Pensare l'infosfera. La filosofia come design concettuale [Thinking about the infosphere. Philosophy as conceptual design]

Sara Del Bello

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BOOK REVIEW

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Pensare l'infosfera. La filosofia come design concettuale [Thinking about the infosphere. Philosophy as conceptual design], by Luciano Floridi, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2020, 152 pp., €15, ISBN-13: 978-8832851489

Philosophy, more than ever before, is playing an essential part in studying real-life situations that have been affected by revolutionary changes, caused by digital transformations. The so-called 'onlife' dimension – described by Luciano Floridi – is key to explaining our condition, where there is no longer a clear boundary between what is digital and what is real. The author emphasizes the importance of a philosophical approach as a conceptual design, keeping in mind the relevance of philosophical questioning and, at the same time, recognizing the critical role of the possible outcomes. Philosophy offers the possibility to understand the context in which we live, making us aware of effective tools to understand our time and its challenges. In other words, we need to rethink our relationship with the digital, starting from an ethical point of view, which can be the bedrock of the philosophy of information.

'We need philosophy to make sense of the radical changes produced by the digital revolution. And we need philosophy to be practiced at its highest level for the difficulties to be faced are considerable' (Floridi 2020, 16). This is the starting point of Luciano Floridi's contribution, dedicated to the philosophical method. In the pages of *Pensare l'infosfera. La filosofia come design concettuale* [Thinking about the infosphere. Philosophy as conceptual design][1] the main focus is the practical role that philosophical thought is called to play in everyday life – in a human dimension in which it is difficult to perceive the boundary between reality and the digital realm. This is the meeting point between real and virtual, about which Floridi coined in another work the term *onlife*. This indicates the specific union between online and offline.

Pensare l'infosfera is an essay resulting from *The Logic of information. A theory of conceptual Design* – part of a tetralogy consisting of other two volumes: *The Philosophy of Information* and *The Ethics of Information*. From *Pensare l'infosfera* emerges the important ability to provide a philosophical foundation to the digital world – a concept which in this case in particular refers to the sphere of information and, more generally, to the contextual presence of that two-part dimension previously mentioned, now constitutive of our relationship to reality. In stressing the need for an ethical foundation on which the philosophy of information can be based, the real elements of value upon which the basic ethical idea is founded are not outlined. Instead, what comes to the fore is an invitation to philosophers to open their eyes to what the contemporary world requires and needs – philosophical support being needed more than ever before.

Philosophical thinking

What emerges as necessary in Floridi's analysis is the need to bring philosophizing back to real concrete situations, starting from the awareness of modern questions that philosophy itself has the responsibility to answer.

The understanding of the various passages that allows one to grasp the core of his perspective with respect to philosophical methodology, or rather, with respect to the constitutive nature of it, starts from a basic assumption, whereby 'the only true method in philosophy is thinking' (Floridi 2020, 43). '[…] Its method is conceptual design, that is, the art of identifying and clarifying open questions and of designing, proposing, and evaluating convincing and clear answers' (Floridi 2020, 53).

We are living in a revolutionary period that cannot and must not evade philosophy, since, in the *onlife* dimension, we need a way of thinking capable of understanding its transformations and offering adequate answers:

> Since Copernicus, heliocentric cosmology has removed the Earth – and therefore all humanity –from the center of the universe. Darwin […] removed humanity from the center of the biological realm. Moreover, with Freud we recognized that […] we are not even at the center of pure rationality […]. We are experiencing what can be described as a *fourth revolution* […] This has been going on since the 1950s, and Turing is undoubtedly the figurehead of that revolution. (Floridi 2020, 129–130)

These revolutions, in hindsight, have not completely reduced the centrality of the individual. In some ways, beyond the important role that they have undoubtedly played, they have partly contributed to the strengthening of that subjectivism specific to modernity onwards.

Keeping with Floridi's argument, the transformative process he refers to comprises a real informational revolution, which he explores explicitly elsewhere, laying the foundations for a philosophical thought that constitutes the speculative ground, providing also the necessary ethical substrate. To quote Floridi, if philosophy needs to be constantly redesigned in order to apply to real-life changes, then as a result, it is impossible to neglect contemporaneity characterized by an ever-increasing informational development.

Citing Norbert Wiener (Floridi 2009, 8), according to whom all living things are informational entities, Floridi also argues that 'the world is the totality of informational objects that interact dynamically with each other', thus creating the infosphere. And if 'digital technologies are not only tools that merely modify the way we interact […] [but] are re-ontologizing – that is, they modify the intrinsic nature (the ontology) of what they affect' (Floridi 2020, 14), then philosophy of information has the duty and goal of coming to terms with them, so to speak, by expanding its own semantic boundaries. This statement can be better understood if we look at the three cornerstones of Floridi's philosophy of information, modelled on a constructivist approach, according to which it is possible to know only what has been given form. Therefore, the key concepts are minimalism, models of abstraction, and constructivism. The starting point of his perspective is the epistemological constructivist idea that knowledge is always the result of something having been constructed. More precisely, 'one can only know what one constructs and, therefore, one cannot know the authentic nature of reality itself' (Floridi 2020, 118). Going further into detail, he writes, 'Plato was right to define the one who understands (the dialectician) as the person 'who knows how to question and respond'. He was wrong to identify the one who understands with the one who uses the information, not the one who constructs it' (Floridi 2020, 122). For Floridi, therefore, it is not a matter of distinguishing between the builder and the user, between praxis and theory; rather, the step to be taken must advance in another direction: knowledge is that which is resolved in the ability to bring into being, modify, and re-propose a given phenomenon. And this is the starting point of the philosophy of information. In other words, it develops from models of reality built through levels of abstraction,

since 'at a given level of abstraction, all objects in the universe are data structures' (Floridi 2009, 16), therefore informational objects constitutive of that infosphere mentioned above. In addition, finally, there is a minimalist approach that allows for the breakdown of a starting question into a series of subsequent questions, all related to the initial one. This gives one the opportunity to tackle a particular problem, dividing it into sub-problems, which are all connected, thus facilitating the treatment.

Knowing how to ask

Starting from this premise, Floridi's reflection revolves around the analysis of the relationship between questions and answers, a prerequisite for any philosophical approach. Floridi explains: 'Philosophical questions are, in principle, open questions […] questions that cannot be answered empirically or logico-mathematically by means of observations or calculations' (Floridi 2020, 25–6). To me, this focus on the philosophical question suggests a reference to a famous Arendtian reflection which highlights that 'if men were to lose the appetite for meaning that we call thinking, they would also lose […] the ability to ask all the questions susceptible of an answer, on which every civilization is based' (Arendt 2006, 146).

In Floridi's opinion, knowing how to ask the right questions must also include an equal ability to seek adequate answers. This key relationship cannot, in turn, be separated from an understanding of context or rather – to use his language – of the level of abstraction against which to analyse the issue under consideration. He borrows the latter element – the level of abstraction – from Turing (Cf. Floridi 2020, 125). As he himself writes: 'the nature of problems can be fruitfully studied by focusing on the kind of resources that are required in principle to solve them […]' (Floridi 2020, 23). In other words, it is a matter of grasping and understanding the set of elements that condition the choices and decisions within an argument and assessment of ideas with respect to a given subject, so as to ask the right questions and proceed towards an appropriate synthesis of the answers. The emphasis placed on the necessity of the answer does not reconcile with a part of philosophical thought, which has always grasped – we might say – the superiority of asking over providing a clarification to any given doubt. In this sense, I reference María Zambrano, who paid particular attention to an a-methodic philosophical method (Cfr. Del Bello 2017) – the result of the rediscovered connection between poetry and philosophy, that is, between the gift, on the one hand, and the urgent question guided by a method, on the other. Zambrano always stressed the importance of an approach that was not driven by a systematic and totally clarifying will, where – in her opinion – the essence of philosophy also lies in the ability to accept what does not lend itself to an absolute and total understanding.

In Floridi's perspective, the search for meaning, which passes through the attribution of meaning to reality, is configured as one of the founding components of the philosophy of information. The ability to semanticize what surrounds us – to use his terminology – is the main way we approach the world, in an attempt to understand it. It represents, therefore, the basic assumption, which requires a continuous and constantly evolving application.

Floridi's observation surmises that, in the era of the digital revolution, even the semantic approach suffers the effects of the transformations taking place. It concludes that we cannot ignore the need to expand the semantic capital at our disposal. It is up to us to grasp the change in progress, so as to seek out the tools necessary for its understanding.

An ethical question

Floridi's work is, therefore, an invitation addressed to philosophy, so to speak, to become aware of the contemporary context and take charge of its own role within it:

> The progressive shift from analytic to digital semantic capital is bound to increasingly affect the way we give meaning and sense to our identities and lives […] and the way we ask and answer our questions (Floridi 2020, 138).

> The philosophy of information enables humanity to make sense of the world and build it responsibly (Floridi 2020, 134).

> This takes on particular importance in the context of today's information societies, in which the multiplication of information sources produces an exponential but often disorganized accumulation of data […] (Floridi 2020, 135).

Philosophy, we could say, must rediscover its practical nature. To quote Achenbach, 'philosophy is more than the typical scientific effort to create a theory' (Achenbach 2009, 25), because it represents 'the intellectual framework that can be used […] to understand and deal with underlying issues' (Floridi 2020, 127) that characterize today's society. Floridi argues that to do so, philosophy must be fully aware of the tools at its disposal, so as to draw the lines – the conceptual design – necessary to pose questions susceptible to multiple answers. This allows people to think critically, which is essential in the face of the new challenges that contemporary life poses to us.

For Floridi, the urgency of an ethical issue that has to do with the digital world arises: as he also explains in his numerous interviews, talking about digital ethics means rethinking the complexity of the *onlife* reality, recognizing the centrality of the human relationship. It means recognizing that we share our space with other living creatures with whom we have deep bonds. This is a criticism of the concept that human beings have primacy over other species – the idea of primacy is rooted in the Aristotelian-Tolemaic model, later undermined by the Heliocentric-Copernican discovery – that echoes Freud's position for which human dominance is a scientific presumption generating a narcissistic illusion. The digital revolution has made us increasingly part of the same network, which has shown how each ego represents the result of a relational process.

This work is a reflection of great interest that also urges a greater understanding of Floridi's idea of human beings and their roots – referencing his own expression – to which he refers with respect to his own ethical-digital vision. That would be interesting to investigate further.

Undoubtedly we need a perspective that rethinks and re-evaluates the relationship between human beings and the digital realm, without incurring in unnecessary and often dangerous demonization. Philosophy is called to take charge of this effort, rediscovering its origin, which is rooted precisely in contact with experience.

Notes

1. *Pensare l'infosfera. La filosofia come design concettuale* has not currently been translated into English. The quotes taken from the book were translated by the author of this review.

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Sara Del Bello
PhD in Political Philosophy, Sapienza Università of Rome, Italy
✉ sara.delbello.x@gmail.com

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