

The Virtual and the Actual: Cyberspace, Paradox, and Proprioception¹

Steven M. Rosen

Abstract

This paper explores the role of cyberspace amidst the multiple crises currently besetting humanity. Can cyberworld transactions facilitate the development of a global community in a time of global fragmentation? We begin by examining the double-edged nature of virtual electronic communication, including the relationship between virtual and actual reality themselves. Then the meaning of actuality is reconsidered in a dialectical context that relates it to the phenomenological concept of *flesh* (Merleau-Ponty). This idea is linked to the notion of embodied paradox. Realizing the actual through the embodiment of paradox is seen to entail a proprioceptive process of moving attention backward to the otherwise unconscious source of one's awareness. It is subsequently suggested that our cyberspace transactions might lose their detached, disembodied, purely virtual quality and take on a more vital, intimate, and concretely communal character if we could relate to one another through a proprioceptive form of discourse (a practice known as "proprioceptive dialogue" is offered as a specific example). In the broadest terms, the essay proposes that the current fragmentation of human society may be addressed by surpassing our alienated way of relating and shifting to a dialectically embodied form of actual community.

Keywords

virtual and actual, cyberspace, paradox, proprioception, addiction, subject and object, flesh of the world, dialectic, embodiment

1. The Ups and Downs of Cyberspace

Thirty-five years ago I wrote *The Moebius Seed*, a philosophical novel that climaxed with a worldwide computer forum set up as an open-ended and spontaneous cultural exchange.² In my novel, individuals and groups from far and wide freely contributed information, images, music, and ideas to the forum on a broad range of holistic, spiritual, and process-oriented themes: ecology, new physics and cosmology, non-linear evolution, non-local connectedness, chaos theory, creative transformation, global healing, and the like.

The global electronic forum portrayed in the novel was intended as a model of collective creativity and planetary interrelatedness that could address the widespread fragmentation gripping us at every level of human and world affairs: disintegration of families and other social institutions; ethnic conflicts raging around the world; growth in

¹ This paper is based on "Invitation to Proprioceptive Dialogue" and "Practicing Proprioceptive Dialogue," pages on my website, "embodyingcyberspace.com."

² Rosen, Steven M. (1985) *The Moebius Seed*. Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Publications.

international banditry and terrorism; world markets reaching new levels of erratic fluctuation; nuclear weapons and waste proliferating out of control; ecosystems strained to the breaking point, unleashing natural catastrophes with devastating consequences (floods, famines, epidemics, tsunamis, hurricanes, etc.). Beset by multiple crises, people are feeling more and more challenged to shoulder an overwhelming array of burdens and responsibilities, more and more fearful of others they perceive to threaten their interests, or even their lives—with fear breeding hatred, hostility, and violence. In short, humanity seems in the process of coming unglued, and taking the rest of the planet with it. Could a global computer forum along the lines described in my novel help mitigate this dire situation? Or was I being overly optimistic about what happens when computers are linked en masse?

Since I wrote that book, we have witnessed the linking of individual computers into networks that are themselves connected through an internet reaching almost every corner of the globe. The internet now plays an integral role in most of our lives—every day and in many ways. But it is far from clear that this role is entirely constructive, since consumerist exploitation figures prominently in it, and the internet is given to a disembodied electronic remoteness that lends itself to alienated, anonymous communication. We may well be inclined to say that this global electronic “community” is a poor substitute for genuine community. On the other hand, perhaps it is possible that the internet could come to function as it did in my novel, providing the connective linkages in a planetary network that serves as the scaffolding for a new way of relating, a whole new social order.

It took me twenty-five years to come to the internet as a home for my work. Following the novel, I wrote several non-fiction books dealing with philosophy and science, consciousness and culture—all geared to addressing the issue of world fragmentation raised in my speculative fiction (see note 7). But after publishing *The Self-Evolving Cosmos* in 2008, I felt disenchanted with conventional books distributed in the conventional way. However innovative works like this may be in terms of their content and style of presentation, they remain marketed commodities owned by authors and publishers and distributed in a linear fashion to an anonymous audience. Not only is such communication commodified, unidirectional, and indirect, but its mode of expression is constrained by a print medium essentially limited to squiggles of ink arrayed in lines of text and two-dimensional charts, diagrams, and illustrations.

Communication in cyberspace is different. Images and ideas can be freely offered by anyone choosing to participate, with contact being immediate and information capable of flowing out to, and back from, multiple sources at once. Moreover, exchanges can be enhanced and enlivened by including animated images, movies, sound, and—in the future, perhaps—even touch, taste, and smell. There is also the prospect of employing virtual reality techniques to create a sense of deeper immersion in communication environments otherwise attenuated by distance, and of developing dimensionally-augmented, holographic images that produce remarkably lifelike experiences. So the potential is great for simulating virtually the more tangible experiences of everyday interaction. It was these and other cybernetic possibilities that led me to set up my own website in 2009. One of the website’s features is an experimental multi-media e-book containing video and audio elements that indeed simulate concrete experience far more closely than can conventional print books (see embodyingcyberspace.com).

Yet—at least with what is presently attainable on the internet, we *are* speaking of *simulations*, electronic imitations of living reality, not reality itself. And a simulated global community surely does not take the place of the authentic community so badly needed now in this time of planetary fragmentation. But might it be possible to make the transition from simulation to reality? What would have to be done to bring that about?

The simulation lacks substance, density, fullness of body. It is a virtual reproduction of reality absent the flesh and bone of the actually real. The quality of being virtual is in fact an underlying characteristic of the cybernetic world in general. At bottom, it is a ghostlike world of ephemeral traces. The work of postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida³ sheds considerable light on this.

Derrida saw cybernetics as involving a kind of inscription or writing that is wholly lacking in substance, one consisting of traces that possess the odd property of having no palpable precursors. The cyber-trace is like the smile of the Cheshire cat, like a footprint without the earlier presence of a foot, like the ghost of a being that was never alive. There is nothing below the cyber-trace to provide it with a solid foundation; no sub-substantial presence serving to ground it; no substratum to actualize its virtuality.

To better understand what this means, let's compare the way things worked in the old mechanical age with how they now function in our age of information. Whereas classical machines entail palpable operations upon matter and energy, computers involve a more subtle form of activity. To illustrate, consider the difference between word processing and the production of words on a mechanical typewriter.

The old typewriter is fitted with a fixed set of type bars, each with its own alphabetic or numeric character. The typefaces are actuated by stroking keys on a keyboard composed of corresponding characters. If, for example, I press the key marked “n,” mechanical energy is imparted to the associated type bar causing it to rise out of its housing and strike an inked ribbon secured over a blank sheet of paper that is held in place on a cylindrical platen. In this way, the metallic typeface, “n,” is made to leave its trace on the page. What process produces the letters now appearing before me on this computer display?

The close resemblance of my computer keyboard to that of the mechanical typewriter is deceptive. When I tap the “n” key on my word processor, I do not initiate a mechanical operation wherein an already present typeface is *re-presented*, transferred to a blank surface. Instead, I send an electronic impulse to a microprocessor that, in itself, possesses no such preexisting actualization of the letter “n.” What we find in the hardware of the computer, in the silicon chip in which the computer's operations are carried out, are not so much material actualities as *informational potentials*. Physicist David Bohm explains: “In a computer, the information in a particular chip has a wide range of virtual or potential activities to which it may give rise. Only some of these are actualized in the activity of the computer as a whole, in a way determined by the overall context of the entire structure of the computer and by all the information that has been put into it.”⁴ According to Bohm, information is defined as “a *form* that literally ‘informs’ (i.e., forms from within) an ‘unformed’ energy to give rise to a corresponding determinate activity.” And with respect to *computer* information, “the form in the state of

³ See Derrida, Jacques. (1976) *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴ Bohm, David. (1986) “A New Theory of the Relationship of Mind and Matter,” *American Journal of Psychological Research*, 80, p. 125.

the silicon chips enters into the energy in the computer to ‘give shape’ to a corresponding activity.”⁵ The chip is composed of a large array of tiny transistor switches each of which constitutes a basic unit (or “bit”) of information in that it can answer the simple question of whether the switch is on or off, one or zero (more exactly, whether or not voltage is applied to the silicon diode in such a way that the flow of electrons is permitted). When I give the chip input by pressing the buttons on my keyboard, it responds to me by “flipping switches,” choosing zeroes and ones, in accordance with the way it has been programmed. In the specific example, when I type the letter “n,” the microchip creates a particular binary pattern of zeroes and ones as per the instructions it receives from the word processing program that I am using. It then transforms this pattern into a recognizable output that appears on the monitor as a visual display: “n.” In this way, informational potential is actualized, activity is shaped that leads to the creation of meaning. So, whereas mechanical typewriting entails the transfer of an *already* actualized pattern of matter-energy (the typefaces) from one location in space to another (from the bank of type bars to the sheet of paper), electronic word processing involves an actualization *in-the-making* whereby a pattern of matter-energy is produced from an initially potential state, one in which the pattern does not yet exist. Since bits of information are not committed in advance to any particular combinatorial pattern, and since zeroes and ones can be combined in an indefinite variety of ways, meaning can be shaped in a highly flexible manner. For example, we are not limited to a fixed set of characters in word processing but can create any number of character sets and switch from one to another at the press of a button. The flexibility of word processing is greatly enhanced by the fact that the electronic meaning patterns appearing on the computer display are *virtual*. The patterns are not fully actualized until a final printout of hard copy is staged, and this permits the text to be sculpted in a far more fluid manner than is possible in typewriting or handwriting.

What it comes down to in Derrida’s terms is that mechanical writing is governed by the “metaphysics of presence” whereas cyber-writing is not. The typed or handwritten character is a squiggle of ink or graphite that functions as a substantive reality. Matter concretized in this fashion is certainly not immutable; it can be altered in a variety of ways via exchanges of energy. Nevertheless, the metaphysics of presence is enforced here by the first law of thermodynamics, which tells us that, however matter-energy might be continuously transformed, it cannot simply *vanish* from the space-time continuum; it can neither be destroyed nor created, we are told. Accordingly, the printed mark—as a material presence fixed upon the writing surface by the chemicals in its ink or graphite—cannot be eradicated without at least leaving some *trace*. This trace—say, in the form of a faint darkening of the page where a letter was erased, or a slight unevenness of the surface where correction fluid was applied, or perhaps in a form so subtle that a microscope would be required to detect it—attests to the fact that, although the sign has indeed been transformed in the attempt to erase it, it never completely disappears from the page.

But would the printed mark really need to be annihilated from space-time in order for it to be removed from the writing surface without a trace? In mechanical writing, the initial inscription of the sign is obviously no creation *ex nihilo*; it is a transfer of energy from a preexistent source (typeface, pen, pencil, etc.). Therefore, even if the first law of

⁵ Ibid., p. 126

thermodynamics cannot be violated by destroying the printed mark altogether, could the mark not at least be transformed in such a way that it would revert to the form of energy in which it existed prior to the act of inscription? Would not such a reversal effectively remove all traces of the inscription that had appeared on the writing surface? This is where the *second* law of thermodynamics kicks in. According to the principle of entropy, the transformation of matter-energy from one state to another in fact *cannot* entirely be reversed. For instance, in burning a lump of coal, potential energy is converted into kinetic energy in such a way that an irreducible residue is left; the ashen byproduct of the transaction bears witness to the fact that the potential originally contained in the coal cannot be restored. In a similar way, once a sign is hard-printed onto a page, there is no going back to the state of affairs that existed prior to the inscription. This inability to totally reverse the engraving process affirms the “gravity” of such writing. Because mechanical writing bears the weight of substantive presence, the traces it leaves cannot fully be effaced.

It is evidently not like that with cyber-writing. Here inscriptions seem readily reversible; traces can be destroyed and created with equanimity in the virtual spaces of cyberworld, for, as Derrida has intimated, the traces we work with are of presences that “never were” (“footprints” not preceded by “feet”). This is what permits the astonishing flexibility of word processing. It is why the letters and words I type on this keyboard can be sculpted so fluidly; why I can add or subtract a word with such little effort; why I can move whole paragraphs or sections from one location to another, or merge these bodies of text—all in an essentially seamless manner, leaving no indications that any changes have ever been made.

Yet there is an undeniable downside to all this typographic agility and convenience. Because computer images originate in absence, in the equipotentiality of the virginal chip, the cyber-writer can find him- or herself on perilous ground. Indeed, in immersing herself in the “weightless” field of evanescent traces, there really is no solid ground on which the writer can stand. Given that the virtual traces with which s/he plays are the phantoms of beings that never really existed, an “unbearable lightness” haunts the playing of this game. And the ephemerality of cyberspace can prove to be downright frightening, as I have personally discovered.

My first full taste of the cybernetic void came in 1987 while working on my old Apple IIe. I had invested myself in a conceptual project that held great significance for me. Each day I sat at my computer for hours on end wrestling with elusive subtleties, laboring to tease out daunting nuances of theoretical abstraction, and, in the process, taking great pains to shape just the right language to give coherence to my ideas. Then, one morning, with the errant press of a button, I overwrote the file that had contained my work and weeks of toil were simply obliterated. Not a catastrophic fire or an explosion, but the innocent stroke of a key had annihilated what I had previously put so much of myself into for so many days. This led me to radically doubt the weight of that work. The glaring discrepancy between my long sessions of effortful striving and the ease of their instantaneous effacement conveyed to me a sense of the uncanny. The feeling went beyond the ache of losing something valuable, and beyond the tangible fear that it could well happen again. My Herculean labors had been negated with such little difficulty that it led me to wonder how much real substance they could have had to begin with.

Given the colossal investment of myself in this work, its demolition symbolically simulated my own death. One does not survive such a “death.” What has weight, substantive presence, *cannot* die. The laws of classical thermodynamics tell us that solid matter leaves its mark, and that this trace can neither wholly be expunged (the first law) nor returned to a state of potentiality existing prior to its actualization (the second law). But if the cyber-trace is utterly weightless, if it is a ghost of what *never was alive in the first place*, there can be no “survival of death” here because there never was any palpable life. Ghosts of ghosts in infinite regress seem to be the only “inhabitants” of the cybernetic wasteland. In dwelling therein, I too become such a ghost.

The viruses, worms, instabilities, hackings, and crash cycles that accompany cybernetic activity add to the spectral feeling I have when I’m on my computer. The whole time I operate it, there is a background quality of skating on thin ice. This sense of insecurity has even invaded my sleep. On more than one occasion I have dreamed of working in front of the display screen when it suddenly goes black. This triggers an ominous sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach signaling that the “plug has been pulled,” that the rug has been pulled out from under me, leaving me without support. What remains is a phantom-limb feeling of active emptiness, gnawing absence. This is the downside of the cyberspace experience, its grave undercurrent. On the upside is a sense of levity, a heady feeling of exhilaration when at play beyond gravity’s pull. The postmodern *modus vivendi* epitomized by cybernetic writing is appropriately captured by *Wiley Coyote*, a cartoon character familiar in popular culture. This comical creature dashes frenetically from place to place in hot pursuit of his avian nemesis *The Roadrunner*, until Wiley’s precipitous, helter-skelter movements take him over a steep cliff. Defying the law of gravity, he continues his hyperactive doings in mid-air—until he notices that nothing supports him, whereupon he crashes to the ground with a thud. What an apt metaphor for the “game of the world”⁶ played in cyberspace.

My cybernetic play has all the signs of an addiction. Research suggests that dependencies of this kind basically involve the sudden reduction of complexity to simplicity, or ambiguity to clarity. In addictions as diverse as cocaine abuse and gambling, the evidence indicates the presence of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with heightened attention to complex or ambiguous stimuli that hold the promise of rapid and clear-cut resolution. When an intricate or initially unclear pattern is quickly brought into sharp focus, we react with a rush of euphoria (“aaah,” or, “aha”) as the pleasure center of the sub-cortical brain is activated. But the reward is short-lived and must continually be renewed to be sustained. The inherent ambiguity of cyberspace makes it an ideal breeding ground for such dependency.

In my own case, the underlying ambiguity of this digital medium is compounded by the fact that the content of what I’m writing has its own daunting uncertainties. So it is not enough for me to reduce ambiguity merely by forming the words, sentences, and meanings of this text from the open potentialities of the “virginal chip.” For, with the challenges I’m facing in drafting this essay, the conceptual ambiguity lingers on after the syntactical ambiguity is resolved. Therefore, at times when I’m groping for meaning and it isn’t forthcoming, I feel compelled to look for more clear-cut, “higher-definition” resolutions of ambiguity—as when I repeatedly interrupt my writing to read the latest

⁶ See Derrida, Jacques. (1976) *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 50.

headlines, check the number of downloads of my latest article, or search the internet for the latest polls in some high-stakes political contest.

Cyber-ghosts like me are perpetually hungry creatures. Because the nourishment they obtain is only virtual, it cannot effectively satisfy a hunger that is *actual*. A virtual reward is a flimsy thing: transitory, superficial, simplistic. One moment you're flying high and everything is as clear as it can be. You're experiencing a surge of unadulterated pleasure, a burst of sheer delight. How sweet it is! But then, all of a sudden, the situation flips and you're down in the dumps feeling the nagging necessity for something more. That is what addiction is all about. There is that needy, gnawing, murky hole in your gut that you try again and again to fill with pure clarity, pure sweetness, pure light, pure spirit, pure ecstasy. The problem is that the "hole" itself is nothing pure. It is not just an absence waiting to be filled by some presence. It is a hybrid blending of absence and presence, a paradoxical entanglement of positive and negative whose profound ambiguity cannot be resolved by anything merely positive.

2. Actuality as Embodied Paradox

If it seems from my questioning of cyberspace's lack of substance that I am implicitly recommending a return to the pre-cybernetic actuality that is familiar to us, that is not the case. For I now want to suggest that, at bottom, it is the *paradoxical merging of opposites* that is actual. I propose that the inextricable entwining of contraries is what forms our foundation and constitutes the substantial center of our being. This dialectical order of being is constituted neither simply by a hole nor by some idealized whole but by a *(w)holeness*.⁷ The phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty called this the *flesh of the world* (see section 4 for a more detailed account of the flesh).⁸ Thousands of years before, the Chinese spoke of interpenetrating opposites that ground reality as yin and yang, and alchemical and esoteric traditions have carried this forward by advancing the principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites).⁹ For many centuries, however, in science and in everyday life, we've taken as actual what in fact is only virtual. Ruled by dualistic either/or thinking, we've driven the opposites apart and have come to believe that reality is made up of simplified presences, positive entities and identities that are only what they *are*, *this* as opposed to *that*, devoid of any contrary shades or nuances. Conventional wisdom might tell us that the cybernetic revolution has replaced the actual with the virtual. But—on the contrary, I believe the digital age simply makes obvious the *virtual* nature of what we have long taken as reality, so that now, its lack of genuine substance is no longer deniable. And this is what ultimately drives us into addiction. For, no virtual substance, no artificial affirmation or negation, can fill in for the paradoxical actuality of our fleshly being. Note that, on this reckoning, though the

⁷ See Rosen, Steven M. (2004) *Dimensions of Apeiron*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi (Brill); Rosen, Steven M. (2006) *Topologies of the Flesh*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press; Rosen, Steven M. (2008) *The Self-Evolving Cosmos*. London: World Scientific; Rosen, Steven M. (2014) *Dreams, Death, Rebirth*. Asheville, NC: Chiron Publications.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U. Press, p. 139. See also Rosen, Steven M. (2006) *Topologies of the Flesh*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

⁹ See Jung, C. G. (1970) *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Vol. 14 of *Collected Works*, translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

mechanical typewriting I spoke of above certainly seems more substantial than cyber-writing, it is basically no more actual than cyber-writing after all!

The contemporary world cannot resist the pull of cyberspace. The cultural momentum is carrying us decisively in that direction, as we are swept up in the planetary wave of email, texting, google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the like. Granting that our participation in the “global electronic village” is largely inescapable, are we destined to continue roaming the cyberscape in the manner of “hungry ghosts”? How can this fleshless virtual reality be transformed into a living actuality? I suggest we can do it by surpassing the abstract dualisms, objectifications, and idealizations that dominate our present lives and embracing the reality of embodied paradox. To clarify this notion of paradox, I’ll distinguish it from the sort of paradox that remains an abstraction.

Consider a commonly cited example of a paradoxical statement: “Everything I say is false.” Evidently, this assertion is true if it is false, and false if it is true! In this kind of paradox, opposing terms (“truth and falsity”) are particular objects of thought, entities already projected before the thinking subject. While the well-known “liar’s paradox” certainly subverts the boundary between the objects, it comes “too late” to directly affect the division that is established before any reflection upon objects can occur: the division between object and subject. It is by prereflectively splitting object and subject in this way that the subject remains detached from the objects cast before it and abstraction is maintained. What I mean by an *embodied* paradox is one that not only surpasses the boundaries separating objects of reflection, but also, the prereflective boundary dividing object and subject. For, the paradoxical object cannot be embodied, made fully actual, without the concrete presence and full-fledged participation of the living subject.

Stated a little differently, an embodied paradox is one that is *concretely self-referential*. Ordinarily, I refer to myself in an abstract way. I look in the mirror, for example, and see myself as an object staring back at me. Viewing myself in this objectifying fashion, the division between object and subject is in fact preserved by tacitly splitting myself so as to create a new subject—the “me” now doing the viewing. Could I regard myself *without* objectifying myself?

Suppose—instead of just directing my attention forward, to an external image of myself projected out in front of me—I bring my awareness in the other direction, move it backward into the subjective source of that projection. The term I’ve used for this act of reversing the gears of ordinary perception is *proprioception*.¹⁰ Etymologically, to perceive is to “take hold of” or “take through” (from the Latin, *per*, through, and *capere*, to take), and to conceive is to “gather or take in.” These activities are carried out in the “forward gear” of consciousness, where attention operates through the objectification of reality carried out by a detached, essentially anonymous subject. The term *proprioceive* is from the Latin, *proprius*, meaning “one’s own.” Literally, then, proprioception means “taking one’s own,” which can be read as a taking of self or “self-taking.” It is true that the term’s conventional meaning derives from physiology, where it signifies an organism’s sensitivity to activity in its own muscles, joints, and tendons. But Bohm spoke of the need for “*proprioceptive thought*,” which he viewed as a meditative act wherein “consciousness...[becomes] aware of its own implicate activity, in which its content

¹⁰ See note 7.

originates.”¹¹ Another form of proprioceptive practice has been suggested by psychologist/philosopher Eugene Gendlin, who described a method of focusing on psychological issues by drawing attention inward to obtain a *felt sense* of the overall bodily background of the problem.¹² Years earlier, the social psychiatrist Trigant Burrow spoke similarly of the need for human beings to gain a proprioceptive awareness of the organismic basis of their divisive symbolic activity.¹³ In none of these examples of proprioceptive self-reference is the self merely turned into an object. But neither does the backward movement of attention encapsulate the self in a narcissistic bubble, for this kind of reference to self does not exclude the other or object.

To give a more concrete illustration, right now I am moving my attention backward into my body to obtain a felt sense of the process of writing this essay. As I attempt to stay in contact with my process and work with the paradoxes that are involved, I notice a certain activity within me (seemingly taking place in my head) that has the quality of “thrashing about”: my thoughts jump around in a desultory manner, leaving “rough edges” and dangling “loose ends.” I experience an irritating indefiniteness, a murky openness that leaves me feeling exposed, vulnerable, and dissatisfied. My resistance to this attempt at witnessing my own process seems to take the form of sleepiness and a tendency to drift away. Often I sense myself wanting to break away more completely from the proprioceptive ambiguity, to escape into something more certain: checking my email, playing a computer game, surfing the net for interesting news stories (as mentioned above), and so on. The urge to disengage from the task of staying with my process is frequently quite compelling, especially when that process requires holding onto paradox as it jumps to and fro between opposing poles, like a bucking bronco refusing to be tamed. “Hungry cyber-ghost” that I am, I need much greater clarity; I need to be able to pin down a definite meaning and get closure on it. That’s what satisfies me and gives me pleasure. Dwelling in the open-ended ambiguity, holding the paradox without resolving it in favor of one pole or the other, leaves me feeling unrewarded, frustrated, and distressed.

This is my experience as I write this essay. In drawing back in upon myself to consciously recover my process and put it into words, I neither negate the pattern of feeling-discomfort-and-seeking-escape, nor do I transcend it. The experience is still there, but now, by gaining awareness of it, I create some distance from it so I am not just blindly ruled by it. At the same time, because my awareness of the experience is rooted in my body, I am not simply detached from it, but am sensing it from within. That is to say, in proprioceiving my writing experience, I am both outside of it and inside of it at once. The experiencing “subject” and the “object” experienced thus enter an intimate circulation, revolving around each other in interpenetrating proximity like opposing sides of a Moebius strip that continuously twist together while yet remaining apart.

Concrete self-reference then, involves an act of proprioception in which I move my awareness backward into myself without just objectifying myself or reducing myself to purely self-identical subjectivity. What happens instead is the paradoxical merging of

¹¹ Bohm, David. (1994) “The Bohm/Rosen Correspondence,” in *Science, Paradox, and the Moebius Principle*. Albany: State University of New York, pp. 223–58.

¹² Gendlin, Eugene T. (1978) *Focusing*. New York: Bantam.

¹³ See Galt, Alfreda (1995) “Trigant Burrow and the Laboratory of the ‘I,’” *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 23, pp. 19–39.

subject and object. At one and the same time, I am object and subject, other to myself and myself. Thinking dialectically can help us grasp this paradox. According to Merleau-Ponty, “Dialectical thought is that which admits that each term is itself only by proceeding toward the opposed term, becomes what it is through the movement, that it is one and the same thing for each to pass into the other or to become itself, to leave itself or to retire into itself....Each term is its own mediation.”¹⁴ This is the strange logic that governs the self-referential process I am enacting as I write. And I am proposing that such proprioceptive self-reference/other-reference is what is needed in our cyberspace transactions if we are going to shift away from the vacuous addictive patterns currently prevailing here, where the other always appears as an object (of desire or revulsion) projected before a detached self (even when that other is an objectified version of said self). It is through embodied proprioception that we can make the transition to the more fulfilling interactions of a cybernetic reality that is not merely virtual but actual.

3. Proprioceptive Dialogue

By way of turning from the solitary proprioception I enacted above to a form of proprioception suitable for communication in cyberspace, I now want to call your attention to a specific practice described on my website (see <http://embodyingcyberspace.com/practicing-proprioceptive-dialogue/>.) Proprioceptive dialogue (PD) derives from the work of the scientist-philosopher, David Bohm (see david-bohm.net/dialogue). This kind of dialogue is not primarily a discussion of concepts or a forum for exchanging ideas. It is an experiment in “radical honesty” in which participants relate to one another on the basis of an awareness of and willingness to share their hidden agendas: underlying assumptions and motives, feelings and projections, defensive maneuverings, etc.

PD requires that we relate to each other by moving in the “opposite direction” in which conventional discourse takes place. Rather than moving forward, moving out to you, authoritatively advancing my position on whatever we are discussing by simply and directly presenting it to you, I relate to you in a more circuitous, reflexive way, by going proprioceptively *backward into myself*, back into that hollow place at the center of my being. That is to say, in PD, I relate to you through a bodily felt sense of my own process of relating as it is occurring in the moment. In this way, I am not just presenting an abstract content, a collection of finished thoughts. Instead I am disclosing—to myself and to you—the thinking and feeling and sensing process that lies behind the finished products. If we can encourage each other to relate in this way, it should allow us to “see behind the scenes,” to read the *subtext* of our discourse, to make transparent the underlying motives and hidden agendas that are normally invisible in the defensive posturing of ordinary discourse. Crucial to this process is our ability to suspend or slow down our own thinking to a great enough degree that we can be receptive to ourselves and to each other;¹⁵ to listen deeply out of the hollow core of ourselves, and mirror back

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U. Press, p. 89.

¹⁵ See Wikse, Jack. (2003) “Slowing Things Down: *Gelassenheit* and the Somatics of Dialogue.” Annual Conference of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences, Boston, November 2003. Citation retrieved August 16, 2016, from <http://towardsocialsanity.net/slow.htm>.

to each other “a view of some of the assumptions and unspoken implications of what is being expressed along with that which is being avoided.”¹⁶ Each participant then has an opportunity “to examine the preconceptions, prejudices, and the characteristic patterns that lie behind his or her thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and feelings, along with the roles he or she tends habitually to play.”¹⁷ And there is an “opportunity to share these insights” with the group. By tapping into the dynamic—sometimes formless and chaotic—substrate that lies beneath the fixed positions we customarily hold, PD becomes a “process of creative participation among peers,” a free-flowing exploration in which we can play together in otherwise unconscious, unknown territory.

Note that while PD can be meaningful and rich, it is not typically rewarding or entertaining, since it requires that we tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity for extended periods. Rather than obtaining ready rewards, gaining fast closure on specific goals, and receiving food for our egos, we must be willing to stay suspended in that hollow place, that ever-changing, open-ended field of process and flux where the questions far outnumber the answers. This can be frustrating to say the least.

Finally, I note (as Bohm and his co-authors did) that perseverance is needed for effective PD. Even with a clear introduction to the process, “when the group begins to talk [or write] together it will often experience confusion, frustration, and a self-conscious concern as to whether or not it is actually engaging in Dialogue. It would be very optimistic to assume that a Dialogue would begin to flow or move toward any great depth during its first meeting. It is important to point out that perseverance is required.”¹⁸

What seems most crucial to PD is that we be able to “move *backward*,” self-reflexively engage in proprioception. Just as I can obtain a proprioceptive sense of the muscular activity in my fingers as I type these words, I should also be able to obtain—though not as easily, to be sure—a felt sense of my defensive “reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions.”¹⁹ Seeing them and feeling them in this way, observing them as they are actually taking place within my own embodied psyche, allows me to share them with you, and have them be reflected back to me by you.

To be sure, engaging in proprioceptive dialogue will bring no simple salvation. It will not take us from the underlying emptiness of present-day cybernetic experience to a total fullness, from the cyber-holes into which we often drop to an ideal wholeness, from anxiety and frustration to unmitigated sweetness and light. Indeed, swinging from the depths to the heights—and back again—is what we *ordinarily* do. So it is clear that a shift to proprioceptive discourse will not give us that addictive high from which we inevitably crash. Instead of surging upward to the sweetly ecstatic, crystal-clear heights of “perfect wholeness,” in PD we can experience a *bittersweet (w)holeness*, the paradoxical interpenetration of whole and hole.

In the course of PD, we may be able to see behind our desperate flights of fancy without lacerating ourselves too severely for them. No doubt we are mortal beings who are strongly inclined to grasp at immortality. In times past, one could effectively deny one’s mortality and project an image of rock-solid permanence. But in this postmodern cybernetic age, the ephemerality of the ego is far harder to ignore. That doesn’t stop us

¹⁶ http://david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

from trying, however. The commitment to sustaining an impregnable ego-identity is so strong that—in our cyberspace exploits and elsewhere—we are still attempting to do it, however fruitless these efforts may be. Thus the addictive quest for “absolute clarity,” which is at bottom a quest for a clarification of our being that can never really be achieved. Here we look to disclaim our phantasmal existence and solidify our core by banishing the shadows of ambiguity that are cast over it. And we want to do this in perpetuity, for, if the blazing flashes of clarity we think we can sometimes glimpse were tempered by even a hint of impermanence, our “highs” would be less than perfect.

It is this denial of death that we need to recognize. In practicing PD, we would do that together, even as the tangible urge impels us to abandon the frustrating work of dialogue and jump to our e-mail or the internet in search of something less painfully ambiguous, something that will provide a rush of self-affirming lucidity. In concretely accepting our mortality by retracting the projections that accompany its denial, we move proprioceptively. Moving backward against the grain of our outthrust to immortality, we grope our way into its bodily roots and sense the hole, the absence actively aching with the loss of everything that has affirmed us. In being present to that as we dialogue, can we grieve through the bitterness to something bittersweet?

Our bodies seem to be the key. To the extent that we actually move our attention into the bodily roots of the disembodied ego’s projections, remain there long enough to consciously process the hole at the core of that ego-identity, and grieve the loss of all the affirmations it has offered, the exclusively bitter taste can perhaps start to fade. And the bodily awareness of absence, of the holes in our individual beings, can metamorphose into a cognizance of the paradoxical (w)holeness of a larger being. This is the mode of being already intimated. Concealed within the empty core of the seemingly fleshless ego that imagines itself detached from the world is an order of being that constitutes the very *flesh* of the world.

4. Proprioceiving the Flesh

For Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *flesh*, “there is no name in traditional philosophy,” in fact, “no name in any philosophy.”²⁰ The flesh cannot be named in traditional philosophy because, with it, the most basic categories of the classical tradition are transgressed:

The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being . . . is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element,” in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being.²¹

It is the proprioceptive emptying of egoic being that prepares us for making tangible contact with the “paradox of Being,” as Merleau-Ponty characterized the flesh of the

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U. Press, pp. 139 and 147

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139

world.²² According to philosopher Carol Bigwood, while phenomenologists would insist that “Being is not a [mere] being,” neither is it a “God [or] an absolute unconditional ground...but is simply the living web within which all relations emerge.”²³ That is to say, *Be-ing* constitutes the dimension of dynamic life process, the fleshly dimension of the *lifeworld*.²⁴

To inhabit the lifeworld is to be immersed with others in transactions so intimate that the sharp distinction between self and other, seer and seen, is confounded and “we no longer know which sees and which is seen.”²⁵ As Heidegger put it, the down-to-earth, lifeworld subject is a *being-in-the-world*, a being involved in

a much richer relation than merely the spatial one of being located in the world.... This wider kind of personal or existential “inhood” implies the whole relation of “dwelling” in a place. We are not simply located there, but are bound to it by all the ties of work, interest, affection, and so on.²⁶

But this sense of being a fully situated, fully-fledged participant intimately engaged with the world has been obscured over the centuries. The process of repression began with the emergence of Greek civilization from mythic culture some three thousand years ago and it was strongly reinforced at the time of the Renaissance in Europe.²⁷ From the original entanglement with living community there arose a narrowed down, abstracted, fleshless way of being, accompanied by a sense of identity that has become more and more detached and insular. And now, in these postmodern times, the lifeworld appears to have finally disintegrated into a lifeless cybernetic wasteland inhabited by the narcissistic ghosts of beings that never were.

What is presently called for is a shifting of gears. The centuries-old forward thrust of the ego needs to be reversed and we must move proprioceptively backward. For I cannot (re)enter the lifeworld as long as I proceed from the “I,” from the fullness of the ego. “I” must proceed instead from the ego’s empty core, from the hole in the “I” that can bring the (w)holeness of the flesh.

The hole in the “I” is my portal to *you*. It is not surprising that cyberspace is currently populated by lonely and hungry “ghosts.” The nourishing contact with others that we so desperately crave can never be realized by selves that relate to others solely in the narcissistic terms of how those others can satisfy what our egos project upon them as potential sources of affirmation. Relating to each other out of the fullness of our egos, we look to one another for nurturing support but cannot receive each other. There are no hollow places in ourselves that make room for the other’s presence, that welcome the

²² Ibid., p. 136

²³ Bigwood, Carol. (1993) *Earth Muse*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p.3.

²⁴ Husserl, Edmund. (1936/1970) *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, translated by David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U. Press, p. 139.

²⁶ Macquarrie, John. (1968) *Martin Heidegger*. Richmond, Va.: John Knox, pp. 14-15.

²⁷ These historical transformations have been documented by numerous scholars. See, for example: Gebser, Jean. (1985) *The Ever-Present Origin*. Athens, OH: Ohio U. Press; Neumann, Erich. (1954) *The Origin and History of Consciousness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press; Ong, Walter. (1977). *Interfaces of the Word*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press.

other in. All that confronts the other is an ego that allows space for nothing but its own self-obsessed cravings.

Surpassing the virtual communication now prevailing in cyberspace and fleshing out the actuality of the “global electronic village” requires relating to one another via our *holes*. Only in the hollow part of me is there room to receive you as you actually are, rather than as you are projected by my ego. So, in reading what you write or listening to what you say, my own internal texts and voices must recede to make room for what you are communicating. If my initial reactions are colored by the expectations, wishes, and desires that rush out of me to meet you, I must pull them back and invite you in. In communicating “hole-to-hole,” if our mutual proprioceptions take us far enough back into the empty centers of our respective egos, we may meet one another as full participants in the long-repressed world of the flesh. Note, dear reader, that this movement backward will be no mere regression that returns us to an undifferentiated pre-egoic flesh. The fullness of the ego will remain even as we gain cognizance of the emptiness at its core. In this way, we will enact together the dialectic of fullness and emptiness, of whole and hole.

5. An Invitation

As I noted at the beginning of section 3, there is a page on my website already devoted to the practice of proprioceptive dialogue (<http://embodyingcyberspace.com/practicing-proprioceptive-dialogue/>). But I must confess that, since setting up the webpage, I have not devoted adequate attention to it. Being something of an introvert, I found it easier and safer to pursue theoretical work on my own and I have given priority to writing projects that have kept me well within my comfort zone. However, after completing a big project in 2015, I spent many months contemplating where next to invest my energy. I asked myself repeatedly: What is it that matters most to me at this juncture in my life’s work? In the end, I was drawn back to the theme of communication in cyberspace.

During my period of soul searching, it did not escape my attention that, in just the last few years, the so-called “Doomsday Clock” has been moved from “six minutes to midnight” to an alarming “three minutes.” This figurative clock, maintained by *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* since 1947, symbolically indicates our closeness to global catastrophe (nuclear, environmental, etc.). It is my conviction that our time until “midnight” has been significantly shortened by the increasing breakdown in human communication and community. Our narcissistic self-absorption appears to have progressively worsened, exacerbating our tendency to objectify and demonize each other. As of this writing in the summer of 2016, I can think of no clearer example than the chilling spectacle of America’s presidential election and the candidacy of Donald J. Trump, that paragon of heedless megalomania. I suggest that this egotism run amok is not just an anomaly but an extreme instance of a propensity now rampant in our society. And I believe that, at bottom, our pandemic egocentrism depends on continuing to relate to each other solely in the ego-dominated “forward gear” of discourse, that in which we view the other as but an object cast before our detached subjectivity—there to be manipulated and exploited, or else simply ignored.

I do realize that it will be far from easy to shift the gears of discourse to *backward* and engage in a proprioceptive form of transaction. Forward is our default setting and it is

so deeply entrenched in our culture and psyches that most people cannot bring themselves to question it, or even to know what it means to raise such a question. I who have long advocated this “gear reversal” have also found it difficult to gear myself for proprioception. After all, I too am a child of post-Renaissance culture. But perhaps we do not need vast numbers of people experimenting with proprioceptive dialogue. Perhaps we can help bring about the necessary shift with a relatively small number of patiently determined participants working to reach a critical mass. Needless to say there is no guarantee of achieving the requisite transformation. Still, if such a shift is what is needed, it is surely worth a try given what is at stake.

To that end, I would like to extend an invitation to those of you who see the importance of revolutionizing our manner of communication, and of doing so particularly in cyberspace, which is fast becoming our primary space of discourse. Please consider contributing something to my webpage on proprioceptive dialogue (<http://embodyingcyberspace.com/practicing-proprioceptive-dialogue/>). You may respond to the most recent message posted there, or you may offer a fresh message of your own, following the guidelines suggested on the site.

In conclusion, proprioceptive dialogue is an approach that seeks to promote an embodied form of electronic communication permitting us to interact with each other not just surface to surface, but core to core, through the dimension of process that brings into play the hollow recesses lying within us. I propose that engaging with each other in this way may eventually help transform the virtual community of “hungry ghosts”—the legions of anonymous phantoms detached from reality and plagued by insatiable cravings for substances, commodities, and products of all kinds—into an actual community based on concrete presence and deep process.