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Book Review Essay: “Human Virtuality and Digital Life: Philosophical and Psychoanalytic Investigations” by Richard Frankel and Victor J. Krebs

Review of *Human Virtuality and Digital Life: Philosophical and Psychoanalytic Investigations* by Richard Frankel and Victor Krebs, Routledge, 2021 286 pp.

Frankel and Krebs (2021) have put forth a timely and evocative text that considers the concept of human virtuality, through philosophical investigations as well as through the lens of psychoanalytic theories, broadly understood. They develop the idea of the virtual as a human capacity to turn inward to dreaming and fantasy life, that is extended in the digital virtual. As they discuss various aspects of virtuality and provide examples of the digital virtual, they include myth, futuristic musings, and historical understandings of the development of novel media. They delight by stimulating thinking about the future of psychoanalytic theories all of which may be shaped by our use of and development of digital technologies.

Their goal in this text is ambitious. They note at the outset that this is not to be a practical guide but rather they attempt to provide a text that is existentially meaningful, transformative, and a concrete encounter with paradox. This, they have largely accomplished. They insinuate we are to look to the phenomenology of our encounters with the digital (but they fail to use formal phenomenological methods in earnest and instead use a series of very interesting examples of contemporary western accounts of digital technology use – how we now behave socially with our phones, the case of Cambridge Analytica, Twitter’s impact on our elections, Alexa mishaps, online porn, uses and problems with Siri, examples of cyber bullying and trolling, futuristic issues shown in the Netflix series, *Black Mirror* and many more) and suggest that we must be open to the unknowable, or negative capability, a concept first put forth by Keats (as cited in Starr, 1966) and later adapted by Bion (Symington & Symington, 1996) for use in psychoanalytic practice. They further purport to provide a balanced view of digital technology, which is a tall order. They are well aware that so often the discourse on digital technologies quickly becomes polarized and fails to leave room for thinking. They then attempt to remain balanced by presenting evidence for both positive and negative consequences of the digital virtual, yet the slant of the text overall ends up, in my estimation, leaning toward concern over the current and potential effects of the digital on ourselves and our social and emotional lives, supported by psychoanalytic and philosophical thinking. They pose a few positive examples and leave space for what is unknown and in particular, the possibility that there are positives that are under-appreciated in each chapter. The problem is that we are simply so steeped in this massive change to ubiquitous digital engagement that we have yet to have sufficient distance for *Nachträglichkeit*. The pace of the development of digital technologies and the applications we use makes it particularly concerning as we may never be *nach* whatever it is we are trying to digest and consider more fully as the digital keeps changing and developing

in a rhizomatic way (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) at the pace of machine time, which never sleeps and is out of sync with the natural rhythm of our embodied, social and emotional pacing. We are stuffed to the brim with impressions, or beta elements (Bion, 1962), unable to swallow fast enough let alone digest. They quote Žižek and Daly as they defend the need to be balanced while acknowledging the difficulties associated with such a task:

The very status of what it means to be a human being will change. Even the most elementary things, like speaking language, emotional sense and so on will be affected. Nothing should be taken for granted and it would be inconsequential to be either optimistic or pessimistic. (Žižek and Daly as cited in Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 12)

While they may not have achieved their goals because there is not enough attention paid, in my estimation, to the potential and actual positive consequences of digital virtuality, to be balanced, the reader is left stimulated and inspired to consider further how psychoanalysis and philosophy may support us in our thinking and in practice as we grapple with what it is to be human in relationship to the digital and what is to come in the future.

The book is organized as follows. After introducing the concept of human virtuality the text proceeds in four parts: Virtual Media, Evolving Conceptions of the Virtual and the Real, Depth Psychology in the Digital Age, and Philosophical Issues of the Virtual. In each part numerous psychoanalytic ideas and philosophical ideas are considered in conjunction with concrete examples of encounters with digital virtuality that we can likely all recognize. It is relatable and masterful in its seamless tacking between theory and example. What follows are summaries of the larger ideas within each part of the text.

In part one they provide an interesting review of how information has been shared historically and how each of these ways of interacting (speaking, writing, photography, film, virtual reality) impacts our understanding and experience of the body, time, relationships, and ultimately truth. Speaking, they argue, which is an embodied act that occurs in a moment in time and space and relies on memory and retelling (unless it is recorded) and is never an exact copy of the original is compared to writing, which can be read any time anywhere and referenced, leading to rational pre-thought-out arguments as a means of discourse. Thereafter, they consider photography, which captures an empirical moment in time, which could be used as evidence but which now allows us in the case of the digital to hyper focus on details by zooming or to distort with the use of filters among other digital tools used to modify images. Our memories and evidence, stored in pictures or in digital form are sometimes, as in the case of Facebook's touchup features or Google's timeline, aimed at creating a "better" and different memory, distancing us from the truth. They further provide examples of film, including fantasy films and extend this discussion into the realm of interactive virtual reality. They go on to highlight the many concerns about the relationship of these experiences to the real. Our relationship to truth itself and any intersubjective agreement on reality is thus at stake with the digital. While every new media development has brought concerns at the time about nefarious uses or challenges to the ways we consider knowledge and truth, our time is one of post-truth. We are experiencing a shift in how we think and relate to others, our memories, time, perception and space. This is all happening at a pace of change that is unprecedented. We live in a liquid time (Bauman, 2000) where what we call knowledge is developed and communicated rhizomatically (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). There is a recognition that perhaps we are living in a post-truth and post-human time. What this means for psychoanalysis, which is concerned with truth (Meltzer, 1988) and the human psyche, specifically, remains to be seen.

In part two they set up the two opposing stances on the virtual – the virtual as a fake copy of the real and the virtual as an upgrade or improvement of the real. They then discuss the phenomenology of the virtual and consider the hyper-realization of meaning. They ask, can we metabolize what we take in? Is there a loss or a gain in our experience by being immersed in these digital experiences? And they develop the concept of digitally induced death anxiety including cases of what might be called digital addiction and a loss of quality of engagement with reality. They summarize,

Reality is reduced to the controllable and predictable nature of the copy that is perfectly designed to fulfill our wishes, thus liberating us from the obdurate density of the real. We are no longer slowed down by the exigencies of matter, space, and time, desire and its fulfillments live in the unbroken circuit of virtual relations that overcomes the frustrations and obstacles attendant to everyday life. (Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 64)

They go on to discuss how it never really fulfills. And warn that "...perhaps we begin to lose our affective and bodily connection to the world; it is little by little disappearing, becoming a thing of the past" (Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 66). They provide examples of these issues in virtual shopping, virtual sex, virtual wars with drones, all numbing us to the real, disconnecting us from our bodies and each other and driving desires that will themselves never be realized completely but will surely drive more seeking. "The virtual liberates us from our situatedness in time and space, which ordinarily serves as a constraint to fantasy and desire" (Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 67). In Lacanian terms, they note, we now have unmoored signifiers and therefore a lack of meaning. The consequence is a problem with desire and lack that is unprecedented.

Entertainment, information, and communication technologies generate intensity and immediacy, and thus overcome the dullness of everyday, ordinary experience. And yet, this turn away from the world only increases our desire for the real, for what we end up encountering in the virtual is not the real, but its digital double, the hyperreal. (Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 76)

They go on to say that tech may not only be numbing us and facilitating meaninglessness, but even worse it will in fact take away our ability to mourn properly as things can always be replayed or numbed at will. What may be at stake is not only truth, but our emotional lives altogether and our ability to metabolize emotional experience at all. There is some attention to the positive stance that the digital is an improvement on the real. They evoke the concept of rhizomatic as driving a democratization of playful experience as a way to develop the positive stance of the digital virtual. The idea being that we can transcend time and space and create a collective. We have seen this in movements and connection with others that we otherwise would not have experienced without social media and digital technologies as in the #metoo or Black Lives Matter movements in the US. We can extend and surpass our ordinary perceptions in the digital, which has merit in many applications, as in the case of various surgeries or diagnostic tools in medicine, for example. There is even some attention paid to the digital providing new digitally mediated opportunities for emotional processing rather than mourning being forestalled by the digital. Overall, however, the argument for the positive is less convincing because the negatives are so concerning.

In part three, they consider the digital and depth psychology.

Some insist that this dissolution of the self into the maelstrom of collective forces has the negative effect of foreclosing many, if not all, of the values that practitioners of depth psychology....tend to affirm, such as the freedom of imagination, 'negative capability', interior depth and the privacy of the self...(Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 113)

Now with the digital, the unconscious is exteriorized, surveilled as in the panopticon (Foucault, 1975) and ultimately controlled through rewards and punishments of a social and economic nature. They go on to discuss how this impacts our fundamental understanding of the self, the other and the group, and link these ideas with key psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism, desire, the pleasure principle, and sexuality. The digital promises to provide the love and attention we never got and we strive to find the end of the Internet in its pursuit, neglecting all that is before us to varying degrees. It further erodes our ability to tolerate lack which drives more seeking. There is discussion of the digital, in contrast, as a potential space (Benjamin, 2018) and the digital as a transitional phenomenon (Winnicott, 1971), which is an alternative and hopeful read of our relationship with this third.

Within this part, there is also a specific focus on examples of digital use in adolescence which is timely and interesting. This is particularly important as we consider that there are now large groups of people who have

never known a life without the internet, and all of those under 18 have never known a life without the smartphone. These groups may not have developed a sense of themselves that includes an analog experience of self and others and again we don't have the benefit of *Nachträglichkeit*. We have yet to see how these young people will grow up and develop and if the seemingly interminable hours spent on TikTok, video games, snapchat or Instagram in lieu of playing outside with others in real life will have lasting negative or positive effects. Thereafter the digital and its relationship to managing the other at all ages and developmental stages is explored. They describe how digital tools allow us to disavow others in new ways such as through phubbing, ghosting, zombieing, and so on, as well as to desire and objectify others in digitally enhanced ways. The impacts of these phenomena with their disembodied quality may allow some to behave more antisocially than they might ordinarily without the real time feedback of the gaze of the other. As an alternative, more positive read, Frankel and Krebs consider that the digital can serve as a safer space for aggressive and sexual urges that otherwise are problematic for civilization. They continue this line of argument by considering more examples of sexuality and the erotics of the digital. While there is a nod to the idea of transitional space and potentiality in this area, more attention is paid to the gnarly negative examples of cases where people are addicted, separated from others, and alienated, furtively nursing their narcissistic desires bathed in the blue light of the screen.

Part four considers the philosophical issues of the virtual, including what it means to be heading toward a post-human age and the singularity. The question of ethics is raised, and in the end, we return to psychoanalytic ideas and consider digital mourning and melancholy, mirroring, narcissism, containment, and leaking. This chapter is filled with examples and leads us to consider the need for technoethics or perhaps, although not explicitly stated by Frankel and Krebs, a decoupling of technology development and use from capitalist and political aims. This is made more urgent because of the lack of desire on the part of companies like Meta (formerly called Facebook), for example, to provide transparency to the public in their research about the impacts of virtual reality or in the case of important (Black) ethicists, like Timnit Gebru, who have raised concerns about facial recognition software among other tools being racially biased only to be marched to the exit and fired immediately. Some technologists themselves are calling for interdisciplinary consultation and ethical conversations to mitigate unintended consequences of their products and services (Nohria & Taneja, 2021). Others are barreling forward toward the post-human age insisting that the future is bright. What Frankel and Krebs leave us with is that psychoanalysis and philosophy have something to offer in this dialogue and I would add that we cannot afford to have these conversations as if they are valueless, apolitical or without relationship to economics.

The text ends with a postscript discussing the digital in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The text was written at the beginning of the pandemic, which continues as I write this review. It is notable that Frankel and Krebs did not directly consider the impact of COVID-19 on how psychoanalysis has been practiced recently or on recent experiences of teaching and learning philosophy in the University. Many of us, myself included, at the moment of this writing, due to COVID-19, are conducting analyses and participating in analyses as analysands via phone, or online. Many are teaching or taking courses and seminars online as well, so it seems pertinent to discuss how the digital virtual may be impacting the practice of our work. Of course, there are many who are writing about these issues specifically and Frankel and Krebs already have a significant agenda so perhaps it is unnecessary to include in this already full and inspiring text. Nevertheless, the receipt of this text against the backdrop of an audience that has been distanced from our colleagues, our students, our analysands and our analysts, if we are in analysis, is noteworthy. We are living a digital experience of working and learning without the benefit of *Nachträglichkeit* needed to reflect on the longer-term cumulative impact of these experiences as well.

A word about the particular and the situatedness of the experiences we are having as a group seems important. Krebs is writing from Peru and Frankel from the US, leveraging an incredible array of largely western philosophers and thinkers (Aristotle, Descartes, Foucault, Deleuze, Dewey, Guatteri, Heidegger, Kant, Levy, Locke, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Plato, Rilke, and Wittgenstein among others) and psychoanalytic theorists from various schools and perspectives (Bebe, Benjamin, Bion, Ferro, Freud, Hillman, Jung, Khan, Klein, Kohut, Lacan, Milner, Ogden, Stern, and Winnicott, among others). The

breadth of ideas is vast and they are a pleasure to consider in conjunction with the examples provided to illustrate the digital experience and yet, the situatedness of this differently individually experienced phenomena, that is not ahistorical or apolitical is largely ignored. For example, there is little discussion of what it might mean to be located in a particular place and time or a particular body (despite their argument, and I agree, that the digital disrupts our understanding of embodiment or our situatedness in place and time) and a particular psyche, using digital technology and how that may impact how one experiences the self and other and the group. I imagine a Chinese national, for example, who does not have access to the same internet, as someone located in Denmark or the US, is very different, not to mention the relevance of particular aspects of those people's psyches and how that comes to bear on how the digital is experienced. A Black American, compared to a white German, may also experience significantly different phenomena when interacting with online porn, facial recognition tools, social media or Alexa based on the algorithms that are developed to drive these experiences that have been found to be racially-biased. Further, we are each experiencing the digital age from both a developmental perspective and as age cohorts, some of whom have no analog recollection of how things used to be or are using particular tools and not others that are marketed to their particular age-based segment of the capitalist pie. We are perhaps siloed from each other based on our experiences of the digital and how they have shaped us. These tools are not valueless, apolitical, nor separate from the economic systems in which they are used. This situatedness likely shapes how one experiences the pharmakon, both in terms of the problems the digital creates for each of us, the desires they stimulate and the problems they attempt to address. These issues were not considered in this text; this all would have likely been far too much for 286 pages but may be compelling in a follow up text.

In the end, Frankel and Krebs provide an engaging starting point for an important dialogue for us all and specifically for psychoanalysis and philosophy. They point to the need for more theorizing and ethics and subtly suggest that our experiences of the digital or phenomenology may be a useful way to continue to explore the digital and its relationship to our psychic futures. They have laid the groundwork for the development of additional theories and we can only hope that others pick up this important topic and develop it further keeping pace with our rhizomatic, liquid times. Some directions that may be useful for future texts or responses may be a discussion of these ideas together with the Lacanian discourse of the capitalist (Declerq, 2006) as applied to the digital virtual. Bion's theories of groups (1961) certainly could be relevant in dialogue with social media and the ideas contained in Freud's *Massenpsychologie* (1921/2005) may also be interesting to consider. These and others can be left to others to carry forward and develop.

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Bio:

Nicolle Zapien is a licensed clinician with two decades of experience. She is currently a candidate training at the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California (PINC). From 2015 to 2019, Dr. Zapien served as Professor and Dean of the School of Professional Psychology and Health at California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). During this appointment she oversaw six clinical training degree programs, the department of field placement, and five training clinics. While at CIIS, she also served on the IRB and chaired the research committee. Prior to becoming a clinician, Dr. Zapien spent a decade as a consultant designing, conducting, or overseeing more than 200 quantitative and/or qualitative studies for industry clients, including those in the tech sector. In 2018, she sponsored a hackathon design competition in collaboration with HackMentalHealth,

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