Reading the World upside down: How to deal with frozen knowledge

It is not an accidental that especially in our times the question arises whether an uncontrolled and blind trust in technology can have dangerous implications in the context of our everyday life. No technological development is comparable to today’s digital revolution. With teleparticipation and, last but not least, with the technological outfitting and enhancement of the human body by biomechanical and neurobionic prostheses the distinction may be blurred between the natural and the artificial, between truth and illusion, between the formal and the material. A radical change in our everyday thought and work is taking place which encompasses and pervades the life of each and every individual in its entirety. We run the risk of losing our grounding in the earthly world.

As a minor aspect of this general issue I will examine in the following the restrictions to which we are exposed in teleparticipation, in the exchange of information and knowledge in the Internet, in electronic communication as it takes place in messengers and chatrooms. But before I go into details let me first state my central thesis:

1) The only knowledge we can achieve via the Internet is frozen knowledge
2) Heideggerian openness is an appropriate means with which to deal with frozen knowledge
3) Heidegger’s inverted world view is an appropriate answer to a striking characteristic of Modern Times: Dreaming off the World.

Frozen Knowledge

The only knowledge we can achieve through the Internet is frozen knowledge and with electronic communication we will always be caught up in standard scripts and roles. Such an assessment, however, is anything but clear. In chatrooms for example we find a strange mix of elements of oral and written language. It seems as if writing has learned to speak. When I was observing social interactions in Chatrooms two things caught my attention: a high degree of involvement and intense emotionality. Only the beginner experiences messages on the monitor as symbols created by animated cartoons. Tools such as the keyboard, monitor and Chat-software are in the foreground of his attention. The advanced user on the other hand is practically drawn into the middle of the chatroom. A feeling of proximity to the other participants arises even though they may be thousands of miles afar. This feeling can be best described as a kind of flow which connects the users in a very intense and intimate way.

One possible explanation, among others, for this phenomenon is the high speed of exchange in chatrooms compared with face-to-face communication. At first glance this fact sounds strange because speaking is normally faster than writing. But we have to take into account that in a chatroom many people are talking with each other and whereas in ordinary conversation only one person can speak, in the chatroom all participants can write their messages simultaneously. The written messages flit across the monitor at a very high speed and force the reader to formulate his own answers without any further reflection about what she wants to say. This circumstance causes the user to fall into a situation of flow in which time passes unnoticed and all reflection about one’s activity ceases, which results in a kind of unconscious “mindless” coping with the chat-community.

Another important factor is the special language used in chatrooms. Very often shortcuts (onomatopoeia) are used such like n8 (german) or u (english). This allows for fast
conversation and connects the letters to their oral phonetics. Another remarkable feature is its performative style. Saying something does not describe an action, it embodies the action itself. Thus the new language of the Internet contains many features which have been ascribed to former oral cultures.

But what does all that imply? Can oral speech and direct contact really be substituted by online-relationships without any losses and restrictions?

In his study on Carnegie Mellon university Robert Kraut maintained that in the Internet strong social ties are substituted by weak social ties. Critics of that study, however, claimed that the sample used was not representative and Kraut himself withdrew his polemic in a later statement. In another study Parker and Loyds even argued that users of chatrooms are more socially active than others. The reason for this social behavior may be found in the fact that virtual escapism, the radical withdrawl from real friends and relatives, is not the normal behavior of Chat participants. Even in Chatrooms people after a while come together in reality, meetings are organized especially for Chatters.

My question however is a more speculative one: What if communication in the Net were to become a central issue in our social behavior?

One objection to electronic communication might be the following: In electronic communication we use only one aspect of communication namely that one which can be transmitted in explicit, written terms. However, not everything we experience can be completely explicated. In order to understand something which has been said explicitly we must presuppose an implicit understanding. This understanding remains in the background. The understanding of written terms works only as long as we can rely on the fact that all the participants in the electronic communication share the same common understanding.

When I discussed this issue with my colleague Rainer Born and with Martin Waldegger, my assistant in e-learning, Rainer put forward the following example: Look at the technique of perspective in western painting: A smaller man is a man standing at a greater distance. When we look at a painting we don’t think about the fact that our perception of the little man is an interpretation instilled in us by our western tradition. The idea that the man is further away comes to us willy-nilly, quasi automatically as if spatiality were something built in, an intrinsic feature of the painting.

But think about the case of a child who says to his father: “look, look at the little man standing there on the top of the hill.”

What the example illuminates is the simple fact that perspective foreshortening is something which has to be learned. And in order to learn it we need experiences which are not embodied in the painting. Just think what would happen, if we would try to learn perspective only by exchanging paintings. Nothing in the paintings would give us the key for understanding the spatiality of the painting. In Chinese culture for example the small size of a man indicates his minor social status.

So in order to understand written symbols we must rely on socially shared standard experiences which we have to know from the very outset. In electric communication therefore nothing really new can be learned. Instead we always remain within the limits of some standard experiences and stick in this way to what is already known.

When I told him that story Martin suddenly responded: You may be right as long as you reduce electronic communication to the exchange of written symbols. But the Internet has long since exceeded the limits of writing. And it will not be long before the Internet will allow
the transmission of all kinds of impressions you can get with your own five senses, including haptic and olfactory sensations.

Rainer’s objection to this answer was the following: There is a new variant of cybersex in which people can touch each other with a stick operated by remote control. But, Rainer added, even in that case we must already know something about sex in advance in order to be able to understand a touch of a stick as a touch by our remote partner. If we hadn’t already had such sexual experiences such a touching would not have meaning for us at all.

Back to Martin he argued again: Even in face to face communication the impressions we get from our partner have to be interpreted. In all our sensations we can find this uncertainty concerning their meaning. So how does this differ from the Internet?

Ok, how does this differ from the Internet? When I was hearing all this I asked myself whether I don’t run into some kind of total scepticism. If Martin is right and every signal, every message we receive has a meaning which, even in real life, is only derived how does it ever come about that we understand each other? How is communication ever possible? This sounds strange.

But before I got impossibly stuck on that question I tried to clarify what that rumor about derived and intrinsic meaning means. Let me give you an example.

Let us suppose that a European painting is shipped to China. In China a Chinese points at a little man in the painting and says: Look at this minor person. Is our Chinese wrong? As long as she is interpreting the painting I would say no. Because the painting is only an artefact and its meaning is only derived, it is in the eye of the beholder.

We can say: The small size of the man does not really indicate distance. There is no built in spatiality in the painting. It indicates it only in the context of a special tradition. It would be a quite different story if our Chinese would interpret the intentions of the European painter from the background of her culture. If she would say, for example, that the painter intended to show by size a man of minor social position, she would make an error.

Now what can we learn from this short lesson about intrinsic meaning? We can learn two things: 1) Not the painting itself really means this or that by itself, only we mean by the painting this or that. We are the meaning-makers, it is up to us what the painting, what the signal, what the message really means. 2) What is meant intrinsically is not relative to a context any more. Would the latter be the case we could never make an error.

I am saying all this now – and this I want to emphasize – without any ontological assumptions concerning intrinsic or derived intentionality. What I am doing instead is only a very modest commentary on the everyday usage of the attribution of meaning. I just want to explicate how our ordinary understanding of intrinsic meaning works and what “really meaning” implies. By really meaning spatiality, for example, we fix the meaning for all possible contexts. And we can do this by virtue of our own immediate directedness towards spatiality – an ability which no artefact has.

But after all this I am coming back to Martin’s question: How do we ever able to fix meaning, if the meaning of all the signals we get is derived? Do we not reach the conclusion that all meaning is derived, a view which by the way such different philosophers as Dennett and Derrida would share?

So what about intrinsic meaning? Before I look for an adequate answer I have to breathe deeply. The answer is very, very simple: It is the situation as a whole which cannot be cut up into single chunks of experiences and from which something like intrinsic meaning emerges.
This statement sounds like a deus ex machina. If there is something like intrinsic meaning it must emerge from somewhere so why not take the situation of our being in the world as a whole? This is not the end of my analysis, however, on the contrary it is its beginning. First of all we have to state that that Quinian rumor about the indeterminacy of all signals we receive is a very artificial view of our everyday communication. In a normal situation we don’t first hear noises and then furnish them with a meaning, what we hear instead are verbal messages which always already have a meaning. Only in the mode of detached philosophical reflection are we able to strip those messages of their meaning.

In everyday life, on the contrary, we are involved in a meaningful world which has a social dimension from the very outset. I don’t want to loose much time on this. Because everything that needs to be said about this topic has been explained in Dreyfus’ reading of Heidegger. So a few words will suffice it for my purpose.

*Dealing with frozen knowledge: Heideggerian Openness*

In everyday life we don’t stare at things in the mode of detached reflection, things don’t simply occur. Instead we encounter them as something available in the process of an involved coping activity. This concerned coping in a world in turn is grounded in a basic familiarity which penetrates all our everyday activity in such a way that all equipment we cope with is encountered as something embedded in a whole set of other equipments. But this equipment whole, although it is a constant companion of our everyday activity, remains in the background of our attention. Invisible and transparent as it is it can be very easily overlooked. And in fact it has been ignored in the tradition of western philosophy. A lot of the epistemological scepticism contained in the above mentioned ambiguity concerning our understanding of sounds and other signals has its origin in this ignorance of our primordial settledness in such an equipment whole. But as I said before I don’t want to belabor this point.

What I want to ask instead is whether this Heideggerian approach does not amount to some kind of pragmatic reductionism. In the early 1950s Alfred Delp asked himself in a somewhat ironical way whether Heidegger does not turn the human being into the owner of a huge arsenal of equipment. Or, to put it another way, we can also ask: If our being in the world is grounded in our concerned coping activity how can the real be disclosed on the basis of such a being-in-the-world and at the same time be in itself?

First of all we have to see that Heidegger’s analysis of equipment in *Being and Time* is in regard to his main purpose, nameley to explain the phenomenon of world as transcendence, of minor importance. He even stresses this point in a footnote in “Essence of Reasons” where he explicitly says that the nexus of equipment can never be identified with his phenomenon of world.

I am coming now to a difficult point for which I can give only some basic clues within the limits of this lecture. The question is how to understand disclosing in the right way. First of all I want to come back to the above mentioned fact that we don’t hear noises and give them an interpretation in hindsight, that we instead listen to meaningful messages from the very outset. Heidegger calls this phenomenon in being and time the primordial openness of the human being. But how to understand this openness? In a commentary on a poem of Rainer Maria Rilke in a lecture called Parmenides from 1942 Heidegger argues about this openness.
The poem says the following: “With all its eyes the creature sees the openness. Only our eyes are as if reversed and entrapped entirely around themselves all around their free way out.”

In Heidegger’s reading this means the following: Because of his ability to reflect, the human being is cut off from an immediate access to reality. Only in a state before reflection is immediate access to reality possible. But, Heidegger, stresses, this is not his understanding of openness. His openness does not mean something unconscious, unreflected but at the same time it does also not mean something conscious or deliberate. In basic concepts of metaphysics – world – finiteness – loneliness Heidegger gives his openness the following meaning: It is a kind of awakening to a special mood which does not change or even destroy that mood as it might happen in case of deliberate consciousness, on the contrary that mood comes in the process of its awakening into being. And what we are waking up for is the disclosure of the real. In basic concepts of metaphysics you can find one of the rare confrontations of the human being with the animal Heidegger has ever given. He says there: Whereas the bee knows the flowers the human being knows the stamens as stamens. This is why the being of animals is characterized by “poverty of world” whereas the human being is characterized by the ability to build a world. In contrast to animals we are in Heidegger’s view almost “builders of world”.

That does not mean that the animal lacks openness completely. An animal is not a stone. It has, in the view of Heidegger, “directedness”, yet it does not have directedness towards the being as a being. This accessibility of the being as a being in turn is exactly what Heidegger has in mind when he ascribes to the human being the ability to build a world.

Now the question comes up how this openness can ever be experienced. Heidegger offers several different examples for such an experience. I will pick out only one, namely anxiety. In this connection three questions may be in order:

1) What is anxiety? 2) What does anxiety disclose? 3) What does anxiety imply for the above mentioned question how the real can be disclosed and yet be in itself?

1) Anxiety is a special affectedness which happens in situations of a total breakdown of our familiar coping with things.

2) In anxiety we become aware of the tacit background of our concerned coping activity with which we are familiar from the outset. But we don’t become aware of it in the sense of a deliberate cognitive process but rather in the mode of finding ourselves already settled in it. We have called this settledness in an equipment whole something primordial. Now it turns out that something even more primordial is lurking in in the background, nameley finding ourselves in total unsetteledness happens in the case of anxiety. Heidegger even emphasizes that all our familiar dwelling in a world is only a mode of this unsettledness and not the reverse.

3) Now to the question how the real can be disclosed on the basis of our being in the world and yet be in itself. This problem is a very difficult one. And I must admit that I can give you as a solution for this problem only an interpretation of Heidegger because he himself does not face this problem directly. But let me start with a more vivid example. In a painting of Michelangelo in the sistine chapel Adam points his finger at god and god at Adam. Their finger-tips, however, do not touch each other. Why? The reason is because such a touch would demask God’s transcendence in its inscrutable mystery. In a religious understanding the only possibility to bridge that inevitable gap between god and man is belief. Now Heidegger’s approach is a different one. As a philosopher he cannot rely on belief. So
everything that he says must be demonstrated and supported by experience. His method is not
religion, it is phenomenology. So how to solve Michelangelo’s problem by phenomenology?
How can we long for the transcendent without destroying and demasking its mystery in the
very process of that longing? This question should not be confused with the epistemological
question how a subject in the mode of detached reflection can ever understand an outside
reality. The question is, on the contrary, how a human being by the way of its involved coping
in a world can ever encounter a being which has a stand in itself.

In a very pointed manner we can put this question also in the following way: How to touch
the untouchable? This sounds in the first place like an unsolvable conundrum. Heidegger’s
answer is: For the very reason of human’s ability to experience the total breakdown of
familiarity in the case of anxiety he can encounter the unfamiliar. It is exactly this breakdown
which turns human existence into a being living from afar. To put it in another way we can
also say: Transcending the borders of the known in the case of breakdown we root our
understanding in the unknown. And, I must add, this is not a problem for epistemology, in the
view of Heidegger, it has to do with the way our being is situated in a human world.

This kind of transcendence is not grounded in a special mental power of the human being like
in the case of an intuitus originarius, it is a transcendence born out of a weakness which
enables us first of all to respect the Other as something having a stand in itself.

What we have, I suggest, is a weak ontological attitude. What I mean by a weak ontological
attitude may be best explained if we go back to Rainer’s example of a cybersex scenario in
which a stick or something similar is operated by remote control. As I explained before we
must know in advance what a sexual relationship is in order to be able to interpret a touch by
a stick as a touch by our partner in the net. Without that ontological attitude we could not even
be deceived. Heidegger is asking a similar question which has to be understood only in a
rhetorical sense: If we mistake in the darkness a tree for a man does that mean that our
intention is directed towards a mere representation of a man and not the man himself? His
answer is: No, the deception is possible only because we erroneously intend the man himself.
Without that ontological attitude we could not distinguish between illusion and reality. But
what is weak now about that ontological attitude?

Due to the experience of total breakdown we leave the door always open for entering the
unknown (Please note that I am not talking about propositional knowledge). That means that
our directedness towards the ontological cannot be reduced to that we are just familiar with.
According to that weak ontological attitude the above mentioned statement that every thing is
what it is only in the context of an equipment whole requires a supplement which is crucial,
namely that this equipment whole in turn is what it is only in the mode of its breakdown. It is
for that reason that Heidegger sees in everything some unfathomable mystery.¹

So if we take all that talking about our coping activity as being absorbed into the familiar
background of an inconspicious equipment whole we have to see that this is only the one side
of the coin. What completes the coin is just the same background in the mode of its
withdrawl. We can also say: Only by having a stand in the abyss of the unfamiliar do we build

¹ The objection that this is at best only the way of experiencing the equipment whole and not an ontological
condition of its being we have to face with the fact that according to Heidegger experiencing something is just
the other coin of its existence.
a world. If we would be totally absorbed by our tacit background coping activity no openness whatsoever would be possible.

What does all that imply now for Internet communication? First of all I have to draw our attention to the simple fact that Internet communication is a computer mediated communication. Mediated communication in turn is a reframed communication. In order to reframe communication we have to know in advance all relevant facts which we use in direct communication to understand each other. If we implant that knowledge now in a computer network all information we can get from our remote partner will be frozen to just this technical realization of the knowledge. No new experiences outside of this technical model of communication will ever come in. What we have is a communication without surprises, a communication without roots to the unknown. And what we are actually doing is a communication via representations of communication.

An example might help to illuminate what I mean. In chat communication the only information about our partner which comes to our attention is not an immediate impression but rather only what our partner is saying about herself. So we can say: In chat communication the only information which is exchanged is based upon our mutual self descriptions. But such descriptions, even when we are not lying, give only a distorted impression of ourselves. The social relationship we can deal with in chatrooms is therefore always restricted to some standard roles we have already in mind when we start the communication. A new relationship, however, is only build by direct interaction with a person whose character is full of surprises and unexpected reactions. It is for that reason that only in the very moment when two people meet in reality do they have a chance to build a relationship.

Dreaming off the world

I am coming now to the closing part of my lecture. Give me just some additional few minutes to address directly the topic of our meeting namely “dreaming off the world”. In a common understanding this title describes a desituated, uprooted and deworlded life in a synthetic and sterile environment, a life cut off reality. Such an interpretation suggests that in order to correct such undesirable developments the only thing which we have to do is to reanchor our life in the earthly world. Heidegger’s view, however, is much more sophisticated. It is a view of the world which turns practically everything upside-down. The world from which we dream off is after all I maintained before not an earthly paradise in which we dwell from the outset. On the contrary, as I said before, having a stand in the abyss of the unfamiliar we build a world. We build a world by facing the potentiality (not only possibility) of a total breakdown of everything we might ever have been familiar with.

Dreaming off the world, at least in my reading, amounts to a falling into oblivion of exactly this potentiality whilst being lulled in the illusion of leading a quiet life without any risks and concerns.

Sometimes sheer terms can betray a lot. In psychology, at least as long as it is strictly following the rules of scientific methodology, laboratory settings are applied in order to eliminate interfering variables which are termed in German “Störvariablen”. These are variables which disturb our explanation. The aim of the scientific endeavor is to eliminate
such “Störungen”. And the only method to eliminate “Störungen” is to freeze the context. Scientific explanations, I have to admit, following the scientific principle of parsimony are not by their very nature a bad thing. In humanities, however, if we take such explanations as an immediate description of the human nature by itself we run the risk that our explanations are far removed from all ecological validity.

But how could it ever be that we mistakenly read the model into the real? The answer is a little bit tricky. First of all we have to recall that in our everyday coping activity we are completely absorbed by what we are doing. There is no need for further reflections or explanations. Only in case of a breakdown do we start to ask questions. If we were never experienced a breakdown of our involved coping activity there would be no demand for science. This is by the way an issue Hubert Dreyfus has worked out in his commentary on being and time.

In order to make clear which problems I aim at I put the following in a pointed and rough statement: Theoretical knowledge, the point of view of a detached subject is the outcome of a breakdown in our absorbed coping with things. It comes to the fore in the moment of a rupture in our tacit background knowledge. But on the other hand in order to replace the real by a model created by theoretical knowledge we have to become completely absorbed by the model. How can that be? How can we become drawn in exactly that which is in turn just the result of a break in our absorbed coping behavior? Heidegger calls that being drawn in that we are dealing with falling.

But how the process of this falling could tilt over in a disengaged and decontextualized activity as it occurs in case of theoretical knowledge, he cannot answer. Even at the very end of being and time he asks himself: Why on earth do we encounter decontextualized and occurent things in the process of our falling and not something available which would be much closer to us? Only the late Heidegger takes up this issue and answers it in a new and surprising way.

An interesting indication can be found in one of H. Dreyfus’ unpublished manuscripts to his commentary on being and time. He calls this kind of falling from which traditional western ontology arises a privative form of falling.

As a privative falling now we can read late Heidegger’s answer to this question. In modern technology a new kind of being drawn in, a new kind of falling comes to the fore. It can be best explained by breaking it up in two steps. In a first stage we have to see theoretical knowledge as a result of a breakdown in concerned activity. In the process of this breakdown our settledness in a familiar world withdraws. What happens in modern technology now is - and this is the second step of the explanation – that this withdrawal in turn falls into oblivion. Modern technology is according to Heidegger a kind of hiding and covering up that withdrawal as a withdrawal. Falling in modern technology becomes the character of an all and everything dominating attempt to close off anxiety. This special view of technology paves the way to a new and genuine reading of European nihilism. Nihilism is seen as the result of an anxiety of anxiety, an annihilation of the nihil as a nihil. Jaque Lacan in his psychotherapeutical sessions is playing with this idea. Heidegger’s formula against technological nihilism therefore is not to undo the process of decontextualizing and uprooting in our modern life. Concerning a new enlightenement he would say that it is not enough to reflectively correct the errors of the original enlightenement. Not a rationalistic revision of rationalism but also not a deliberate rejection of modernity as it happens in religious fundamentalism is at stake. On the
contrary, Heidegger’s own approach is a more Zen-like attitude towards the burden imposed on us by western thinking, namely by taking over and passing through that burden to transform it into a positive chance. Like the Indian who does not overcome but instead endures pain by going into it, Heidegger’s advice for technological nihilism is to see all that covering up and hiding as a mere modification of our own unsettledness. This unsettledness, however, which is seemingly a weakness is in reality a power, it is the essence of our condition humaine. If this lecture has no other significance I will be satisfied with having pointed out how much productive energy is contained in exactly this fragility of the human world.