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Reply to Luciano Floridi

The fact that my comment mainly refers to Floridi's then newly published book goes back to a misunderstanding. I had understood the request to be about a book symposium and assumed that Floridi's initiative essay would be a précis of that book. When I received it, I had already elaborated the outline of my comment about the book, and I found that I could not really work with the initiative essay because it was purely programmatic. It lacked arguments on which my comment could operate. The text floated in a theoretical vacuum, since it deliberately made no effort to engage argumentatively with opposed views that anybody actually defends.

On closer examination, this characteristic seemed to be a consequence of Floridi's view of the nature of philosophy as conceptual design and the fundamental openness of philosophical questions, which I had addressed in my comment. For this reason, I decided (encouraged by the editors) that my comment does provide an illuminating perspective in the debate of the initiative essay and I extended it by the last section, which provides the transition between the book and the essay. Situating the text within the larger methodological framework of the book brings a dimension to the discussion, which does not get into view by focusing just on Floridi's initiative essay.

This is why the disagreement between Floridi and me goes deeper than in the other comments. We are playing two different games. The game that I am playing is the game of epistemic justification with the aim of arguing for the truth of philosophical claims. One can trace this game back to the Platonic distinction between *Techne* and *Episteme* which is really at stake here. Floridi, in contrast, plays a constructionist new game that he labels »conceptual design« which is the result of what he calls metaphorically »rebooting« philosophy.

The dictionary meaning of »rebooting« is to restart a computer. Yet, if one takes Floridi's rhetoric of revolution seriously, his project is rather comparable to what is known as »rebooting« in the enter-

tainment industry with respect to movies, comics or video games. In this context, the term »reboot« means to restart an entertainment universe that has already been previously established, and begin with a new story line and/or timeline that disregards the original writer's previously established history, thus making it obsolete and void.« (Willits 2009) It seems to me that Floridi's rebooting of philosophy works similar, familiar names from the history of philosophy appear but his game is not the same any more. [He compares what he is doing to pulling a table cloth from under a dinner service at once, »if we are successful« Floridi concludes, »what will have changed is what the items are placed on, not their positions.«]

The fact that Floridi, for his part, finds my considerations not helpful is, hence, not surprising. It is due to a completely different understanding of what philosophy is about. If philosophical questions are open in Floridi's sense, then it does not make sense to say that philosophical claims can be true or false. Insofar as philosophical arguments aim at justifying why one should accept a certain view as true, the thesis of the openness of philosophical questions would explain why Floridi is not putting forward arguments in his initiative essay, but rather aims at establishing a new narrative.

The following passage gets to the heart of this new narrative:

But what concept can today replace the main one of a social *thing*? Almost a century ago, Cassirer identified the end of what I have defined here as the Aristotelian–Newtonian paradigm in the transition from the centrality of the concept of substance (things) to the centrality of the concept of function (relations) in mathematics and physics (Cassirer 1923). He was right, and the next step is simple: a function is only a special kind of univocal relation between input and output. It is therefore a matter of appreciating the possibility that it is not the concept of »thing«, but that of »relation«—which refers to what constitutes all things and connects them among themselves – that can play a foundational role in the political thought of the twenty-first century. (p. 6)

It still seems to me that this view, if we take it seriously as a *paradigm change*, amounts to the idea of replacing the individual as the normative foundation of political philosophy by a relational view that reduces it to a node in a functional system. I also pointed to the moral and political dangers that result from replacing the notion of a free and equal moral person by such a functional view. In the light of these dangers, Floridi's artificial naiveté appears to be frivolous and it

falls short of more customary views in political philosophy like Rawls' who shows that we can do political philosophy without resorting to questionable metaphysically claims.

Floridi assures that nothing could be more distant from his views than my interpretation. However, if this is true, then I am loosing grip on what exactly the *paradigm change* that he envisages consists in. It would have been helpful to specify the old paradigm with reference to the contemporary philosophical discussion to avoid making it appear just as a straw man in which everybody could see their favorite philosophical bogeyman.

Floridi's strategy of intentionally emptying the text from any »cunning of reason« (p. 3), technical terms and bibliographic references that allow to situate it in the context of specific debates made it incomprehensible to me. Maybe I belong to the »contaminated [who] should take no offence, but they will not understand it.« (p. 3). However, my aim in philosophy is precisely to convince those with rational arguments who do not agree with me and not just address those who already share my views.

This is what I did in my comments on his book. I elaborated on four key objections against his thesis of the openness of philosophical questions in a standard philosophical way by producing arguments that support these objections. Floridi's reply to my comment does not at all address these arguments. Take, for instance, his method of abstraction. I do not have any problems with this method in the context of Computer Science, but I argued against his transfer of this method to philosophical problems with reference to his own explication and examples. His derogatory reply to my comment is ultimately a refusal to engage with my arguments. Floridi finds them unappealing and maybe that is in some sense true. However, as Davidson once said with respect to conceptual relativism (which bears some resemblance to Floridi's view), »The trouble is, as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining the excitement.« (Davidson 1984, 183)

In the end, Floridi's feeling that I do not understand his views properly have to do with the fact that our disagreement about the nature of philosophy is so deep that we cannot even find common ground for discussion. This becomes obvious in his reply to my objection that a question like: »Should I wear my hair shorter?« fulfils his criteria for philosophical questions but is obviously none (by the way, I never claimed that the reason for this is that the question is too

simple and elementary as Floridi puts in my mouth). In response, he simply states, »that is still a philosophical question, just one that is not very interesting and consequential. There is not even a bullet to bite; this is just plain common sense.« (Reply, p. 389)

I doubt that even common sense would consider this question as philosophical. Yet, it is true, common sense often uses the term »philosophy« to refer to the purely speculative, arcane and ultimately irrelevant, to matters of ideology that are beyond rational debate because one cannot be right or wrong about them. In this sense, one might point out something like »my hair-philosophy is: rather too short than too long!« However, this example does not show that there is hair-philosophy. It rather shows that one is as ill advised to trust common sense when it comes to the nature of philosophy as when it comes to the nature of mathematics, paleontology or psychology.

Bibliography

Davidson, D. (1984): »On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme«, repr. in: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 183–198.

Willits, Th. R. (13 July 2009), »To Reboot Or Not To Reboot: What is the Solution?«, <http://www.bewilderingsstories.com/issue344/reboot1>. Retrieved June 2022.