



SOCIAL NETWORKS: Reason, Freedom, and Being

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ABSTRACT

In the first quarter of the 21st century, social networks are subject of disillusionment. Like the rest of TICS, the hopes placed in them in relation to reason, deliberation and democracy seem to have been shattered. Nor does the other pole of modernity, freedom, seem to be satisfied with social networks. Heidegger and his approach to technology provides the metaphysical key to understanding the essence of social networks, and points out a way of access that is an ontological interpretation in a realist key, of which three of the fundamental aspects will be outlined.

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1. The Disenchantment of Technology

In the final years of his life, Umberto Eco emerged as a prominent critic of social networks and as a defender of journalism and books as enduring sources of knowledge and sociability. His remarks reflect a growing scepticism towards the epistemic and ethical implications of online communication:

Social networks give legions of imbeciles the right to speak, who previously only spoke in a bar over a glass of wine, without harming the community. They were immediately silenced; now, however, they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner. It is the invasion of idiots (*La Stampa*, 2015).

In a more recent interview, Jürgen Habermas also expressed his disenchantment with social media and the wider information society, while seeking to defend the small spaces of the Internet that still allow for genuine communication. As early as the 1980s, he warned that modern technology does not necessarily lead to an expansion of socially rational domains (Habermas, 1986), but rather carries within it the potential for closure. One of the German philosopher's central concerns is the impact of the information society on knowledge and democratic freedoms. For Habermas, technological rationality has ultimately subjugated genuine communicative action, rendering it subordinate not only to technology itself but also to the economic imperatives that sustain it, particularly the drive for productivity. This same analysis applies readily to social media. Habermas is not entirely pessimistic about the Internet, yet he cautions that 'the Internet distracts and dissipates' (Habermas, 2014).

Giovanni Sartori adopts a more pessimistic stance than the German philosopher. His reflections on television leave little room for Habermas's cautious optimism: 'Television radically modifies and impoverishes the cognitive apparatus of *homo sapiens*.'

Television then, and social media today, both appear to atrophy humanity's capacity to apprehend the reality of things. As Sartori warns, 'The *paideia* of video will turn Internet users into cultural illiterates who will quickly forget what little they learned in school and, therefore, cultural illiterates who will kill their time on the Internet, in the company of sporting, erotic, or small-hobby *soul mates*. For this type of user, the Internet is above all a splendid way to waste time, devoting it to trivialities' (Sartori, 1997).

Sartori, Eco, and Habermas are among the most significant intellectuals of the turn of the century, an era defined by the emergence and expansion of the web and digital networks. Their suspicions regarding social media are not recent; rather, they originated when the underlying logic of these platforms had already taken hold in other domains of the information society. One of the earliest and most influential analyses was Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1997), in which he underscored the progressive replacement of reality by the medium of television, thereby generating an alternative form of reality. The integration of artificial intelligence and its algorithms into social networks, as well as their availability to users through tools such as image filters or Grok in X, illustrates the extent to which the substitution of reality has not only become commonplace but has, in fact, culminated in the triumph of an alternative reality.

Baudrillard, in essence, confirms through the information society what Lyotard had already articulated in *The Postmodern Condition*: the end of modernity and the loss of faith in reason and its products as instruments of liberation and knowledge. Sartori, Eco and Habermas still belong to the modern optimistic spirit that unites reason, freedom and democracy, and it is precisely this orientation that underlies their sense of outrage. These thinkers make three fundamental claims. First, they identify the entirely novel character of modern technology and, in 2025, of social networks, artificial intelligence and augmented reality. Second, they emphasise the profound impact of these technologies on human life, either by generating a new species, *homo videns*, or by degrading humanity itself. Third, they argue that such technologies pose a genuine threat to the intellectual, moral, and political integrity of human beings. If the information society represents the culmination of scientific and technological progress, it simultaneously constitutes one of the greatest dangers to human reason and freedom.

2. Realitysim

Maurizio Ferraris has termed the replacement of reality by virtual reality *Realityism*, which is the substitution of reality with the *Reality Show* (Ferraris, 2013). According to the Italian philosopher,

realityism has three fundamental characteristics, which intersect and reinforce one another: juxtaposition, dramatisation and a dreamlike quality, all of which can also be observed in social networks. The first, juxtaposition, refers to the way content is presented in immediate succession, often combining highly disparate realities. On social media timelines, news of an earthquake or natural disaster may be followed instantly by a video of a championship football goal, a photograph of a bombing or a recipe. There is also a juxtaposition of realities in terms of their significance: without interruption, a natural disaster resulting in thousands of deaths may be followed by a fashion show, a multiple homicide, the weather forecast, and so forth. Social networks themselves have highlighted this banality with the expression *kitty videos*, which, among other effects, contributes to the exhaustion of our cognitive capacities (Fundación Telefónica, 2024).

The juxtaposition of content produces a dual effect. On the one hand, if all material is presented uniformly and homogeneously, no item appears more significant than any other. Reality becomes blurred, tending towards haziness and, in consequence, a sense of unreality. Within the juxtaposition itself, a moral equivalence emerges, as the mere contiguity of information and news precludes the existence of a criterion for its ethical evaluation.

Secondly, Ferraris (2013) speaks of dramatisation: 'something real is taken and dramatised with actors, transforming it into a semi-fiction'. Dramatisation is not a mere substitution of reality; it is not fiction. It involves the replacement of some of its parts, thereby disturbing the totality of its existence. Old Spanish uses the expression *half-truth* to denote this type of falsehood.

Crucially, dramatisation possesses an intrinsic purpose: exaggeration aimed at eliciting specific emotional responses from others. In the age of reality television, reality itself is insufficiently compelling; it must be transformed in order to capture the attention of contemporary audiences. Conversely, it may be argued that modern viewers lack the capacity to find reality intrinsically engaging; it must be mediated, manufactured, or reworked before it can be presented effectively.

Ferraris' *Realityism* takes its name from the reality shows that have dominated Western television schedules from the 1990s to the present day. Crucially, the significance of this phenomenon lies not in the dramatisation itself, but in the substitution of reality with drama: contemporary individuals learn history through miniseries on online platforms, videos on YouTube, shorts on TikTok, or posts on X.

The third element is what Ferraris terms *dreamification*, understood as the intensification and irrationalisation of dramatisation. Is the life depicted in reality television a dream or fiction? The author's distinction between fiction and dreams is pertinent: dreams are not merely fictional, but represent irrational fiction that engages or appeals to the human subconscious. In doing so, dreams transgress the very rules or conventions of reason and thought, immersing the individual in a fog of apparent inconsistency, yet a realm in which there is neither danger nor obligation.

Juxtaposition, the accumulation of representations of reality as a means of filling virtual space; dramatisation, the manipulation of reality to satisfy passions or emotions; and dreamification, the prioritisation of the irrational and the unconscious over the sense of reality, constitute the fundamental elements of Realityism, the latest phase of the information society, to which social networks undoubtedly belong. If this characterisation is accepted, these phenomena represent the ultimate failure of modern reason, as Lyotard anticipated: the postmodern condition signifies the end of enlightened reason, its pretensions, and its very consistency (Lyotard, 1997). This perspective clarifies the disillusionment with which the last thinkers of modern reason, Habermas, Eco, and Sartori, regarded the evolution of the information society, perceiving it as a potential threat to the human condition itself.

3. Between Reason and Freedom: Enlightenment and Its Discontents

If social media represents the ultimate manifestation of the Realityism Ferraris describes, it is necessary to consider its relationship with reality, with modern humanity's modes of knowing, and with the role it plays in contemporary life. The modern response to these questions is well known: scientific reason and technology are both the origin and the instrument of freedom, and ultimately of democracy. Enlightenment represents the liberation of humanity from its culpable immaturity, in accordance with Kant's well-known formulation (Kant, 2013). It marks the moment of human coming of age, characterised by the convergence of two elements: the full exercise of freedom and the full deployment of reason. The enlightened spirit therefore entails a dual affirmation: reason, guided by science, has

matured and is capable of promoting human freedom across all domains; and human freedom constitutes the ultimate objective of the awakening of reason.

Enlightenment therefore entails the knowledge of reason and freedom, advancing in solidarity within human development. Understood in this way, does the information society signify the triumph of knowledge and reason, or the triumph of freedom? Furthermore, to what extent can we speak of the triumph of the enlightened, rational, liberal, or libertarian spirit within the realm of social networks? These questions belong to the domain of the philosophy of history and, for our purposes, relate to the disillusionment of enlightened progress (Adorno, 2016; Aron, 1994)

Classical philosophy resolved the relationship between reason and will in a principle prior to both: the existence and meaning of these constituent elements of the human being are grounded in the order of the real, which possesses two defining characteristics: it is independent of human freedom, and it is accessible to reason. Human activity is expressed as science and *techne*, but above all as praxis: the constitution of the person through the exercise of their faculties (Aristotle, 2005). The spirit of the Enlightenment, by contrast, implies the inverse: the conditions of reality are determined by the subject, from whom the possibility of science and knowledge emerges. In this perspective, technology represents the natural extension of science, but, above all, it serves as the instrument through which development and progress are realised, both for the individual and for humanity as a whole. Accordingly, the information society and emerging technologies should constitute the pinnacle of this process of rationalisation, which is also presumed to be democratic.

This appears to be the source of disappointment for authors such as Sartori and Habermas: the failure of new technologies and the information society to advance human reason and freedom simultaneously. It is worth emphasising the core aspects of Sartori's critique. First, *homo videns* is not only less rational and less knowledgeable than previous conceptions of humanity, but is also undergoing a process of intellectual degradation. Second, freedom of choice has become a diminished form of freedom, increasingly divorced from reason.

Habermas offers a different perspective, focusing on the relationship between power and freedom. New technologies do not enhance rational deliberation or citizen freedom; rather, they have become instruments of political, economic, and industrial power (Habermas, 1986).

4. Social Networks: The Overman or the Last Man?

New technologies therefore appear to have disappointed or disillusioned the expectations placed upon them as generators of knowledge or as instruments for its dissemination. Their principal contribution lies in the facilitation of information exchange, which in turn may support the generation of more and better knowledge. Yet, they do not themselves create knowledge; rather, they enable collaboration. Their rationality is situated in discussion, deliberation, and the free exchange of ideas. Even when construed as a form of counterpower or democratic opposition, they remain 'new forms of social change and alternative politics, exploiting the opportunities afforded by horizontal communication networks' (Castells, 2008).

It is now common to identify three elements that account for the disenchantment of authors as diverse as Eco, Habermas, and Sartori, and that undermine the claim of social media to serve as a vehicle of reason. First, their expansion in both qualitative and quantitative terms is increasingly banal and superficial. Quantitatively, image-based networks dominate with videos, memes, images, and reels rapidly occupying a central role in their operation. Qualitatively, the content itself appears progressively degraded (Caldevilla, 2013). Third, critics frequently emphasise the disorderly, ruthless, and unrestrained nature of social media, which seems to render rationality and deliberation formally impossible.

If contemporary social media therefore cannot be regarded as an expression or instrument of human rationality and reasonableness, does it instead constitute the triumph not of reason, but of freedom? Complaints regarding the lack of regulation and standards, critiques of fake news and unfounded opinions, and the pervasive climate of aggression appear to support this interpretation.

Hence, our disillusionment with social media can be approached not from the conventional perspective of reason, but from that of freedom. Do social media constitute the triumph of the will of their participants, with technological rationality serving as an instrument in the service of the total

freedom of those involved? This question is fundamentally philosophical, returning us to the core of modernity and to the tension between reason and will that we have identified. The answer lies in recognising that the balance increasingly favours freedom over reason: social media is the domain of the former, not the latter.

The ultimate logic of this perspective leads to Schopenhauer, who sought to prioritise will over reason, and from him to the broader philosophical tradition culminating in postmodern thought, of which Lyotard represents both culmination and terminus. From this vantage point, social media is no longer a product of reason intended for knowledge and deliberation; it is an instrument of the will to power, of the fundamental drive that moves both the world and humanity. The absence of rules, the perpetual confrontation between participants, and the continuous exaggeration appear to transform one of the last great technological advances into a vehicle of unrestrained freedom.

The will to power in the modern and postmodern tradition is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, it entails the affirmation of the will of all elements of reality, including human individuals. On the other, it constitutes a blind force, an inescapable destiny that governs the world, compelling all beings to affirm both it and themselves. Freedom, rather than being conceived as a reliable and optimistic sphere of human existence, appears as a formidable demand, obliging individuals to acknowledge its tyrannical character.

Reason, together with its technical creations, exhausts its value as a principle of order and knowledge: the information society both enables and conceals the true nature of reality. This is why Nietzsche concludes that science and technology are a fiction, necessary, yet fictional, for human life and coexistence (Regueiro, 2024). For Nietzsche, authentic freedom consists in recognising the true nature of reality, which aligns with the vital and irrational ideals characteristic of tragedy rather than of science or philosophy. New technologies ultimately respond to this blind force, serving power more than will.

From this perspective, the defining features of Realityism, accumulation, dramatisation, and dreamlike qualities, can be more fully apprehended. The latter two, in particular, direct attention to elements external to reason, indeed fundamentally irrational: emotions, motivation, and intensified passions. Once again, the meaning of science and technology can only be grasped from outside them: artificial intelligence, data accumulation systems, and social networks are intelligible only when understood as products of an ultimate drive that is profoundly non-rational. In this sense, what appears most rational ultimately manifests as a striving for the authentic reality of life, whose characteristics are distinctly Dionysian.

If this is the case, then indignation or disappointment become meaningless: the question regarding information technologies is whether one accepts their nature, demystifies their meaning, and engages with them freely. Understood in this way, they cease to be merely a realm for the exchange of information, opinion, or knowledge. Rather, the true meaning of life is expressed through them: disorder, chaos, and struggle are elements that technological rationality ultimately conceals. Social networks, viewed in this light, are simply a product of will, or, more precisely, of power. By power, we do not mean the political and technological forms to which Habermas (1989) refers, such as rational economic and political domination, but the power of the will itself: passionate, untamed, and unrestrained.

Once their passionate and impulsive nature is acknowledged, rationalist disillusionment can diminish. Accepting what they are entails the affirmation and exercise of one's own will. Even new technologies can serve as instruments of liberation through recognition of the Dionysian nature of reality. Social networks thus constitute an ideal ecosystem for certain artistic practices. 'Surrealist images and quotations pertaining to the Dalinian universe are presented in a digitised form, so vivid and captivating that they become more engaging than a conventional picture book or any art history manual' (Elías-Zambrano & Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, 2024).

This characteristic lies at the heart of the ambiguous nature of scientific and technical rationality: it enables humanity to acquire secret knowledge of reality, thereby producing desacralisation and disillusionment. Science and technology permit the removal of the sacred and the realisation of the world's disenchantment, in accordance with Weber's well-known formulation: they allow not only the knowledge of the real, but also the creation and production of reality. In the context of social networks, these platforms expose reality and challenge scientific, political, or economic legitimacy: the very actors

and institutions that facilitate their development are, regardless of their power, rendered vulnerable, weakened, or threatened (Castells, 2008).

The value of knowledge is thus inverted. When all knowledge is widely available and universally accessible, participation in it becomes universal, and knowledge itself loses its singular relevance. What emerges as truly decisive is not reason, whose fruits are already widely shared, but will. Unlike knowledge, will cannot be shared; it is inherently individual. From this perspective, the age of social media is one of freedom, will, and power. It is therefore natural that social media should become the arena in which these elements predominate, and where imposition and struggle take precedence over knowledge and deliberation. Consequently, enlightened indignation and disillusionment clash with the very evolution of social media: it is only fitting, as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer assert, to acknowledge and accept the character that science and technology conceal.

Yet there remains one further step in this argument, evident once again in Nietzsche's thought, which introduces a new dimension to the claim that social networks are, and should be, the domain of freedom rather than reason. This possibility, however, may degenerate into its opposite: social media as the realm not of freedom and creativity, but of the pursuit of security. This is precisely what technology provides, the comfort of human reason, which is in effect the negation of life. From this perspective, technology constitutes the very negation of tragedy, and social networks, with their growing disorder and accumulation of interlinked controversies, amount to nothing more than pure appearance: an appearance that ultimately unmasks nothing.

This, and no other, characterises the last man. Following the death of God and the collapse of the promises and expectations of Western metaphysical culture, the last man is no longer capable of either appreciation or contempt. He arrives at a form of disenchantment, but not that of the enlightened individual; rather, it is the disenchantment of his successor, who reigns supreme on social media. 'It is best to no longer will, no longer value, no longer yearn or desire anything beyond the current order of the world. Better to close one's eyes and surrender, offering no resistance' (Nietzsche, 2018).

For Nietzsche, modern man is characterised by mediocrity: the inability to reaffirm his will and, with it, to transcend the limits of metaphysics and science, thereby reasserting himself within the artificial and enclosed realm of technification. If this is the case, the information society runs the obvious risk of becoming the refuge of the last man, with social media functioning as the domain in which he deceives himself, inflamed by a false sense of freedom. Far from constituting a realm in which the freedom and will of the *Übermensch* are genuinely expressed, or in which life manifests itself through disorder, violence, and chaos, social media instead represents the opposite: a domain in which these forces are tamed and appeased, confined to the purely superficial.

We have arrived at a surprising conclusion: the will to power and the irrationality inherent in social media ultimately imply conformism. The heroic influencer, the furious tweeter, or the hater with hundreds of thousands of followers does not rise above the mediocrity of the last man. This observation becomes clearer when we introduce an additional element, which is also typically modern and intimately connected to reason and freedom: security, the fundamental drive of modern man. From the perspective of freedom, the affirmation of free will inevitably generates a demand for security. Hobbes most sharply observes that the assertion of freedom entails the urgency of security (Herrero, 2012), giving rise to rules, laws, and norms that constrain freedom in order to guarantee it.

This is not the freedom Nietzsche envisions. The freedom that animates Nietzschean restlessness bears no relation to the pursuit of security; rather, it entails the acceptance of insecurity. The *Übermensch* is one who recognises that living in freedom necessarily involves renouncing security. In other words, to renounce security is to live in freedom.

To embrace freedom is to embrace tragedy. Here we encounter a counterpoint in Descartes. His relationship with the information society is immediate: the realm of mathematics, and of the self that exercises it, is the realm of security. Beyond this domain lie doubt and the unexpected, those phenomena that it is legitimate to question, according to Descartes (Descartes, 2010). Only geometry permits certain progress in knowledge. From this perspective, computer technology represents the Cartesian technique par excellence: it constitutes the most advanced domain of mathematisation and formal logic. In Spanish, computer devices are termed *ordenadores*, literally 'that which orders, classifies, or organises'

various elements; in English, the term is even more expressive: computers. To compute is to add, subtract, or perform any form of mathematical operation.

Computing reduces reality to ones and zeros, thereby creating a realm of mathematical certainty. Its limits are clear and precise, allowing navigation with apparent freedom and confidence, provided it is understood in the manner Nietzsche despises: as a constrained, controlled domain, supported by a mathematical environment that negates risk and, consequently, life itself. Social media, despite its apparent disorder and the unfolding of the most Dionysian passions, ultimately constitutes a set of ones and zeros, a perfect mathematisation that restricts true freedom and replaces it with mere appearance. The last man thus conflates the realm of ones and zeros, exemplified by platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook, with the realm of genuine freedom. This is nothing more than pure appearance (Benanti, 2020).

The last man is not merely the individual who fails to transcend his miserable condition; he is one who remains oblivious to it, even living under the illusion that technology enables him to overcome his state of impoverishment, through reason or through freedom. This represents the most troubling predicament: humanity remains enslaved to an instrument while believing itself to be free. Social media, which allows anyone to become a focal point through hyperbole or exaggeration, provides the will only with an illusory freedom.

5. Death and Renewal in Philosophy

It appears that we have returned to our initial point. The disillusionment of enlightened reason with social media, in relation to shared information, common knowledge, and rational deliberation, has led us first to recognise its failure. This failure has, in turn, prompted the search for an answer not in reason, but in will or freedom. The chaos, creativity, and insecurity that seem to prevail in these platforms might be interpreted as the triumph of will and power. Yet life within new technologies ultimately presents itself as apparent, constrained, and secured by computer models, algorithms, and, above all, the most rigorous mathematical rationality.

Among the two authors we have cited, Nietzsche and Habermas, the figure of Martin Heidegger stands out, to whom it is useful to return briefly. Unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger is a philosopher in the strict sense, seeking to elucidate existence not solely through art or tragedy, but through a rigorous philosophical investigation of being. Unlike Habermas, Heidegger pursues a metaphysical account capable of explaining, beyond convention and dialogue, the very texture of reality. His world may appear distant from the domain of TikTok, Facebook, or Tinder: it is the world of the atomic bomb, mechanisation, and industrialisation. What concerns us here, however, relates to two significant aspects: first, the endeavour to discern the essence of social networks beyond the networks themselves; and second, the imperative to develop a metaphysics of existence that enables the understanding, and ultimately the liberation, of humanity from technology (Heidegger, 2021).

With regard to the first point, what characterises modern technology is its accumulative and cumulative nature: it integrates previous technologies while simultaneously tending to develop autonomously, following the logic of 'if it can be done, it will be done' (Heidegger, 2021, 1966). This implies that technological progress no longer depends solely on humanity, but increasingly on technology itself and the possibilities it presents. Consequently, the essence of technology cannot be discerned from technology alone: it does not explain itself or its role in revealing reality. Observing it merely as a means is insufficient; technology does not appear to serve reason, freedom, or will in a satisfactory way. Understanding its function in the unveiling of being therefore requires analysis beyond technology, in the relationship between the being of the world and *Dasein*, or being-there. In contemporary terms, this limitation is reflected in the inability of social networks to account for themselves.

With regard to the latter point, if philosophy no longer exists, Heidegger concludes with characteristic severity, the task remains to keep life open to philosophy's return. The absence of philosophy does not imply the absence of philosophers: the contemporary era has witnessed a proliferation of philosophers navigating social media with ease. Yet Heideggerian logic points precisely towards transcending technology (Van Leeuwen, 2009). The Realityism with which we began is, in fact, the very negation of philosophy, occurring when the question of existence or being becomes impossible.

To interrogate the essence of technology is therefore to question its role in revealing truth, a task that requires stepping outside of it and observing it externally. This underpins Heidegger's well-known and enigmatic 1966 statement, 'Only a God can save us,' which ultimately signals the necessity of understanding technology from the standpoint of an ontology of being.

To consider social networks from an ontology of being entails abandoning the dual ambition of approaching them simultaneously through reason and knowledge, and through freedom and will. As we have observed, such attempts inevitably fail, for their essence lies neither in serving as instruments of enlightened reason nor in expressing freedom and the will to power. Neither perspective suffices to account for them. With Heidegger, we recognise the necessity of looking beyond social media to apprehend its true nature; ontologically, however, we can advance one step further than the philosopher from Messkirch. It is on this basis that we outline the preliminary elements of a realistic ontology of social media.

Social networks are neither isolated nor sudden phenomena. Their existence forms part of the broader trajectory of technological development, which situates them within the framework of Heideggerian reflection on technology. In this sense, interrogating the essence of social networks parallels Heidegger's examination of modern technology, industrialisation, and atomic energy. For the present purposes, it suffices to emphasise a triple character: social networks are accumulated, accumulators, and cumulative.

Social networks are accumulated because they are not a sudden phenomenon. Their existence depends on what preceded them: the development of the Internet, email and messaging services, websites, blogs and forums, cable and on-demand television, and, ultimately, social networks themselves. They are not creations *ex nihilo*; rather, they constitute the latest manifestation of human interaction through technological networks. As such, they are the product of prior technological achievements: they arise from the accumulation of knowledge, techniques, and experiences. Their existence is therefore indebted to all that came before.

In addition to being accumulated, social networks are also accumulators: everything that preceded them persists within them and forms an integral part of their nature. Social networks incorporate the logic of blogs, forums, and websites. Moreover, these antecedent forms have not disappeared but are embedded in social networks through screenshots, links, and references. In this way, social networks accumulate and preserve all that has contributed to their development. Metaphysically, they are caused by these prior elements, and without them they would lack substantive content.

Social networks are cumulative because they possess a forward-looking dynamic: they evolve independently, propelled by technological developments that drive their progression in specific directions. Forums gave way to blogs, blogs to Facebook, and Facebook to Twitter, WhatsApp, and, most recently, applications for generating video, photo, and other content based on the networks' own material, often facilitated by artificial intelligence. Social networks thus exhibit a mode of behaviour inherent to their very nature.

The philosopher Markus Gabriel has emphasised the unreality of social networks: from a physical perspective, they consist merely of concrete elements, cables, servers, satellite signals, computers, and various devices. In this sense, they appear to lack independent existence. The paradox, however, is that despite this absence of autonomous material being, social networks nevertheless exist. What kind of existence, then, do they possess? While Heidegger offers a valuable starting point, classical metaphysics provides the most satisfactory framework for addressing this question. Three fundamental aspects of the metaphysics of being allow us to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in this inquiry.

Firstly, as networks, their reality corresponds to what classical philosophers would term *accidental*: their existence is possible only through substantial realities to which they contribute a relational character. Aristotle defines accident as 'that which is found in a being and can be affirmed with truth, but which is nevertheless neither necessary nor ordinary,' adding that 'the accident occurs, exists, but has no cause in itself, and only exists by virtue of something else' (Aristotle, 2023). Networks thus constitute a reality and possess a form of existence of their own, yet their definition corresponds to being *in another*: their existence depends existentially on the elements with which they are related.

This entails, first, that as relational entities, networks cannot transcend the beings connected through them. This is by no means insignificant: from an ontological perspective, the network genuinely inheres

in the related elements, exerting a real and effective influence. Yet this influence pertains only to a specific aspect of their existence, rather than their entirety or that of other elements. In other words, if the related beings, those with substantial existence, are open to reality in an immediate fashion, networks mediate this openness through the related beings. The principle is straightforward, yet of profound significance: as relational entities, social networks presuppose prior substances or natures upon which they depend, the existence of which transcends and sustains them.

Secondly, accidents refer existentially and essentially to a substance: without the substance, the accident lacks authentic existence. While accidents, as we have observed, can exert real influence by modifying the substance to some extent, as Sartori has emphasised, they do not alter its substantial nature. In the case of human beings, this substance possesses two key characteristics. First, it functions as the efficient cause, as Heidegger notes in relation to technology: humans create the technological artefacts that may ultimately threaten their own existence (Heidegger, 2021). Second, human beings possess a rational and volitional nature, which renders them open to the world.

Thirdly, there is an additional consideration: rational substances do not exist in isolation. They are inherently open to the world; in Heideggerian terms, they are existentially open. This openness underpins Heidegger's insistence on transcending mere technology, for nothing is more perilous than *Dasein* permanently absorbed by one of its own creations. The existential challenge posed by social networks lies in the conviction that they can exhaust human beings, who are perpetually engrossed in them. Introducing the concept of *essence* alongside *existence* enables us to address this difficulty: the rational and free nature of humans is intrinsic to their being, regardless of whether it is exercised or directed towards truth. Human rationality is potentially oriented toward the act of knowing and is distinct from its actualisation in practice (Thomas Aquinas, 2023).

6. Conclusion

Social networks represent the latest development in one of humanity's most significant technological endeavours: information technology. Contemporary reflection on them is marked, however, by unease and frustration. They appear to fall short of the expectations placed upon them by philosophers, politicians, and society at large. They disappoint those who perceive in them the triumph of scientific reason and the ideal of collaboration, deliberation, and communal engagement; yet they also fail to satisfy those who seek a realm of excess, vitality, and the instinctive reality of human life, for, at its core, social media remains a domain of security governed by technical and mathematical rationality.

The essence of social networks must be sought beyond their immediate existence, which entails questioning the meaning of their being. This can only be achieved by examining their relationship with the broader context of existence. The question of social networks can be approached solely from a metaphysical perspective, as Heidegger asserts. Yet, if this inquiry is confined to existential reflection alone, it reaches an impasse. A metaphysical approach that revisits the question of existence must go beyond existentialism, introducing the distinction between essence and existence. The concept of essence or substance allows us to identify the immutable and permanent characteristics of human action and knowledge, which, even when shaped or distorted by the use of social media, do not undermine human existence.

Accordingly, an ontology of social media begins with three fundamental elements. First, social networks do not possess independent being but exist accidentally: their true meaning can only be apprehended by considering the substance to which their existence refers. Second, while accidents are inherent to this substance, they do not define it; they neither compromise its nature nor its essence, nor, indeed, its existence. Third, the reality from which social networks arise transcends them, whether conceived as the pursuit of truth or, in classical metaphysical terms, as knowledge.

Understood in this way, social networks, like information technologies more broadly, are properly situated within the totality of the order in which they emerge.

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