El Gran Teatro del Mundo

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El Gran Teatro del Mundo

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Danaher, Nyholm, and Earp's (2018) intuition about the relevance of an ethical analysis of the Quantified Relationship (QR) and Quantified Self movement is timely and valuable. It fills a gap in the current ethical debate on social media, emerging online behaviors, and the digitalization of the body. Their analysis provides readers with accurate and comprehensive information, challenging trivial interpretation. The very seriousness of their approach deserves two further considerations and one final reflection.

The first consideration regards "gamification." Gamification, far from being only a formal aspect of QR, is its essential feature. The term is quite new, as it was first used in late 2000s by software engineers to indicate the application of computer game design and principles to other contexts (e.g., education, professional training, marketing, health, and so). The concept is, however, older; it dates back to at least mid 1990s, when French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1995) famously argued that the Gulf War did not actually happen, as the "real" war replaced by a broadcasted "copy" war—a huge, illusory, video game to please the public. To be sure, Baudrillard was subtler than his critics at the time supposed. He never argued that combats had not been real; rather, he argued that reality was forever shadowed by virtuality. Facts existed somewhere—he thought—but once turned into a TV broadcast, they were inexorably lost to the public. Baudrillard's argument was further developed by Michael Ignatieff (2000), who went more in depth with the notion of "virtual" war. Ignatieff argued that new wars are not only presented as video games (as per Baudrillard's argument), but they are actually played as though they were video games, too. Declarations of war and other war formalities have disappeared; commanders became software engineers; physical contact between soldiers became often unnecessary and in-field combatants could even be robots; instead of decisive victories or defeats, there are just inconclusive endgames. Baudrillard's and Ignatieff's arguments could be easily extended to QR as well; the idea that there are deep similarities between intimate relationships and war is ancient, already constituting the core of Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata*. The comedy went even further, suggesting that gender relationships are always on the verge between desire and conflict, love and war. In such a sense, both wars and intimate relationships could be easily gamified because they are already games in their inner structure. This was well understood by Blaise Pascal, who deserves a full quotation because he probably captured, more than three centuries ago, an important ethical challenge posed by QR:

> When I have occasionally set myself to consider the different distractions of men, the pains and perils to which they expose themselves at court or in war, whence arise so many quarrels, passions, bold and often bad ventures, etc., I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber . . . But, on further consideration, when, after finding the cause of all our ills, I have sought to discover the reason of it, I have found that there is one very real reason, namely, the natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition, so miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it closely . . . Hence it comes that play and the society of women, war and high posts, are so sought after . . . We do not seek that easy and peaceful lot which permits us to think of our unhappy condition, nor the dangers of war, nor the labour of office, but the bustle which averts these thoughts of ours and amuses us. (Pascal and Eliot 1958, 40)

The second consideration stems directly from the first: It regards intimate tracking and surveillance, which are likely to be the most relevant reasons, or at least the most apparent, for ethical concerns. Although Danaher, Nyholm, and Earp explicitly limit their focus to relationship-specific problems, they cannot avoid considering privacy-related objections to QR, which constitute the implicit landscape of their critical evaluation. They seem to take privacy objections as granted, in order to progress them. Yet following this strategy, the authors lose the opportunity to rethink the privacy paradox, say, people's dissonance between expressed privacy concerns and actual online behavior (Barth and Jong 2017), which is blatant in QR cases. Indeed, QR almost bridges the gap between surveillance and theater, between Big Brother and Peeping Tom, making it evident that today "the world serves as a stage for tele-performance, and because virtually any space on Earth can serve as a backdrop for live footage, people live with the awareness that they may become "actors" in this footage at any given moment—

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intentionally or not" (Tinnell 2011). Tinnel's "world browser" theory is extremely helpful to understand QR. Erving Goffman (1922–1982), Guy Louis Debord (1931–1994), and Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) are, so to speak, the "noble fathers" of this theory, which is better known, in its traditional formulation, as "world-stage" theory or metaphor. It is a philosophical and literary trope dating to Greek and Latin civilization (Quiring 2014), usually understood in relation to the frail, contingent, illusory, nature of human life, destined to dissolve and fade away, like plays and dreams, "and our little life is rounded with a sleep" (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 4, Scene 1). Although with different arguments, Goffman, Debord, and McLuhan were hardly fascinated by these melancholic and crepuscular visions; rather, they were interested in the explanatory power of the world-stage metaphor. They owed to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud the conception that theatricality is embedded in social and political life (Quiring 2014), often in the form of "false consciousness." They use the world-stage metaphor not only to understand but also to criticize the contemporary society. Yet, as Quiring ironically notes, the search for authenticity, as opposed to the world stage, was often, and paradoxically, "accompanied by a call for a total theatricalization and fictionalization of life" (Quiring 2014, 13), notably in Debord. Yet the problem is greater than a mere issue of philosophical coherence, because it points out an unresolved conflict.

The world-stage metaphor is rooted in the tension between presence and reference, appearance, and representation. This is splendidly evoked by QR. On the one hand, QR is totally illusory: It is not the reality of intimate relationships; rather it is their digital representation, even less "real" than performers on the stage. On the other hand, QR is not only the place where reality is performed, but it is the truer form of reality in the digital world. As Internet links do not simply refer to "external reality," but they create a web of new meanings and digital actions, also QR creates a new class of intimate relationships, which are as real as physical relationships. The interest of this argument relies on its inherent circularity. All reality is virtual, and virtual reality itself is only virtual reality—to paraphrase Calderón de la Barca ([1666] 2004: *La vida es sueño*, Act I, lines 957–58)—but in the information society, for many, virtual reality has become the realest reality. There are deep biological reasons that could contribute to explaining this. Since the discovery of a class of neurons called "mirror neurons," which are activated both when individuals act and when they observe the same action performed by other individuals, growing evidence shows that higher animals possess a biological system of mimicry (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004). Humans have developed such a capacity to its highest degree, and this is likely to be one of the main evolutionary advantages of our species (Gallese 2009). What is this skill of mirroring other individuals, if not the implicit, ongoing perception of the world as a stage? Human beings are "theatrical" in their inner neurological constitution and, *pace* Sigmund Freud, the "theatrical drive" is likely to be even more primordial than any sexual drive. This is probably the profounder

emotional reason why the digital world is so mentally pervasive (and psychologically dangerous): It meets one of the deep-rooted needs of the human mind, and it goes even further. It is more than a dream turned into reality—it is like two mirrors, digital and biological, facing each other; finally, it is a global *mise-en-abyme*, a collective play within a play. The plot of a famous 17th-century drama, close to medieval mysteries—*El Gran teatro del mundo* (Calderón de la Barca [1666] 2004)—was entirely based on the representation of the world as a stage. Today, this is what the digital world does as well. But if the world is already a stage, then what is the stage where it is staged?

My final reflection will be very short. Danaher, Nyholm, and Earp give us an great opportunity to explore and discuss these themes, which are far from being purely theoretical, although they could also invite some nice metaphysical speculations. Traditional approaches to privacy—based on regulations, information, and education—are still important, but they fail to capture the epochal novelty of the digital revolution and ultimately, to protect people. We should not let the opportunity offered by the QR case, to open new perspectives on privacy, pass us by. ∎

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