Deviances in the Virtual Reality or the Character-Altering Power of Virtual Communities

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1. Introduction

Although the term “virtual reality” is difficult to define semantically, it has a complex meaning in our everyday life. The word “virtual” itself has the meaning of vividness and reality. The attribute and the noun is practically the same so it does not take us nearer to the denotation of the term. The notion is the product of the simulative technology: Virtual Reality (later VR) makes it possible to create artificial surroundings where one can experience how real situations move in a computer-simulated environment, try and practice the required behaviour under real circumstances. VR first appeared in the military industry as a technique of drill but nowadays, it is also used in entertaining, with the computer games based on environmental simulation.1 In my essay the expression Real Life (RL later) is used as an antipole to VR referring to the fact that – although the origin of the virtual communities is the real community – the rules of real life are slightly different in virtual circumstances as the philosophy, essence and nature of the virtual community is different.

* This essay was written when the writer was a scholar at the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law, Freiburg i. Br., in the year 2007 and 2008. Contact: parti@okri.hu.

2. Setting the Problem

The term VR has a literary origin and as such metaphoric senses can be attached with it.\(^2\) Social sciences see it principally as a community-forming power. Since the beginning of the world-wide spreading of the Internet, in the middle of the 1990s, the IRC (Internet Relay Chat), the MUD (Multi-User Domains/Dungeons), the Bulleting Board and the already traditional e-mail has become a popular communication channel for people geographically far apart. These channels are appropriate for creating apparently the same communities as the existing ones of RL. The members of the Web communities change rapidly, they have no written rules so there is no norm to which the community can return. The norms which continuously alter through the personality, attitude and wishes of the members can not be held or forced, after all, an executive power in the traditional meaning does not exist in virtual space. There is no controlling entity; moreover norms do not exist in a crystallized form (if they are even known). On one hand it strengthens the freedom of the members; on the other hand it weakens the self controlling mechanism learned in the society.

The loosening of the behaviour models learned and firmed in the society endangers primarily the youngsters as they store the patterns learned from adults (or from children pretending to be adults) as examples to be followed.

3. The Ontology of the VR Communities – Post-Modern Philosophies

The idea of seeing cyberspace as a totalitarian control and monitoring system spread at the time of modern media – like the radio, the television and later the World Wide Web. These ideas form the base of post-modern philosophies which, without exclusion, pessimistically evaluate the information society, the result of the technical revolution. The indirect manipulating technology of the media stands in the cross-fire of these philosophies.

Looking at its structure, the VR could correspond to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon. However, this simile is false in one aspect. The residents of Bentham were kept under central monitoring. Though the monitoring in the cells was not constant the prisoners did not know when their activities were controlled. They had lost their personalities; had become wax figures owing to the quasi constant supervision and the strict control of proper behaviour. In contrast, the means of

\(^2\) It is controversial from whom, or where the expression originated. According to some people the science fiction novel of Damien Broderick (*The Judas Mandala*) mentioned it first. Others believe that it is originated from Lanier (1989). It is not impossible that more books were published at the same time with these contents and labelling but one thing is for sure: it has permeated our daily life as a metaphor.