Changes in Personal Identity in a Digitalised Contemporaneity

In the editorial of the previous issue, whilst questioning ourselves about human identity, we identified, in pliability, the characteristic trait of our species: the human being is open to a wide range of possible modes of action, testified, in a historical sense, by the various cultures, which, according to diachronic and synchronic perspectives, provide adaptive and transformative responses to the surrounding environment. The cognitive and behavioural malleability of our species, by which we mean a complex elaboration of the task of "being in the world", is therefore activated in a relational space co-inhabited by the various players of the planet, including pathogens.

In its own way, even today's pandemic situation falls into the category of adaptive response, required by the relationship between human beings and the surrounding world: what has changed, compared to pre-Covid-19, is the perception of the changes that have affected the spheres of identity and human sociality in particular. It has been said more than once, especially in psychological fields, that "we will never be the same as we used to be",[1] just as it has been discovered that, statistically, meeting and human contact are amongst the prime

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[1] Cfr. S.K. Brooks, R.K. Webster, L.E. Smith, L. Woodland, S. Wessely, N. Greenberg, G.J. Rubin, *The Psychological Impact of Quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid Review of the Evidence,* in "The Lancet," 395, 2020, pp. 912–920.

needs expressed (SWG investigation, 19-25 May 2020). If this is true, the question regarding the possible transformations of identity and new ways of socialising passes, not only through the Co-Sars2 virus and the habits imposed by it, but also, and indeed, above all, through the mediation of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies).

Indeed, the period of so-called "lockdown" has brought out the unavoidable and disruptive presence of digital devices within contemporary society. The world of education has been forced to take heed of it, with schools and universities struggling to adapt their educational offerings by means of multimedia platforms, web-conferencing programmes, video-recording devices, online blackboards, etc... Work too, wherever possible, has had to re-adapt to a smart formula, based on the options provided by digitalisation and communication. It is obvious that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our socio-economic and relational system would have been even more dramatic had we not had the possibility to interact thanks to the connection and operational methods of ICT. Even the way out of the pandemic passes through the use of "new technologies" and tracking applications, telemedicine, robotics, etc..

Yet the virtualisation of human contact and activities forms a great unknown: the tools that have enabled us to maintain this bare minimum of contact and rapport during the total lockdown phase represent the viaticum of a redefinition in the identity structures and relational modalities of human beings. In fact, even after the end of the acute phase of the pandemic, social contacts will not be able to return to those of the past, but this does not depend so much (or too much) on the pandemic event itself – which, in itself, represents a long suspensive "parenthesis" of normality, and which has nevertheless contributed to speeding up telematic processes – but more on the presence of digital devices, real inter-agent players that have structurally modified the social geography of the contemporary world.

Professor Pier Cesare Rivoltella (Cattolica University, Milan) addressed this issue when he presented his paper on HCI (Human Computer Interactions) in an open and problem-seeking manner within a research project on "Human identity, yesterday and today," promoted by our own "Antonio Rosmini" Study and Research Centre.[2] The redefining of relationships be-

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[2] A project comprising various seminars between November 2019 and May 2020, analysing the identity question from different scientific perspectives: from paleoan-

tween real and the virtual, which has resulted in the current situation being "digitally augmented" – excluding the option of considering the virtual world as parallel, and therefore separate – has brought about the definition of the concept of Onlife *(L. Floridi), which describes the invasive and unavoidable presence of ICT in people's daily lives and social dynamics: this presences poses the crucial question of the significance of the role of new, digital technologies in relation to human existence. In actual fact, they intercept our way of thinking, of communicating, of fact-finding, of gathering and producing data, at the same time changing our cognitive, relational and emotional capacities and thus having a completely new impact on the anthropological and identity structures of the human being. In the post-media condition, (R. Eugeni) or information society, (M. Castells), we find ourselves in a situation in which the media and ordinary things are no longer distinguished, because with the* 'Internet of Things,' *the media migrate into everyday objects, becoming part of a symbiotic organisation between environment, man and technology, where devices frequently communicate between themselves regardless of our own intentions to make them communicate.*

This leads to several questions about the present and future of our species in this epochal change: first of all concerning the type of human subjectivity that is developing. The delegation, in terms of knowledge and information, entrusted to our technological supports, reduces individual and collective mnemonic abilities and it is a well-known fact that the memory of the past influences the formation of the identity of individuals and society. In the season of hyper-story, (L. Floridi) relying on digital devices means risking losing our memory, because we no longer maintain an internalised trace of the amount of information that overwhelms us every day. Then add quantity to the volatility of this data, because the average life of digital documents is reduced, just like the duration of an external memory. The same problem - even more extensive in terms of size, energy consumption and maintenance - arises if we talk about cloud systems, the new and precarious 'Libraries of Alexandria'. The presumption of the infinite accessibility of documents and materials clashes with the reality of structural limits, even amongst ICTs. Based on this false myth, our memory abilities might be reduced,

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thropology research (S. Grimaldi) to genetic research (L. Liberatore), and from neuroscience (L. Boella) to gender studies (B. Henry), and going as far as the issues raised by political philosophy (M. Nicoletti, T. Faitini) and pedagogy (P.C. Rivoltella). In the 2021 volume, the articles of the authors elaborated will be published, starting from the reports presented.

creating a media dependency that leads to a new question: have we progressed from "what shall we save or what do we intend to remember?" to "what shall we delete?" - believing this to be adequate to conserve a memory of the rest. Suffice to think of the photo galleries in our smartphones, but the concept can be generalised.

Second, digital technologies work on the dislocation of the person by creating multiple identities through profiles and accounts, populating the social internet arena with varying, virtual versions and thus transforming Pirandello's image of multiple masks into reality, verifiable through our digital profiles. We are what we claim to be, with multiple and discordant narratives, depending on our needs, without the possibility of real mirroring to act as a filter and verification of constructed expectations. In this sense, to what extent and in what way can we still talk about interpersonal experience? Is it perhaps in danger of being overwhelmed by individual narcissistic experiences? And again, what role does physical presence play in dematerialised relationships?

Thirdly, if identity can be constituted in a solipsistic relationship, then the quest for social consensus becomes a binding priority. By spending considerable periods of our waking time in places other than where we find ourselves physically, through our immersion within digital devices, we contrive to create a web reputation, outsourcing the formation of self-esteem to browsers and social networks. Thus, identity mirroring is shaped around new issues: "who am I to you?" becomes "who am I on the social network?" - a place of indefinite and sovereign otherness, virtual Leviathan that dominates and transforms relationships, making the logic of quantity the criterion for models of interaction. And this raises several questions: how is the relationship between intimacy and esteem recalibrated (J. Lacan, S. Tisseron)? What kind of relationship is it that seeks the approval of social network communities? What kind of relationship and social commitment activate low-definition forms of participation such as those implemented by the logic of satisfaction?

The opening up of this vast field of research has obvious educational-training implications. On the pedagogical debate concerning human education in relation to digital devices, ideas for media education have been active for some time, along with other disciplines that

link human development with the potential (and risks) deriving from continuous interaction with "new technologies".[3]

The philosophical investigation of human identity in the contemporary world promoted by the "Antonio Rosmini" Study and Research Centre, thus defines this problematic horizon, attempting to offer integrated interpretive views, (cfr. note p.2). In the current issue of "Rosmini Studies" the historical-critical aspect is also added, which allows the Rosminian heritage to maintain significant contact and closeness with the most debated issues in the present. In particular, we find a common thread of ideal continuity on the pedagogical horizon, and also a possible key to the reading of this volume, especially by delving into the research that Rosmini carries out on the development of human identity. The analysis of early childhood in 'On the Supreme Principle of the Method,' *later resumed by Francesco Paoli, from which the previously unpublished pedagogical* 'Cone of the Rovereto Kindergarten'[4] *is published in this issue, and reveals attention to the environmental context, to relational openness, to the balanced development of the various faculties, in search of value references that nourish human subjectivity from an early age, beyond the historical specificity of the second half of the nineteenth century. Obviously with different motivations and modulations, contemporary psycho-pedagogies also retain this same attention, confirming its decisive importance for the development of the child's personal identity, or "father of the adult," as Montessori would say: it is therefore natural to ask if, how and when these basic identity structures can be modified by early contact with digital games and interactive robotic toys.*

Alongside the reflective register, there is also the biographical story of Rosmini's education, presented in this issue by the contribution of Stefano Ferrari, who, in the formative features of the 'Roveretan' himself, delivers some useful considerations for the investigation of

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[3] Cfr. L. FLORIDI, *La quarta rivoluzione*, Cortina, Milan 2017; P.C. RIVOLTELLA, P.G. ROSSI, *Il corpo e la macchina*, Scholé, Brescia 2019; F. BRUNI, A. GARAVAGLIA, L. PETTI, (ed. by) *Media Education in Italia. Oggetti e ambiti della formazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2019. In this same book, a short contribution is offered by P. Bonafede entitled *Identity and Education in Informational Society*, pp. 371-386.

[4] See text and contributions published in the *Hors de la page* of this volume, pp. 257-354.

identity development. The young man's passion for visual arts, inherited from his uncle Ambrogio, is accompanied by the in-depth study of the works of Winckelmann, according to the formats and methods of ars legendi, *the rigorously extensive erudite reading, functional to* ars excerpendi, *and the practice of drafting notebooks of extracts, which become real "portable libraries" used to compose new texts according to a circular and reflective process. In Rosmini's education, we therefore find that double attention, both to the visual and to the alphabetical, that neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf considered to be the keystone for a complete human education. Her "bi-lingual brain",[5] in which the digital topological and spatial culture is accompanied by the sequential, narrative and analytical culture of the book, represents a model of learning, of building knowledge and ultimately of developing identity, which is witnessed not only by the story of the young Rosmini, but also by all the other great thinkers of his time, able to make their own that erudite practice dating back to antiquity and placed at the centre of humanistic-Renaissance studies, Jesuit pedagogy and German scholarship of the eighteenth century.*

That which is presented here does not intentionally lead to an evaluative comparison between the education witnessed and conceived by Rosmini and the issues raised by the development of identity in digitalised contemporaneity. And nor do we wish to imply that the formation of the child or youth, according to Rosmini and Paoli, is a model or answer for the present. The objective we offer is to read the current changes through Rosminian pedagogical contributions, with the benefit of time, drawing on all the good offered by the historical distance of such analyses, compared to today's studies on digital education. In this way, other fundamental traits of human education can emerge, which can be linked with issues on which digital education, all too often associated with the present, must still carefully reflect: above all, as a stimulus for an open and problematic reflection, it is worth remembering the roles that corporeality, interpersonal relationships, interiority, the ability to reflect and re-elaborate personally, the dimension of mystery and Transcendence, play in the construction of personal identity, themes that are certainly present in Rosmini's anthropological, moral, pedagogical and philosophical texts. Are we sure that these issues have nothing to contribute to today's debate on digital education?

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[5] M. Wolf, *Lettore vieni a casa. Il cervello che legge in un mondo digitale*, tr. it., Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2018.