Exclusive Interview: 'On Metaverse and Immortality' with Philosopher Dr. Firat Ilim

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"It should be noted that the foundations of the phenomena known today as software and coding were actually developed by philosophers."

Dr. Firat Ilim is a professor of philosophy, working on Carnival Studies and Musical Semiotics.

"I would like to remind, on the threshold of the metaverse era, that all kinds of innovations we live with today were dreamed and realized collectively by scientists, philosophers, and artists."

Mankind has entered a digital transformation that resembles science fiction movies. When we look at the chronological progression of technological developments, many ideas that were once dismissed as "daydreaming" later became real innovations. Leonardo Da Vinci's airplane sketches, for instance, were far ahead of his time. In a similar spirit, could the washing machine or dishwasher be considered the "metaverse" of the past? If someone had told a washerwoman in the 1800s that a machine would do the laundry, she might have thought the speaker was insane. This is the starting point of our exclusive interview with Dr. Firat Ilim, in which we examine such questions.

Baktas: Hello Dr. Ilim, what do you think the metaverse promises us? Isn't it too simplistic to reduce it to a mere tool for entertainment and gaming?

Ilim: Hello Mrs. Baktas! I believe it would be a mistake to limit the metaverse phenomenon to the entertainment industry. Many current metaverse designs replicate the external world virtually, while others embrace more fictional dimensions. In both cases, virtual lands are already being bought and sold, and even second-hand markets are emerging. In a future metaverse, you might live in a virtual Tokyo, visit a local coffee shop, and socialize there. Naturally, a vast economy will emerge around these experiences—from virtual clothing to metaverse taxis. Some people will earn their livelihood in these digital universes; others will expand their domains through competition or gameplay. These are predictable developments. Even more striking scenarios are possible—being prosecuted in a metaverse court, or serving a virtual prison sentence. I find even the imaginable aspects of this fascinating!

Baktas: Have any philosophers anticipated such developments? How did they make predictions about the future while analyzing their present?

Ilim: Actually, since Plato, philosophy has always engaged with reality and its representations. A turning point came with the question: "Can we doubt the reality surrounding us?" We find this in Aristotle's *Organon*, and it gained new depth through religiously motivated skepticism. Descartes asked, "What if our brains are in a jar, and all our experiences are illusions?" This was a pivotal moment. It shows that the

idea of simulation was already part of human collective consciousness 400 years ago, and it never really went away. On the contrary, it has evolved and taken on new forms.

If we speak in terms of technological development, the roots also align with Descartes' era. High-tech imaginings appear in the writings of Cyrano de Bergerac, for instance.

Baktas: What is the link between philosophy and technology?

Ilim: Philosophers have contributed more than is commonly assumed, especially regarding digitalization. The key step in digital transformation was developing symbolic representations of objects and their interrelations—what we now call software languages. Twentieth-century philosophers and mathematicians, such as Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Gödel, played crucial roles in this process. They sought to symbolically represent objects and the possible relationships among them.

Ultimately, this led to expressions claiming the world could be represented entirely through abstract symbolic systems. So yes, what we now recognize as coding has deep philosophical roots. In a sense, this is the end of one story and the beginning of another: a new era striving for liberation from material constraints, yet also at risk of returning to Plato's cave.

Of course, some philosophers, like Heidegger, were critical of technology. But whether supportive or critical, these discussions have long existed and will continue—especially now, at the threshold of the metaverse era. It is vital to recall that human innovations have always emerged from the intersection of science, philosophy, and art.

This is the broader field in which our creations unfold—a space where we theorize, give concrete examples, and design by exploring even the smallest details.

Baktas: Which philosophical current best represents our era?

Ilim: That's a very challenging question (laughs). Any answer I give would likely be contested by other philosophers. Often, we are surprised to find that ancient philosophical problems remain relevant today. While new ideas and approaches certainly arise, I would hesitate to claim that one school dominates. Logical positivism still impresses with its foresight, while existentialism remains significant, especially when considering how data-driven thinking intersects with existential crises. At the same time, I see a need to revisit Schopenhauer and Marx, especially as the current economic system attempts to manipulate our desires. In short, human life is complex and multifaceted, and the metaverse warrants analysis from each of these philosophical standpoints.

Baktas: Suppose ancient philosophers were born into today's world. What kinds of questions would they ask about the metaverse?

Ilim: In a way, I don't think we're that far removed from their concerns. Take Pythagoras: the logical formulations that preceded calculators—the ancestors of modern computers—emerged close to his time. If the ancients were introduced to immersive virtual worlds, they might first seek the "all-powerful programmer" (laughs). They would ask: "Who created this virtual realm, and upon what principles?"

Today, software developers inherit such questions from philosophy. Ancient thinkers tried to classify the entire universe. Modern computer scientists and AI researchers are asking a similar question: how can we develop a taxonomy to teach artificial intelligence about the world? What philosophers once debated as ontology is now the subject of ontology engineering.

Baktas: Did the Pythagoreans have views on immortality?

Ilim: Yes, long before the Abrahamic religions promised eternal life, the Pythagoreans believed in the continuation of the soul after bodily death. They thought that how we live in this life determines our next embodiment. A virtuous life could result in rebirth into a better body and a better life; a life poorly lived might lead to reincarnation as a dog or even a fava bean.

Baktas: Do you think the notion of an avatar sustaining their soul in the metaverse echoes Pythagorean ideas of immortality?

Ilim: To analyze that, we should begin with the mind-body dualism. Ancient and early modern philosophers were rather speculative—and often misguided—about the interaction between mind and body. Even today, some religious traditions assert the independent existence of the soul. Yet psychology, a field originally centered around the notion of the soul, now understands these phenomena differently.

Today, we speak more about "mind" than "soul." The mind encompasses functions such as cognition, affect, volition, perception, and consciousness. These functions do not originate from a single spot in the body but involve multiple biochemical and physiological systems. To transfer all this to the metaverse, we would need realistic models of such functions and systems. And we still don't fully understand even basic faculties, like the sense of smell. So modeling the functions of the mind in a digital environment remains a distant dream.

Baktas: So for the metaverse to truly emulate human experience, it would need to replicate not just consciousness but emotions too?

Ilim: Exactly. And we're far from fulfilling even the most basic conditions for that. Seeing myself walking along a virtual beach, feeling the sea breeze and smelling the air, can be a pleasant illusion—but it remains a carefully designed set of stimuli. My responses will still be filtered through my existing physical body, culture, and interpretations.

If we truly aim to liberate the mind from the body, we will need not only technical means but also conceptual models precise enough to be translated into software. Culture and interpretation are integral to the mind-body relationship. Thus, social sciences must remain part of this conversation.

Baktas: I think the hardest part of interviewing a philosopher is ending up with more questions! Thank you so much for the interview.

Ilim: It was my pleasure. I'm particularly glad you touched upon the philosophy of blockchain. As I said, social sciences are essential to metaverse discussions, and their relevance will only grow. My thanks to the entire team!