Simulated reality and real principles

On Leibniz, Baudrillard and the code breaching

Leibnitz Hannover

Leibniz monument in Hannover

Almost everything has been turned into a code.

Almost everyone is at risk of being turned into a code.

According to Jean Baudrillard, author of Simulacra and simulations, this is due to the fact that all values have been magnetized by codes. He says: “This is the characteristic effect of the code, which is based everywhere on the principle of neutralization and indifference”[1]. What does this mean? Which code is he talking about? In order to understand this, prior to anything else, we must ask ourselves: what hides behind those computers’ screens we are so often faced with? What hides behind these mirrors which have the power to show us what we need or like to see? Nothing else than numerical sequences. Codes, indeed; and, though many would hardly believe it, such sequences are mostly made by zeros and ones, streaming by.

Gottfried W. Leibniz is the most notorious mathematician and philosopher who deeply inquired into such sequences and into the theory on their combinations commonly known as the binary system. In works like Dissertation on the art of combinations[2] and particularly in the very concise Explanation of Binary Arithmetic[3], the German philosopher did not confine himself to outlining all applications of such system, but also claimed that he had found the key to one of the most ancient and mysterious books in history: the Chinese I-Ching with its sixty-four hexagrams.

In both works, Leibniz tried to define his theoretical principles in order to found all of his explanations on an indisputable certainty. Unfortunately, his reasoning sometimes sounds unsteady and unable to fully clarify the symbolical meaning implied in the relation between zero and one, as his contradictory conception of infinite numbers shows[4]. Leibniz focused on the arithmetic aspect of the binary numerical sequences, partly disregarding the metaphysical value of the two most basic figures and, unfortunately, depicting the I-Ching itself as if it only were something similar to a time-table[5].

However, for better or for worse, Leibniz’s time-table turned out to be a ground shaking development during our times. Although it may sound like science fiction, it is a matter of fact that out of such limited knowledge[6], contemporary technology has created a whole universe by connecting binary sequences to all those data which gave rise to the contemporary virtual reality as we know it. Evidently, in such conditions the symbolic meaning of numbers seems to be completely lost and forgotten as figures are only needed for the creation of a substratum language meant to reproduce, and sometimes manipulate, images and messages[7].

This is the ground on which the simulation of our times has been built: numbers deprived of their symbolic meaning and considered only from a quantitative and practical point of view.

Baudrillard, whose perspective is less mathematical than Leibniz’s and more focused on semiotics and philosophy of language, has apparently detected all of the dangers connected to a simulated and manipulated reality, to the point that he says: “All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this gamble on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange – God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not real, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an interrupted circuit without reference or circumference”[8].

As we can see, according to Baudrillard, there seems to be no way out of such simulated reality: it is a simulation which aims at invading our way of thinking, at depriving us of any true contemplative purpose. If “God himself can be simulated” and if “the whole system becomes weightless”, then what are we other than puppets, lost and confused, in a meaningless show? Fortunately the power of simulation is less strong than what the French philosopher believes. God cannot be simulated for the simple reason that mystery itself cannot be simulated. The mystery of divine and angelical intelligence can be hinted at by a sign, of course, but it cannot be confined to whatsoever number or code[9].

Why did not Baudrillard realise that a simulated reality is trapped within the same limits of its own virtuality? Because he detected the dangers related to simulation but did not find the main trick behind such simulation.

Step by step, this point will be made as clear as possible.

Simulation can be complete only when it leaves no blank spaces, no doubts, no aspirations unsatisfied, but as long as we commit ourselves in the effort of giving reality an interpretation and our souls call for purification and a deeper vision of life, it means that simulation was not enough, it means that we are still walking towards a higher ground, trying to ascend and listen to the purest among the intelligences.

Such relation between the sign, our own understanding and the divine intellect which has been debated for so long throughout the history of Western culture, is incisively described in the Divine Comedy, whereas Beatrice says to Dante: “To speak thus is adapted to your mind,/ Since only through the sense it apprehendeth / What then it worthy makes of intellect./ On this account the Scripture condescends/ Unto your faculties, and feet and hands/ To God attributes, and means something else…”[10].

In this sense the gradual transfiguration of souls we find in Dante’s Paradiso would be of great help in order to understand what here we are dealing with. Actually Dante opens his Paradise with these words: “The glory of Him who moveth everything/ Doth penetrate the universe, and shine/ In one part more and in another less./ Within that heaven which most his light receives / Was I…”[11]. This means that reality cannot be reduced to a standard reality, to a universal simulacrum: things cannot be reduced to mere quantities as all beings reveal their nature by moving closer, if they do so, to the Principle of all enlightenment.

Sadly, nowadays’ predominant rationality and sentimentalism prevents many people from thinking in a spiritual way therefore, lacking any trust-worthy principles, they tend to believe that the simulated reality is the only reality. For the same reason it is widely doubted that any transcendental solution can ever solve such problems as the ones we are facing here.

All we can do then is to ask ourselves if there can ever be something that cannot be codified. Which means: is there something that can save us from being turned into empty creatures, exploited by a virtual system?

In regard to this Baudrillard answers: “Perhaps only death, the reversibility of death, is of a higher order than the code. Only symbolic disorder can breach the code”[12]. Perhaps death could be of a higher order, as the codified system lives on visible and apparently living simulacra, but who can guarantee this? There can be a code for death also if the system decides to find one. Actually here Baudrillard reaches the top of confusion by saying: “Only symbolic disorder can breach the code”. How can this be true? Codes literally feed on “symbolic disorder”! The language of codes has been created on an exclusively practical use of numbers. Numbers seen as quantities, not as symbols: here it is the “symbolic disorder”! Therefore, no “symbolic disorder” will ever breach any code, more likely it will maintain it….

What can really breach the code then?

As we saw before in relation to Dante’s Paradise, an all-inclusive simulation cannot be something feasible. Everything and everyone comes near to its own full realization by purifying himself and by ascending to a higher degree of spirituality: this is the reason why we can surely say that there cannot be any simulation in spiritual life.

Spiritual heart’s enlightenment, the so called state of grace, does not depend on any virtual reality. In the Gospels we read: “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”[13]. Well, such an “abundance” cannot be pretended: no code, no numerical sequence, no simulation can mime it. Such “abundance”, if truly inspired, breaches the code; eternal life breaches the code as it links us to an absolute and boundless Infinity which, as such, cannot be reduced to any codified simulation[14].

As we have already seen talking about Leibniz, unfortunately the modern western mentality ended by mistaking the idea of undetermined for the idea of infinite, coming to forget in the meantime spiritual Infinity. From Leibniz to Baudrillard, we can clearly see how all metaphysical principles have been forgotten in favour of a materialistic and simulated conception of reality.

Gustave Doré - Dante Alighieri - Inferno - Canto VII - Hoarders and Wasters

Gustave Doré – Dante Alighieri – Inferno – Canto VII – Hoarders and Wasters

Now that the point of no return has been reached, it clearly shows how the main clash concerning the contemporary culture is the one between quantity and quality, between the obsession for an increasing quantity – quantity of whatever: money, data, news, pictures, thoughts etc. – and the quality of a unique and irreplaceable spiritual life: as what we call progress came to be nothing else than the collective and spread out idolatry of quantity to the detriment of our full spiritual realization.

Someone might ask why we should ever worry about this. Well, the question is quite easy to answer: because, now more than ever, we risk becoming bland souls: simulated characters with no destiny to fulfil and who has some real value in him or her should not accept this[15].

It is of the highest importance then to notice how such war between quantity and spiritual life had been largely forecast in the Gospels. Not by chance all Jesus’ parables speak of such clash: the ninety-nine sheep left in favour of the lost and joyously found one[16], all the goods sold in order to buy the field under which the pearl of the Heavenly Kingdom is hidden[17] and so on.

Nowadays such teachings are revealing all of their depth.

We are not saying that numbers cannot be used in a symbolical sense, all the contrary, the Gospels themselves do this, but symbolical and quantitative meaning are quite different things: the first one brings to a deeper comprehension of heavenly mysteries, while the second one …in the best of cases… brings to simulation. Hence all parables which are found in the Gospels mean to show how obsession for quantity stands in the way of soul’s purification and in the way of a deeper insight into the most mysterious aspects of life and existence.

We can now clearly see how only quantity can be codified, sold and automatically replaced, while it cannot be so as to the inner spiritual spark whose power to enlighten men is unique and irreplaceable. This is the reason why all contemporary materialistic and anti-spiritual philosophic trends, today largely predominant even there where one would least expect it, cannot be reconciled with any real transcendental purpose. How shall we recognize these trends? By the fact that they always deny the centrality of a spiritual aspiration and of a faithful destiny: that aspiration and that destiny which are often symbolized by a radiant heart.

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NOTES

[1] Symbolic exchange and death, p. 128, in Selected Writings, Mark Poster’s Edition.

[2] Original title: Dissertatio de arte combinatoria (1666).

[3] Original title: De progressione dyadica (1703).

[4] Actually it is quite difficult to understand what Leibniz means by sentences like the following: “In any number of given things whatever, even infinite, we can understand what is true of all, since we can enumerate them all individually, at least in an infinite time” (Dissertation on the art of combinations, I. Demonstration of the existence of God). These conclusions sound quite arbitrary, as both enumeration and time cannot be infinite, but only indefinite. How shall we ever enumerate infinity, when infinity as such stands beyond any quantity and number?

[5] Apparently, Leibniz ended by considering his two works on the binary system quite immature. Actually in a mail exchange with Jean Bernoulli he had already started questioning his own conclusions. All the limits of Leibniz’s theories have been exposed in The Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus (1946, French edition), the last work by René Guénon. It must be here highlighted the fact that Guénon, after a life dedicated to the traditional knowledge and spirituality, decided to focus his last work on the mathematical theory and purposely on Leibniz.

[6] There is not derogatory intent in these words: Leibniz’s knowledge, especially about the I-Ching book, can be defined as limited for the simple fact that the sixty-four hexagrams do not only deal with mathematical abstractions, being such a very particular application of their potentiality. Apart from this, it seems that at first all Leibniz aimed at with such ‘discoveries’ on binary system was to make calculations easier to scientists and students.

[7] The fact that such a language has been set on the two basic numbers 0 and 1 can be obviously considered from countless points of view. In any case, it should not be a surprise to anyone that a whole universe, though a digital one, has been created out of it: numbers have such power. However, this is not our concern here as this is not an article about the technological applications as such, but about the way many people came to conceive the digital reality and the lack of consciousness which make them fall into the illusion of simulation as the only and real reality.

[8] Simulacra and Simulations, p. 170, Op cit.

[9] Someone could object that the Jewish Scriptures have a code related to the Divinity, but the Jewish Tetragrammaton is not simply a code, but a Holy Name.

[10] Paradise IV, 40-45.

[11] Paradise I, 1-5.

[12] Symbolic exchange and death, p. 122, Op cit.

[13] Matthew 12, 34.

[14] It is widely believed nowadays, even by famous scholars, that both Testaments bereave of any idea of an infinite and transcendental Divinity. Despite of this, I have never heard them speaking or writing about these words said by King Solomon: “But will God indeed dwell in the earth? Even Heaven and the highest Heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (First Book of the Kings 8, 27).

[15] About this last aspect, it is quite interesting what Walter Benjamin wrote about the disappearance of the aura. See The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility, particularly in the third paragraph.

[16] Matthew, 18, 12-14 and Luke 15, 3-7.

[17] Matthew, 13, 45-46.