, pluralistic and unstable reality.

The very idea of perceiving such a vivid process might look puzzling. Indeed, even Plato was puzzled by the objective to perceive constantly changing, fluent unstable reality by grasping it into fixed system of firmly determined notions. In order to comprehend the specifics of such models one can use the metaphor "assemblage method" which is construed to support the continuous processing of discursive practices that are applied in a general "stream" of socio-humanitarian research. Proving the 'after method'concept, J. Lo writes: "If 'assemblage' is to do the work that is needed then it needs to be understood as a tentative and hesitant unfolding, that is at most only very partially under any form of deliberate control".

As previously mentioned, the unstable ontologies suggested by Essex school of discourse analysis (E. Laclau, C. Mouffe) exposes a special methodological value. Such ontologies describe intensely changeable reality in which not solely procedural, but also constitutive dynamics establishing this reality are absent. It is interesting that J. Urry specifically highlighted the significance of this approach for research and interpretation of the social practices of mobility in modern society. This approach allows the possibility of "runaway away" society as the object of research as the opposition to a framework of the fixed discourse. The social relations are "continuously being opened up, the skin is broken" and almost always traumatically "the wound will bleed" unfulfilled in a potential reconciliation of the unfolding developments. Such models may not be habitual to researchers because of applying various and correlatively to the research process changing interpretations, languages and parameters of modeling.

The put forward interpretations of sociality seem to be outside of the traditional sociological concepts (holism, the theory of structuralism, methodological individualism). There is a need for new approaches, unstable ontologies that could be applicable "…the complex consequences of diverse mobilities; the intersecting sensuous relations of humans with diverse objects, …and the complex and unpredictable intersections of many 'regions, networks and flows" [11: p. 27-30].

Essentially the processes described above which model or simulate reality are taken as a principle the generating force of modern culture over which technologies, on the one hand, have the power, and with another – show that technological development is a realization of certain cultural installations

(requirements, the purposes) the person and society. For this reason the problem of modern philosophy consists in judgment of historical and cultural genesis of digital technologies, detection of the fundamental communications between technological and cultural determinism influencing ontology and also in understanding of consequences of transformation of social processes and the prospects of development of the person of the future.

However, it is necessary to provide an alternative view of rapid development of the virtual forms of communication, which are especially quickly developing within social networks. There is an opinion that virtual communication is of compensatory character in relation to real and social networks and in many respects performs an escapist function, i.e. it works as a kind of a virtual shelter for people unable to prove themselves in real communication and socialization. And the one who cannot realize oneself in real society, immerses oneself in social networks. A widespread negative attitude to virtual communication, in particular to social networks, as to a shelter of those who could not find themselves in the "real" life results from such opinion, as to what distances one from real life, substituting the solution of real problems for simulation of communication and success.

III. CONCLUSION

Modern society becomes virtualized owing to formed special, information, consciousness, which changes traditional moral and philosophical outlook, transforming traditional moral values. Transformation of moral values is characterized by their hedonistic and utilitarian coloring. The system of values, as a result, asymptotically aspires to an economic model of consumerism, i.e. society where a key factor of self-identification and socialization is consumption, and the situation in a social hierarchy is defined by one's level.

Proceeding from the above, we might conclude that the system of values of the informational society corresponds to the consumerist model, transforms moral aspects of communication into utilitarian and hedonistic ones, and its ontological structure has distinctive nomadic features.

In order to give us proper understanding of virtuality as mode of being, we need to introduce and develop digital nomadic ontologies to grasp instable and lucid-dream-like nature of virtual being. The virtualized reality, the hyperreality, forged by the virtual socialization, is by nature unstable and stochastic, which, in turn, encourages modern philosophers and social scientists to develop so-called "nomadic" ontologies in order to uncover its essential traits.

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