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Being Human in the Digital Age: Comments on Floridi's sketch for a New Political Ontology

Floridi's lead article for this exchange is too rich in novel ideas to be exhausted by one set of comments, not to mention his overall impressive contribution to the philosophy, ethics, and logics of information on which it draws.[1] In what follows, I will focus on two dimensions of his proposal for what he calls a »New Political Ontology« (Floridi 2020). First (I.) I will discuss his (social) ontology. Then (II.) I shall sketch an alternative to his »postmodern meta-project« (321). This alternative, which is part of the overall philosophical research program of »New Realism«, maintains that we ought to reclaim the concept of being human as the relevant ontological interface between politics and ethics. Despite his recourse to the very idea of a »human project for the digital age«, Floridi seems to be ensnared by a certain postmodern and posthumanist siren song that is a constitutive part of the problem Floridi wants to overcome.

My comments are meant as an invitation to dialogue rather than as critical objections that might be expected in a »controversy«. For, controversies in my view are alien to philosophy itself. They belong to the preferred modes of confrontation of our digital age insofar as the widespread commercial use of digital infrastructure (including, but not limited to AI-systems as the most powerful tools available) tends to restructure the public sphere in terms of easily digestible forms of polarization. Philosophy's task in the face of our situation of »nested crises« is to cooperate in order to create better, more forward-looking conceptual avenues than those characteristic of our current »management of the attention of the civil society«, which draw on »alarmism, emergency, or recurrent crises« (330).[2] Having said that, I will focus on the aspects of Floridi's article with which I find

[1] Cf. Floridi (2011), (2013) and (2019).
[2] Cf. Gabriel (2020a) and (2020b).

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myself in some sort of disagreement. This disagreement takes place against the backdrop of a vast background of agreement. [96]

1. Floridi's (Social) Ontology

Floridi claims that there is something like »our *Ur-philosophy*« (311). In the context of political ontology, this *Ur-philosophy* which he associates with the names of Aristotle and Newton »conceives of society as lego-like in structure. There are many units of bricks that connect to other units of bricks, from the bottom to the top, to create complex structures, interacting with each other.« (311) Elsewhere, in a similar spirit, I have called this *Ur-philosophy* »legocentrism«, a worldview which is indeed out of touch with much contemporary scientific activity (not limited to the natural sciences).[3] In this regard, I want to emphasize the proximity of Floridi's rejection of an ontology based on naïve set theory and my introduction of the notion of »fields of sense.«[4] Fields of sense are intensional structures. They are domains of objects individuated by Fregean-style modes of presentation that structure objects in a given field. To exist, according to the underlying ontology, is to appear in a given field of sense, such that existence itself turns out to be a relation between a field and the objects located therein. Otherwise put, the ontology of fields of sense belongs to the species of »*relational* Ur-philosophy« (313). As a matter of fact, there are some points of contact between this ontology and the »sophisticated mathematical tools« Floridi mentions (he draws on vector spaces in relativity theory and category theory as foundational theory in mathematics).

Surprisingly, Floridi does not consider those examples of contemporary French (social) ontology that depart from Aristotelian Ur-philosophy in just the ways suggested by Floridi himself. For instance, Badiou maintains that on his preferred interpretation of set theory and category theory, it is possible to provide an ontological foundation of Althusserian political ontology – a tradition of Marxist thought for which Floridi ought to have some sympathies.[5] What is more, Bruno Latour has spelled out a relational ontology of modes

[3] Gabriel (2017).
[4] Gabriel (2015a), 13.
[5] Badiou (2007) and (2019).

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of existence based on his actor-network-theory, which transcends legocentrism and replaces it with a sophisticated ontology based on sociological evidence.[6] Latour (like many other contemporary sociologists from different schools, such as the hermeneutic tradition, the Frankfurt school or that of system theory, to name but a few) would certainly subscribe to Floridi's insight that »economics, jurisprudence, sociology, and above all, in our case, politics, become relational sciences of the links that make up and connect the *relata* (not just people, but all things, natural and constructed, and therefore their environments and ecosystems), even before being behavioral sciences studying the nature and actions of those special entities« (316).

Regardless of this somewhat astonishing absence of references to already existing relational contemporary social and political ontologies, I have a series of objections against the idea of grounding a transformation in (social and political) ontology on an analogy with mathematics and natural science. For, the objects of (social [97] and political) science cannot be meaningfully modelled in terms of natural science. There is no social vector space and category theory is not capable of getting the kind of qualitative experience into view that is constitutive of »the participant standpoint«[7], to invoke Strawson's felicitous formulation.

The most obvious disanalogy between the ontology of the kinds of objects that can be dealt with in terms of strictly mathematical and natural-scientific methods and those that are in the target systems of the human and social sciences is that social objects and facts exist in virtue of their relationship to concept-mongering creatures like us. We produce social facts on account of our capacity to think of each other's experience and to adjust our attitudes to the attitudes of various communities of which we happen to be members.[8] The »force field or relational *network*« (316) of social entities essentially exists in virtue of implicit and explicit attitude adjustments grounded in the fact that we are socially produced and constantly reproduced animals.

Exactly like Latour's, Floridi's »new model, placing the relations at the centre of the socio-political debate, is more easily able to include

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[6] Latour (2013).

[7] Cf. Strawson (1962) and the elaboration of the relationship between a hermeneutically accessible life-world and social relations in Habermas (1984, 1987) which owes much to this Strawsonian account.

[8] Gabriel (2020a), §§ 12–17.

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in its analysis *all* the entities (relata), not only persons, but also the world of institutions, artefacts, and nature« (316).[9] However, there is one crucial difference, which comes out at a deeper philosophical level: Floridi refrains from claiming that the actual ontology of social and political entities is relational. Instead, he presents us with »an epistemological ontology«, »not a metaphysics«, i.e. with »a way of describing the world at a relational, instead of substantial, level of abstraction« (315, fn. 7).

Yet, this motivates my first more critical comment: How does Floridi account for the presumed fact that a »*reticular philosophy*« (316) is superior to an »Aristotelian Ur-philosophy« if all he is saying is that we can devise a vocabulary in which »[a]ll entities are reducible to bundles of properties, and all properties are reducible to n-ary relations, so all entities are reducible to the totality of bundles of relations« (315, fn. 7)? To be sure, it is possible to devise many vocabularies whose logical properties we can fix in an axiomatic way so as to study their intrinsic inferential properties. But what does it mean to claim that Thatcherian social ontology »was wrong« (315) then? If there is a right and a wrong level of abstraction, in what does the rightness consist? It cannot be reduced to »a way of describing the world«, as there are indefinitely many such ways of describing the world. There has to be some set of criteria that help us to decide which of the available modes of description better capture how things really are. At this point, it cuts no ice to assert that the »*relational* Ur-philosophy« imposes »a paradigm shift« and that it »untested, counter-intuitive, unfamiliar, it is not how we conceptualise the world and our societies in it, or how we go about designing and constructing them, and does not really seem to be forced upon us by the nature of the problems with which we are dealing. It is going to be a hard selling« (314). [98]

For one thing, the relational picture Floridi sketches is not really new. It has been a standing possibility throughout the entire history of philosophy, in both the ›West‹ and the ›East‹. It suffices to mention Hegel's discussion of relations in the Doctrine of Essence, as a famous paradigm for 19th century social ontology and sociology, which Floridi

[9] Cf. Latour (2004).

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only mentions in passing (316), and the various versions of holistic, relational ontologies in Buddhist metaphysics.[10]

Floridi compares the motivation for adapting a reticular philosophy to the transition from Newtonian, classical physics to quantum physics. »The point is not that Newtonian physics does not work, but that it no longer works in this case, and that this case is now the more fundamental one.« (315) If this point is meant to be understood at face value, I disagree. For, Newtonian physics does not work precisely because it cannot cover the behavior of subatomic particles. On some scales, it is a useful approximation to the physical facts, but it simply does not cut nature at its joints in all relevant domains, which is why it has been superseded by much better theories, theories whose superiority is both experimentally tested and impressively coherent on the theoretical level.

Regardless of the details of the philosophy of paradigm shifts in physics, the comparison between legocentrism in social ontology and Newtonian physics is misleading to the extent to which social entities ought not, on any respectable construal, to be regarded as points subject to laws of nature – an idea that has been constantly rejected since sociology became an academic discipline.[11] Sociologists have not been operating with the ›Newtonian‹ paradigm, Floridi rightly criticizes. And to the extent to which a legocentric view of the social is actually based on a ›Newtonian‹ (or, for that matter, ›Aristotelian‹) paradigm, the corrective is not to base a new ontology of society on a post-newtonian scientific paradigm derived from physics. Rejecting atomism in social ontology and replacing it with holistic ways of thinking about social facts and entities as essentially integrated into networks of mutual recognition, is certainly not an innovation triggered by »new challenges posed by mature information societies, where well-being is higher and more widespread than in the past (and compared with other developing societies), and the degree of complexity and interconnections is now profound« (315).

In this context, I believe that Floridi's repeated claim that our »Aristotelian-Newtonian Ur-philosophy is so powerful because it is the codification of our deepest intuitions as intelligent mam-

[10] For a recent, logically sophisticated reconstruction of Buddhist metaphysics in terms of contemporary logical and ontological theory see Priest (2014) and (2018). See also the discussion in Gabriel/Priest (forthcoming).

[11] See famously the papers collected in Weber (2012).

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mals« (313) is wrong. At least, in his article he does not offer any evidence or arguments in favor of the idea that a specific metaphysics is indeed constitutive of common sense or our cognitive architecture as members of a species of intelligent mammals. An atomistic social ontology is certainly nothing natural in that sense. If anything, it is the result of a lot of metaphysical theorizing (it might deserve the title ›Aristotelian‹, after all). And if you look back at the founding gesture of political philosophy and ontology, you will notice that Plato, in con[99]trast to Aristotle, defended a reticular philosophy. For Plato, being is a »network of ideas (συμπλοκὴ τῶν εἰδῶν)« where each element is what is in virtue of occupying a position of identity and difference to other members in the network of being.[12] One could even go so far as to maintain that the very idea of Plato's political philosophy which, if anything, is *the* political Ur-philosophy, is based on a rejection of legocentrism.

This brief historical remark is only intended to show that there is nothing natural, common-sensical or deep about an atomistic conception of political ontology according to which »there is no such thing as society«. Of course, Thatcher was wrong, but she was not, after all, even in the business of stating anything faintly resembling a political ontology. Nor did she voice a somewhat natural, common-sensical account of how things really are. Rather, her version of a neo-liberal project has a precise and unfortunate historical place, one which has arguably been leading to a series of social and political disasters for which we urgently need an alternative. In this respect, I wholeheartedly endorse Floridi's overall strategic thrust towards a green and blue information society. In particular, I believe he is right that »not even a society of angels can succeed if it is exclusively a libertarian one. It too needs a social project to support its development.« (325) But the very formulation of this basic and crucial enlightenment insight demonstrates that there is nothing natural about a legocentric Ur-philosophy. Rather, it is a confused expression of bad theorizing whose shortcomings, in my view, are precisely not merely epistemological, but ontological or metaphysical, if you like.[13]

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12 Plato, Sophist, 259e5–6 (in Cooper 1997).

13 In my own work, I distinguish between ontology and metaphysics in roughly the following way: While *ontology* is the systematic investigation into (the meaning of) existence and related concepts (such as identity, difference, relation, field, object, substance etc.), *metaphysics* is a theory of absolutely everything, of unrestricted

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2. Being Human in the Digital Age

In this section I would like to discuss Floridi's important statement that »we do not have a human project for the digital age« (320). He rightly identifies the Achilles heel of the current state of globalization. Arguably, the current pandemic has made it explicit and visible to billions of people that the libertarian, neo-liberal understanding of global markets does not per se amount to anything like a sustainable »vision of the good«[14]. In this context, I have argued for a »politics of the radical center« which I take to correspond to Floridi's »ethical-centric way« (322) of designing a human project for the digital age.[15] And for that, »we need an important thing: a good ethical infrastructure that allows coordination and care of the social fabric« [100] (323). In particular, it seems to me that Floridi is offering an argument in favor of this specifically political proposal, which he formulates in the following passage:

> [T]he very absence of a human project is *itself* a project. We are back to the relational nature of phenomena that absorb their negations. Not having a project does not mean you are doing without one, but rather that you have opted for a bad project, underdeveloped and uncontrolled. It follows that a society without a human project does not exist. There are only societies with human projects that are more or less good, achievable, or compatible with one another. (319)

This implies that there is a ranking of human projects. It would be interesting to hear more about Floridi's scale for ordering more specific projects so as to evaluate his own proposal in comparison to actual and possible alternatives. Clearly, he rejects libertarianism and its associated, atomistic social and political ontology. In this context, I would like to know whether libertarianism and the absence of a human project coincide or whether these are two different kinds of mistake.

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totality. For reasons not articulated here, I believe that metaphysics is devoid of relevant content, because there is no unrestricted totality whose architecture we could reconstruct by way of some combination of scientific, empirical knowledge-acquisition and philosophical a priori reasoning. For details see Gabriel (2015a) and the introduction to the view in Gabriel (2015b).

[14] This is Brian Leiter's apt phrase for a socio-political vision of »what is worthwhile or important« such that particular socio-political decisions are taken in light of such a vision. See Leiter (2014), 118.

[15] Gabriel (2020b).

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Moreover, I was struck by Floridi's largely unsupported claim that the human project for the digital age »will need to be secular and lay« (323). The only reason he gives for this very contentious claim is that »ethics can unite and support faith, but faith often ends up dividing and defeating ethics« (323).[16] He seems to ground this view in the idea that there is a »religious divide« »comprising »we« and »they«« (323). Yet, an elementary dialectical move gets us to the position that the opposition of ethics and faith or of secular and religious is precisely a repetition of an opposition of »we« and »they,« a serious shortcoming which is widespread in circles which rely on the notion that there could be such a thing as a purely scientific worldview. Floridi's opposition of ethics and faith thus threatens »to fall into the temptation of *imposing* a specific vision (religious or otherwise) of the human project at the expense of other visions« (322 f.). I wonder why Floridi does not extend his dialectical operation (political abstention is itself a political act etc.) to his own decisions? This would reveal that the strict separation between the religious and the secular as well as his idea that politics and ideology can neatly be separated so that his own centrism cannot count as ideological, is subject to a dialectical operation: Opposing the (alleged) we-they-distinction of a religious divide creates a divide between the we of a secular group and the they of an (alleged) religious group; the claim that centrist politics is free from ideology is itself a form of ideology etc. [101]

Clearly Floridi's project significantly reduces the »*pluralism*« of human projects to a subset of ethically superior human projects. Yet, if this ranking significantly draws on an opposition of secular and

[16] See also the argument in Floridi (2020), 322: »As for the relationship with religion, the human project must support a secular and immanent society, while being fully respectful of the faiths that can not only cohabit but also flourish within it. The reasons in favour of a lay human project are many. Only a secular society can be coherent with the meta-project, which, to repeat, is a project to facilitate individual projects to the extent that they are mutually compatible. Only a secular society can be truly tolerant, that is, sincerely respectful and supportive of the great variety of individual human projects.« I believe that this series of statements is incorrect and based on a parochial historical perspective on tolerance. See, for instance, Amartya Sen's reminder that pluralistic tolerance of all religious (and atheistic) outlooks in India's Moghul Empire blossomed during Akbar's rule in the 16th century in Sen (2009), 36–39 as well as in Sen (2005). In any event, Floridi's very contentious statement concerning secular society is in urgent need of historical and philosophical justification. As formulated, it is a mere allegation.

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religious projects, it winds up with an extreme polarization of current humanity, the majority of which adheres to some faith or other. This is particularly true of what Floridi calls »the silent world«: »the marginalized, the disadvantaged, the weak, the oppressed« (322), such as Muslim migrants in French suburbs, the small Hindu minority in Germany (which is marginalized, if not oppressed), Polish Catholic migrant workers in Britain soon to be removed from their anyhow precarious social positions in the UK in the wake of the highly uncontrolled human ›project‹ of a hard Brexit etc.

Notice that I am not arguing in favor of a religious human project at all. I am just pointing out that the opposition of ethics and faith is misguided on various levels, most specifically in light of Floridi's own dialectical idea that ethics has to be maximally inclusive or, as I would like to put it, of universal scope. Thus, in my view, the defining feature of a human project for the digital age is a form of universalism which I recently labelled »New Enlightenment«[17]. New Enlightenment's starting point is a brand of moral realism according to which ethics (the discipline) is in the business of discovering moral facts. Moral facts are facts concerning what we ought to do or ought not to do simply in virtue of our shared humanity.[18] We can express moral facts in the usual form of assertions of which we know many paradigmatic instances such as: »No one should torture children«, »We ought to include the silenced voices of the marginalized in democratic processes«, »Gender equality is an important development goal« etc. Call these paradigmatic instances or correct moral statements »self-evident«. The idea is not that all moral facts are self-evident or somehow easy to detect. One of the reasons why this is not the case is precisely natural-scientific, technological and social progress which puts us in unexpected situations whose moral structure we have to figure out. According to my brand of moral realism, the heuristics for the discovery of moral facts hitherto partially obscured or unarticulated has to be based on a model of transdisciplinary cooperation. We need to settle as many non-moral facts about emerging, socially disruptive technologies as possible before we can evaluate those facts in light of earlier ethical achievements. This immediately amounts to a human project in Floridi's sense, because

[17] Gabriel (2020b).

[18] For a recent brilliant account of the relationship between the universal scope of moral thought and the rationality of the human life form see Korsgaard (2018).

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the goal of a global society in the information age can be defined as the creation of maximal-scale cooperation across disciplines and sectors of society. Thus, all scientific disciplines (including the humanities and qualitative social sciences) ought to cooperate in the face of the various challenges and threats humanity faces in the 21st century with the explicit goal of identifying a morally good course of action and organization whose moral value by its very nature transcends national boundaries.

At this point, the humanities come into play. Within the framework of New Enlightenment, they contribute transcultural knowledge so as to dispel stereotypical [102] thinking according to which there is, for instance, such a thing as »European values« that contrast with »Chinese« or even »Asian ones«. In this context, my strongest disagreement with Floridi's project comes to the fore. For I believe that his notion of Europe and that of the EU is highly problematic, to say the least. Let me illustrate my worry that there is a strong strand of something one might even call Eurocentric thinking in the following passage to which I emphatically object[19]:

> [T]he Mediterranean nature of Italy is above all cultural (i.e. relational), not merely geographical; likewise, Denmark is a Scandinavian country; and Spain can be as Mediterranean as Greece. This is why the EU should allow the expulsion of European member countries that do not respect agreements and shared values, and drop the geographical clause that prevents a non-European State from joining the European Union. More Europe also means having the courage to abandon the twentieth-century geographical space, on which the EU was founded, to adopt a relational spatiality, making possible the exclusion of European countries that repeatedly deny the values of the EU, because geography is no longer sufficient, and the inclusion among its members also of countries not belonging to the continent, but which respect and promote its values, because geography is no longer necessary. (317)

There just is no such thing as the values of the EU such that we could identify them in a way which would allow for the exclusion of Poland,

[19] My rejection of the very idea that there are cultures which can be attached to nation states is inspired by Appiah (2018) and Sen (2006). Basically, I would argue that there really is no such thing at all as a »Mediterranean«, »Scandinavian« or »Japanese« culture. At best, these notions are abstractions based on stereotypes. In addition to serious ontological and explanatory shortcomings of stereotypes, they underpin the kinds of mechanism of exclusion which hinder moral progress by silencing those that seem not to belong in a culturalized category.

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Hungary, or Italy from the EU. Let us not forget that almost any member of the EU has right-wing populist and other anti-EU parties and movements. Sometimes, like until recently in Italy, they actually form the government and repeatedly oppose political decisions taken in Brussels or in other member states, in particular, in morally sensitive areas (such as sustainability or migration). Yet, the very idea of excluding Italy from the EU and of replacing it, say, with Japan or Australia, is simply preposterous. Notably, such a proposal runs entirely counter to the idea that we should not create fractions of a »we« and a »they«. Thus, the quoted passage is incompatible with an ethically sustainable and acceptable human project for the digital age. Actually, it articulates stereotypes and biases that we should overcome in the name of a more desirable form of digital transformation, which is a central part of debates in ethics of AI and the regulation of algorithms.[20]

In general, ethics cannot advance without taking the humanities into account. There is a deep reason for this fact which I articulate in roughly the following way.[21] We can think of human mindedness as the capacity of leading a life in light of a conception of oneself as specifically minded. For instance, we can think of ourselves as intelligent mammals, as rational animals, as emergent patterns identical with neuronal processes, as endowed with an immortal soul or as involved in cycles of rebirth until we reach the final stage of salvation based on enlightenment. I call [103] each such conception of human mindedness a »self-portrait«. The humanities can be seen as investigations into synchronic and diachronic variations in the instantiation of this universally shared form of being human. To be human, then, is to actualize the capacity to think of oneself as belonging to reality in a particular way. While the capacity is universal, specific instances can vary from individual to individual, can change over life stages, or form clusters some of us then perceive as social, religious, or cultural identities. The massive variation in actual modes of being human takes place in front of a shared universal form. New Enlightenment sets out to discover details of the shared universal form so that it can be the driver of progress. In that respect, it is liberal without being postmodern. Floridi conflates the idea that the »purpose of the State is centred in defending and promoting the rights of each member of

[20] See, for instance, Richardson (2020), Arun (2020), Gal (2020) and Rizk (2020).
[21] For details see Gabriel (2018) and (2020b).

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society, in a mutually compatible way« (320) with a »postmodern meta-project«. But that is clearly a mistake, for the obvious reason that the liberal tradition is the hallmark of modernity, if anything. For instance, it would be absurd to classify Kant's legal and political philosophy as »postmodern«, while it is, of course, precisely liberal in Floridi's sense. In this respect, it is also false that the liberal project »focuses only on the interests and hopes of the individual, or at most of the person, including the legal person (think of corporate taxation), but does not provide, nor does it mean to provide, programmatically, an indicative framework on the kind of society one would like to build together, and for which coordination of the efforts of many, if not all, is needed« (320 f.).

Actually, this worry is even self-contradictory within Floridi's framework, because the idea of a coordination of individual modes of being human in light of our self-conception as instantiating the form of being human in highly specific, i.e. individual ways, is precisely a political idea that leads to large-scale cooperation needed to maintain the legal order of a democratic rule of law.

I want to conclude this discussion by highlighting that there are many items on Floridi's rather random list of 69 ideas with which I happen to agree. However, there also are many articles in this list I disagree with. I assume that this will be the case for virtually every reader. For this reason, it seems quite obvious to me that Floridi owes us a justification of the transition from some general concerns pertaining to a change in ontology from substance to relation to surprisingly concrete proposals and claims such as »6. *Democracy* is the best way to create and maintain the governance of a polity. « (328) While this happens to correspond to a very reasonable political opinion, I wonder how Floridi would convince representatives and defenders of the Chinese mode of government that he has actually offered an account that speaks in favor of liberal democracy rather than in favor of a contemporary Chinese form of governance for the digital age, which is clearly not democratic in the intended sense.

Overall, Floridi's article falls short of fulfilling the promise of demonstrating that there is a »best possible human social project« (333). And what does it mean to say that politics »is concerned with supporting and implementing the best possible human social project, in a critical and conscious way, that is compatible with the historical circumstances in which it arises, and the individual human projects of which it takes care« (333)? If this is a descriptive

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assertion about what politics is [104] and does, we wind up with a chaotic bunch of mutually incompatible social projects without being in a position to rank them. If it is a normative claim concerning what politics ought to be, then Floridi has not yet offered his actual or possible political opponent sufficiently good reasons to endorse his project.

In sum, we, i.e. all humans currently inhabiting Planet Earth, urgently need an informed political global discussion about who we are as human beings and who we want to become in the future. This discussion ought to be constraint by ethics, i.e. by large-scale cooperative, transdisciplinary and transcultural systems of cooperation designed to figure out as many non-moral and moral facts as possible so as to translate them into manageable and realizable policies. This requires a shift in social and political ontology after the recent breakdown of a purely libertarian, neo-liberal understanding of the global order. The current pandemic crisis can thus be regarded as calling for a »great reset« requiring a paradigm shift towards reticular thinking.[22]

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[22] Cf. Schwab/Malleret (2020). Schwab and Malleret also point out that we urgently need a non-classic, quantum-like account of social complexity. Yet, this comparison suffers from the weakness that socio-economic relations do precisely not obtain between physical objects so that the analogy between a transition from a classical to a non-classical paradigm from physics is not entirely convincing. It might be sufficient to take actual, qualitative, theoretical sociology into account and build better quantitative models on the participant standpoint of social agents. This imperative corresponds to the ur-paradigm of sociology represented by Max Weber.

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