

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE DURING THE PANDEMIC: DANCING IN THE NOOSPHERE<sup>1</sup>

FILOSOFÍA APLICADA DURANTE LA PANDEMIA: BAILANDO  
EN LA NOOSFERA

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**Abstract:** This essay reflects on widespread non-medical problems posed by the pandemic, especially its intensification of the transplanting of human consciousness into virtual domains. Resuscitating Teilhard de Chardin's 1922 conception of the noosphere—"the thinking envelope of earth"—we illustrate how the digital tradition that Chardin anticipated emerged from the oral, written and visual traditions preceding it. We identify some perceptual defects of the noosphere, in terms of their deleterious effects on cognition and socialization. We also assess some epistemic and political difficulties that ensue from attempts to control the "power source" of the noosphere, namely consciousness itself. Finally, we cite brief examples from Indian philosophy, Greek mythology, Victorian literature, Kabbalistic lore, and cosmo-biological speculation, all of which offer explanatory frameworks for interpreting the pandemic. Implicitly and explicitly, this address calls philosophical practitioners to action, as both COVID-19 and its accelerated population of the noosphere raise a plethora of non-medical yet vital human concerns. Philosophical counselors are positioned

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally read on January 16, 2022, as the Valedictory Address at the International Conference on Philosophical Counseling, hosted by the University of Delhi and the Indian Council of Philosophical Research.

to help humanity re-conceive and therefore reinvent itself, in constructive pathways, during these trying times. And to that end, we need to adapt our philosophical practices to the noosphere as well; for it, like philosophy herself, is a product of rational consciousness.

**Key words:** COVID-19 pandemic, noosphere, consciousness, digital tradition, epistemic tyranny

**Resumen:** Este ensayo reflexiona sobre los problemas no médicos generalizados que plantea la pandemia, especialmente su intensificación del trasplante de la conciencia humana a dominios virtuales. Resucitando la concepción de la noosfera de Teilhard de Chardin de 1922, “la envoltura pensante de la tierra”, ilustramos cómo la tradición digital que Chardin anticipó surgió de las tradiciones orales, escritas y visuales que la precedieron. Identificamos algunos defectos de percepción de la noosfera, en términos de sus efectos nocivos sobre la cognición y la socialización. También evaluamos algunas dificultades epistémicas y políticas que surgen de los intentos de controlar la “fuente de poder” de la noosfera, a saber, la conciencia misma. Finalmente, citamos breves ejemplos de la filosofía india, la mitología griega, la literatura victoriana, la tradición cabalística y la especulación cosmobiológica, todos los cuales ofrecen marcos explicativos para interpretar la pandemia. Implícita y explícitamente, este discurso llama a los practicantes de la filosofía a la acción, ya que tanto el COVID-19 como su población acelerada de la noosfera plantean una plétora de preocupaciones humanas no médicas pero vitales. Los consejeros filosóficos están posicionados para ayudar a la humanidad a reconcebirse y, por lo tanto, reinventarse a sí misma, en caminos constructivos, durante estos tiempos difíciles. Y con ese fin, también necesitamos adaptar nuestras prácticas filosóficas a la noosfera; porque, como la filosofía misma, es un producto de la conciencia racional.

**Palabras clave:** pandemia del COVID-19, noosfera, conciencia, tradición digital, tiranía epistémica

## Introduction

As we enter January 2022, our third year of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we are able to reflect on its emergent transformations of the global village—for better and worse—and to inquire as to how

these transformations are effecting the growth and evolution of philosophical practice.

No matter which dimension of the pandemic's effects we explore, be it medical, psychological, educational, socio-economic, or political, we immediately perceive that applied philosophy has enhanced relevance, whether in descriptive, interpretative, or indeed prescriptive roles.

This essay will focus on an overarching technological feature of the pandemic's effects, which has operated and continues to operate significantly in all the foregoing dimensions. That feature is the virtualization of all possible formerly real human transactions and interactions, in tandem with the intensification of virtual transactions and interactions previously in place.

Even prior to the pandemic, the digital revolution had been transforming human self-conception and human interaction in unprecedented ways, not all of them salutary or conducive to well-being. For example, the malign effects of social media on young people particularly, and the brazen censorship of non-conformist or dissident views by tech oligarchs, were already being noted and protested by free-thinkers, public intellectuals, consumer advocates, and assorted pundits (including yours truly).<sup>2</sup>

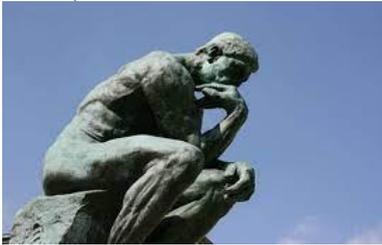
These and kindred issues have taken a temporary “back-seat” to the exigencies of the pandemic, which at the same time has fostered their ongoing exacerbation. Operationally, it amounts to this: the pandemic has displaced a significant proportion of formerly “real” human interactions and transactions—“real” meaning embodied

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<sup>2</sup> For deleterious effects of social media on youth, see e.g. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437> <https://turbofuture.com/internet/effects-of-social-media-on-our-youth>. For big tech censorship, see e.g. <https://www.heritage.org/technology/commentary/big-techs-conservative-censorship-inescapable-and-irrefutable>; Josh Hawley, *The Tyranny of Big Tech* (Chicago: Regnery Publishing, 2021).

beings inhabiting physical spaces in synchronous times—to “virtual” human interactions and transactions—“virtual” meaning disembodied beings inhabiting digital spaces at de-synchronized or asynchronous times.

Said a different way, the vital forces that formerly animated and infused real human interactions and transactions—forces such as physical presence, personal gravitas, emotional palpability, sensory impression, pheromonic reception, body language, social engagement—have all been sublimated into virtual versions that pale beside the real. Descartes' cogito, itself an irreconcilable divorce of mind from body, has been further impoverished to “Pipo ergo sum” (“I tweet, therefore I am”).<sup>3</sup>



**Cogito ergo sum.  
I think therefore I  
am.**

**Pipo ergo sum.  
I tweet therefore I  
am.**



**Figure 1.** Cogito versus Pipo

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<sup>3</sup> In Latin, *pipare* (to tweet) connotes the twittering of small birds in the trees.

There is a name for this region into which humanity has been summarily displaced, and it was coined exactly one century ago (in 1922) by the prescient French Jesuit and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He called it “the noosphere”, and defined it as “the thinking envelope of earth,” or “the sphere of consciousness”.<sup>4</sup> For Chardin, the noosphere has theological and teleological implications. His Russian friend, scientist Vladimir Vernadsky, developed his own interpretation of the noosphere, which he reconceived in a less mystical and more scientific light.<sup>5</sup>

The noosphere supervenes on the earth's biosphere, which itself supervenes on the geosphere. Simply stated, the geosphere is a bedrock whose constitutive elements and fortuitous solar orbit (the so-called “Goldilocks Zone”) were conducive to the emergence of the biosphere. The biosphere is a region overlapping habitable parcels of the geosphere's land, sea and air, in which myriads of life-forms have evolved, amidst alternating proliferations and mass-extinctions. The noosphere is a medium of shared consciousness that emerged from the rational consciousness of the most conspicuous of these terrestrial life-forms, namely ourselves.

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<sup>4</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Teilhard\\_de\\_Chardin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Teilhard_de_Chardin); <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noosphere>; de Chardin, P.T. *The Phenomenon of Man*, William Collins & Sons Co. Ltd., Glasgow, 1952.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wikipedia: “Vladimir Vernadsky” available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir\\_Vernadsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Vernadsky), last access November, 20, 2022.



**Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**  
1881 - 1955

French Jesuit paleontologist,  
theologian, philosopher and teacher

First mentioned the “noosphere” in  
his 1922 essay *Cosmogogenesis*.

The noosphere is a “conscious  
membrane” or “thinking envelope”  
of the earth.

For Chardin, the noosphere has  
theological and teleological  
implications.



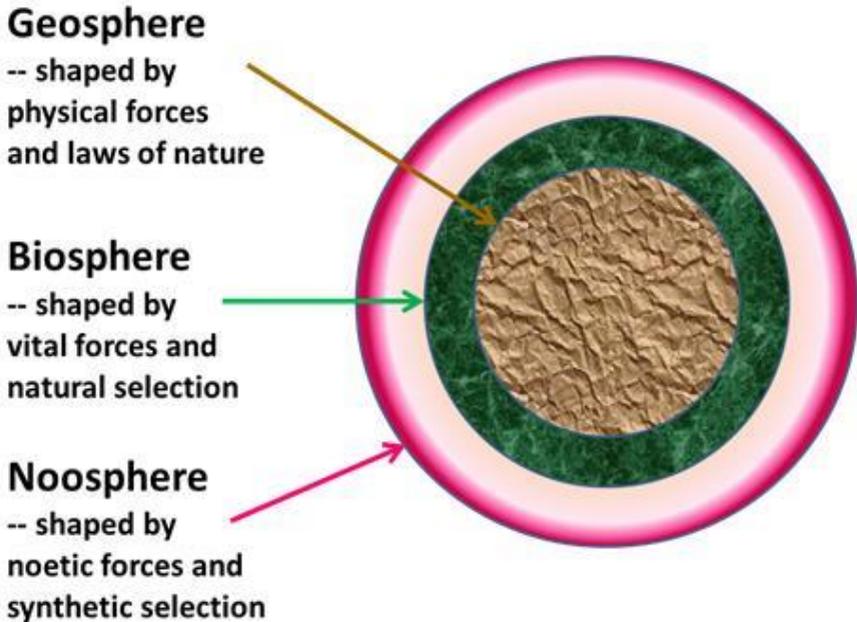
**Vladimir Vernadsky**  
1863 - 1945

Russian scientist and philosopher.

Fields of study included geology,  
crystallography, mineralogy,  
geochemistry, radiogeology, biology,  
biogeochemistry, philosophy.

He met de Chardin in Paris, and  
developed a scientific interpretation  
of the noosphere.

**Figure 2.** Chardin & Vernadsky



**Figure 3.** The three spheres

Before pursuing our analysis of the noosphere and the emerging role of philosophical practice within it, we would do well to ponder the vastly different time-scales on which these three spheres are configured. The geosphere and its solar systemic neighborhood required billions of years to evolve to the point where they could support a viable biosphere. While the oldest sentient beings and their descendents (e.g. sharks and rays) have endured for a few hundred million years, the primates are only tens of millions of years old; *Homo sapiens* only two hundred thousand or so years. The noosphere itself was christened (or defined) only a century ago, and it required the digital revolution some decades later to begin to populate it. Since then, its expansion and population have

grown exponentially, and have yet to attain their limiting potentials.

Consider that the first email was sent by Roy Tomlinson in 1971<sup>6</sup>, and by 2020 more than 300 billion emails per day were being sent: amounting to more than one trillion emails that year.<sup>7</sup> Consider that the first website was launched in 1991<sup>8</sup>, and that by 2021 there were 1.88 billion websites in existence.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the size, scope and scale of operations of the so-called “FANG”—tech tyrannosaurs Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, Google—are all increasing exponentially. In December 2019 there were 10 million participants per day, world-wide, in Zoom meetings.<sup>10</sup> In December 2021, there were 300 million Zoom participants per day, an astronomical increase of 2900% in two years.<sup>11</sup> The average American is now spending 5-6 hours per day on a mobile device<sup>12</sup>, running apps that interface with all the foregoing platforms among countless others.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Wikipedia: “Ray Tomlinson” available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray\\_Tomlinson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Tomlinson), last access November, 20, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://earthweb.com/how-many-emails-are-sent-per-day/>, last access November, 20, 2022.

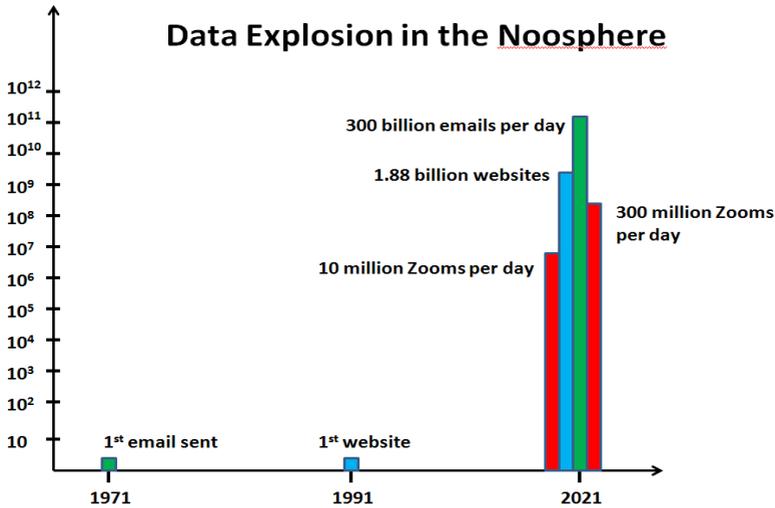
<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://www.history.com/news/the-worlds-first-web-site>, last access November, 20, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <https://www.statista.com/chart/19058/number-of-websites-online/>, last access November, 20, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1253972/zoom-daily-meeting-participants-global/>, last access November, 20, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. <https://www.matthewwoodward.co.uk/work/zoom-user-statistics/>, last access November, 20, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1224510/time-spent-per-day-on-smartphone-us/>, last access November, 20, 2022.



**Figure 4.** Data explosion in the noosphere

NB: The vertical scale is logarithmic; each increment is 10x greater than the previous one.

So one net effect of the pandemic has been to further exponentiate the growth of all these digital technologies, which have in very short order fundamentally and in some cases irreversibly altered the ways in which humans interact, both with themselves and with others. In a most fundamental sense, the virtualization of a slate of formerly real-life and real-time human interactions amounts to the teleportation of human consciousness and its shared expression out of the geosphere (i.e. beyond the body), out of the biosphere (i.e. beyond the embodied social matrix), and lock, stock and barrel into the noosphere. This “thinking envelope of earth” is a medium that transmits, receives, reflects, filters, curates, mines, tracks, exploits and algorithmizes digitized emanations of disembodied and de-socialized consciousnesses themselves.

The rapidity of the noosphere's evolution, and the transformations of consciousness it is occasioning and also driving, are altogether

unprecedented in our species. If *Homo sapiens* is of the order of 200,000 years of age, then all but the last 5,500 years or so of human cultural evolution were based on oral traditions.<sup>13</sup>

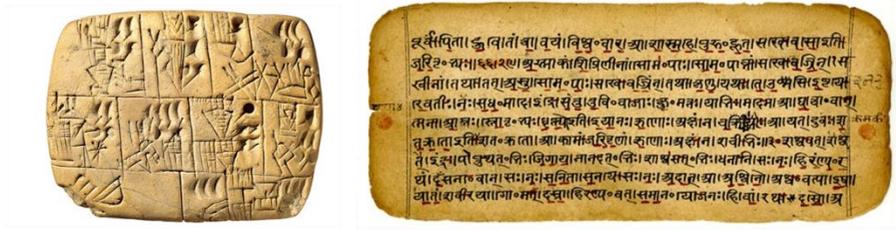


**Figure 5.** The Oral Tradition, the first mode of cultural evolution, established *circa* 200,000 BCE

These were remarkably stable if technologically non-innovative traditions, but they were suddenly superseded, and in fairly short order, by the prodigious written tradition and its incessant innovations, eventually including the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

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<sup>13</sup> The earliest written traditions are thought to have emerged between 4000 and 3000 B.C.E. See <https://www.britannica.com/art/folk-literature>, last access November, 20, 2022.



**Figure 6.** The Written Tradition: second mode of cultural evolution, established circa 3500 BCE

The written tradition in turn was largely superseded by the visual tradition, compassed by the invention of movies initially and then television preeminently. Prior to television, families used to gather around the radio, listening together to their favorite broadcasts, in a continuation of the oral tradition. But following the mass-production of televisions in the 1950s, and the proliferation of channels and programs, TV supplanted radio as the technological focal point of family gatherings. Note that television did not render radio extinct; the oral tradition still survives in the shadow of the visual, but in diminished capacity. Lately it is making a comeback via audio books. Neither did the visual tradition render the written tradition extinct; book and magazine publishing industries continued to flourish, for a while, alongside television and radio.

Listeners to radio or viewers of TV could find themselves interrupted by an encyclopedia salesman knocking at their doors. Nonetheless, average time spent watching television swiftly eclipsed average time spent listening to radio and reading books. Thus the visual tradition born in the 1950s superseded both of its predecessors: the 200,000 year-old oral tradition, and the 5,500 year-old written one.



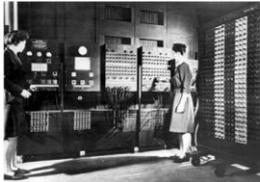
**Figure 7.** The Visual Tradition: third mode of cultural evolution, primarily television, established circa 1950

But the latest innovation of the written tradition—one might date its inception to the introduction of the IBM personal computer 1981—spawned the digital revolution.<sup>14</sup> And the evolution of the

<sup>14</sup> See [https://www.ibm.com/ibm/history/exhibits/pc25/pc25\\_birth.html](https://www.ibm.com/ibm/history/exhibits/pc25/pc25_birth.html), last access November, 20, 2022.

digital revolution shapes the noosphere's structures and functions as the container of the shared consciousness of humanity.

In an oral tradition, people spent hours each day listening to or telling stories. In a written tradition, people spent hours each day reading and writing. In a visual tradition, people spent hours each day watching television or movies. In a digital tradition, people spend hours each day doing all the above online, in addition to emailing, tweeting, gaming, shopping, scamming, gambling, investing, teaching, learning, Zooming, live-streaming, and whatever else they are virtualizing today that will go virtually viral tomorrow.



ENIAC, 1946



IBM PC, 1981



**Figure 8.** The Digital Tradition: fourth mode of cultural evolution, established circa 1981

Indeed, if you were you an alien anthropologist from another planet, studying the Earth from orbital space, intercepting and measuring its many and varied electromagnetic emanations across the broadest possible spectrum, you could not fail to notice the ever-increasing volume of satellite-mediated broadband transmissions, which constitute the very fabric of the noosphere.

Yet you would also notice that the patterns within these transmissions are the antithesis of randomness; they carry meaningful strings of ones and zeros that represent the variegated messages within the medium.

The attractive if not hypnotic and addictive power of the digital tradition stems from its seamless incorporation of oral, written, and visual traditions combined. Thus the noosphere untethers both producers and consumers of culture from spatial and temporal constraints.

If you are interested in a deeper analysis of these four modes of human cultural evolution, and how they affect our cognition as a species, then I would suggest that you read *The Middle Way*, second edition, 2020.<sup>15</sup> It contains, among many other things, a “report card” that compares and contrasts these four traditions in terms of their effects on four pillars of human cognition: attention span, linguistic ability, imaginative capacity, and cultural memory. The digital tradition in particular can cut both ways, either enhancing or impoverishing cognition, depending on how it is utilized. In any case it exacts some peculiar and not altogether salutary transaction costs on those who engage with it. Since the pandemic has compelled so many to spend so much time in the noosphere, it has also magnified and amplified these costs. To understand them better, consider this: Data transmitted and received in the noosphere are thus far constrained to be represented either as images, sounds, or texts; or as animations embodying images, sounds or texts. Thus they impinge on only three of our six human senses: images stimulate the visual cortex; sounds, the auditory cortex; texts, the noetic cortex (or if you prefer, mentation or our sense of thought itself). But at the same time, our other three senses—gustation (sense of taste), olfaction (sense of smell), and

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Lou Marinoff, *The Middle Way*, Waterside Productions Inc., San Diego, 2020), 382.

taction (sense of touch)—are de-activated in the noosphere, as are pheromonic transmitters and receptors as well.

Cognitive Pillar → Cultural Tradition ↓	Attention span	Linguistic ability	Imaginative capacity	Cultural memory
 10.1a Oral	Very good	Very good	Good	Fair
 10.1b Written	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
 10.1c Visual	Very poor	Poor	Very poor	Very poor
 10.1d Digital	Any of the above	Any of the above	Any of the above	Superlative

**Figure 9.** “Report card” on human cognition (from chapter 10, *The Middle Way*)

Thus perceptual consciousness in the noosphere is necessarily attenuated: robbed of three senses plus pheromones that are continuously deployed in the geosphere and biosphere for purposes including socialization, acculturation and humanization. This impoverishment of human sensory experience in the noosphere may have lasting effects on consciousness itself, and ultimately on what it means to *be* human.

Imagine sitting around a table or a hearth with family or friends or colleagues, sharing a meal. This has been a definitive human

activity since the earliest days of our species' existence. All six senses plus pheromones are fully engaged. Now imagine a Zoom meeting with family or friends or colleagues, sharing a virtual meal. There is no possibility of any shared experience of taste, touch or smell, nor of pheromones, nor of the second-order effects on consciousness itself of a shared experience of taste, touch, smell, or pheromones.

If we inquire as to why online education for K-12 schoolchildren is proving to be such a disaster, we find a significant thread of explanation in this foregoing example. For children and adolescents to develop and flourish in wholesome social and cognitive pathways, they require a full range of real spatial and real temporal interactions that engage all six senses, and not an attenuated range of virtual interactions that engage only three senses. Online education of children, and indeed online activities of adults as well, necessarily entails what amounts to sensory deprivation. Such deprivation in turn impedes socialization and impairs cognition.

But this is only the tip of the virtual iceberg. For the noosphere is not simply a passive medium in which perceptual consciousness and its fruits are shared; the noosphere is an active (and sometimes hyperactive) medium that is both utilized visibly and manipulated invisibly to engage and reshape conceptual consciousness itself: not only for social, educational, and entertainment purposes, but also if not overarchingly for commercial, ideological, and political ones—whether benign or malign. In all cases, the noosphere represents a vast new arena of contending competitive forces that seek to lure and captivate minds for as many minutes and hours as possible, and in the worst cases to habituate, indoctrinate, and ultimately enslave them. The noosphere has fomented a cybernetic gold rush, and a virtual Wild West: its prospectors and pioneers, carpetbaggers and robber-barons, are all competing for time-shares in everyone's consciousness.

There is nothing that human beings are capable of thinking, saying or doing in reality that has not by now been cloned in virtuality. This was an aspiration during the formative years of the noosphere: to virtualize material things. But having successfully virtualized real things, the *dei ex machina* behind the smoke and mirrors of cyberspace has unfortunately discovered that this process is fully reversible: they are now successfully materializing virtual things.

At a personal level, data mining and targeted marketing are tracking individual consumers in regards to their browsing and online shopping habits., tailoring and personalizing the incessant advertisements that plague web-pages unless one pays—with time or money—to bypass or remove them. But these are merely minor annoyances or distractions, akin to too many billboards cluttering an otherwise scenic highway.

At a cognitive level, manipulations and distortions of data, and therefore also of consciousness, are rampant. Empirically, it is well-established that consumers willingly visit and revisit virtual domains that reinforce their entrenched prejudices. This is a wholly different matter than listening repeatedly to one's favorite music, or regularly eating one's favorite foodstuffs. Why? Because diversity of aesthetic preference is expected if not celebrated in any open society. But the curating, filtering, shadow-banning, and downright deplatforming of non-conformist or dissident views is the very antithesis of diversity in an open society; rather, it is a brazen epistemic tyranny that herds consumers into the depths of a virtualized Plato's Cave. The epistemic tyrants who attempt to control truth in the noosphere are therefore unwittingly creating opportunity for philosophical practitioners to emulate the Socratic tradition, re-enter the virtual Cave, and help liberate its captives. We do not claim to be possessors of truths, but rather to be comparatively dispassionate inquirers who, via the time-honored elenctic method, strive at least to expose transparent absurdities

and dispel patent falsehoods. In this role philosophers have more work to do than ever.

Recall Bertrand Russell's amusing yet chilling pamphlet on the power of propaganda, written in 1943, when radio and newspapers were still the leading technologies in the fabrication of news and the manipulation of public opinion:

Give me an adequate army, with power to provide it with more pay and better food than falls to the lot of the average man, and I will undertake, within thirty years, to make the majority of the population believe that two and two are three, that water freezes when it gets hot and boils when it gets cold, or any other nonsense that might seem to serve the interest of the State ... No person who did not enthusiastically accept the official doctrine would be allowed to teach or to have any position of power. Only the very highest officials, in their cups, would whisper to each other what rubbish it all is; then they would laugh and drink again. This is hardly a caricature of what happens under some modern governments<sup>16</sup>

I submit to you that, exacerbated by the pandemic and abetted by the relentless conversion of the noosphere into a virtualized Plato's Cave, Russell's warning is hardly a caricature at all, for this is happening under most if not all current governments—except that some of the “very highest officials” appear to believe their own rubbish as fervently as the indoctrinated prisoners in their virtual cave.

I am sure you can see how epistemic tyranny is itself a lever of political tyranny. Many of you surely realize that the pandemic has, within two short years, become a pretext for governments of the formerly freest nations on earth to strip their citizens of supposedly inalienable civil rights, to rule by perpetual decree in defiance of their own constitutions, to politicize medical science to justify such

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<sup>16</sup> Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish: a Hilarious Catalogue of Organized and Individual Stupidity*, Haldeman-Julius Publications, (Girard, Kansas, 1943, p. 17.

rule, and to utilize the noosphere for tracking, tracing, enabling or disabling human transactions and interactions—not because it conduces to arresting the pandemic, but because it centralizes political power and cows if not terrorizes citizens into compliance. After 9/11 and the subsequent spate of Islamic terrorist attacks across Europe, as well as in Mumbai and Bali, a widely-repeated mantra declared “We are all Israelis now.”<sup>17</sup> After only two years of COVID-19, it is equivalently clear that “We are all mainland Chinese now”. When it comes to mandating control of their own citizens, governments of the Anglophone nations—America, Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, formerly the freest among the free countries—are behaving like cadet branches of the Chinese Central Party Committee.

Please do not misunderstand the tenor of this foregoing remark, as it is not at all intended as a criticism of China. On the contrary, I am persuaded that if there were anything resembling an objectively reliable “happiness index”, then the current Chinese population would score more highly than the current American one. I am merely asserting that until recently most citizens of Western democracies were more accustomed to exercising individual liberties than kowtowing to authoritarian dictates, whereas most citizens of Confucian cultures appear to prefer regulated social harmony (if benevolently motivated) over the anarchic discord, embittered divisiveness, and frequently violent transactions of Western-style civil strife.

Bertrand Russell realized this in 1922 (the same year in which Chardin coined the term “noosphere”), and wrote:

The Chinese have discovered, and have practiced for many centuries, a way of life which, if it could be adopted by all the world, would make all

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<sup>17</sup> E.g. <https://www.capitalismmagazine.com/2001/09/we-are-all-israelis-now/>; <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/we-are-all-israelis-now/>, last access November, 20, 2022.

the world happy. We Europeans have not. Our way of life demands strife, exploitation, restless change, discontent and destruction<sup>18</sup>

So while Chinese citizens have not lost much liberty and autonomy during the pandemic, even if because they had little enough to lose before it, citizens of Western democracies have lost significant liberty and autonomy, because their governments have ruled by emergency decrees that approximate martial law and undoubtedly violate supposedly inalienable rights.

Police statehood aside, the unwholesome effects of the pandemic do not confine themselves to untimely deaths of loved ones and unexplained cases of “long-COVID.” Non-medical side effects include psychological and socio-economic debilitations of lockdowns, marked increases in alcohol abuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, and teen-age suicide. There are widespread feelings of powerlessness, despair or anger among the general populace. There are fears engendered by calculated media hysteria. While many Western citizens are becoming fed up with authoritarian demands of unquestioned obedience to whichever dictate *du jour* best serves the interests of the ruling elites, yet many remain fearful of speaking out in increasingly politicized and punitive cultures. The elites in turn exempt themselves from the very decrees they promulgate.

All these problems that the pandemic has spawned, spanning every sector of society, cry out for the voices of philosophical practitioners to be heard. We must amplify the extent of our presence in the noosphere, offering counsel and facilitating discussion on all these issues, in ways and from perspectives that we have been uniquely trained to provide. How each of you rises to this challenge is entirely up to you, but the movement of philosophical practice itself must move into and throughout the

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<sup>18</sup> See Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1922.

noosphere to keep pace with the twin developments of the digital tradition itself, and its intensification by the pandemic.

It is necessary and also enriching for communities of philosophical practitioners to meet in the noosphere, as we are doing here, but it is not sufficient for the continued growth of the movement. We must make our philosophical services as available in the noosphere as they were in the biosphere and geosphere, for that is where human consciousness is spending ever more of its time, and expending ever more of its resources. Beyond this, some of you may choose to deploy yourselves as virtual public intellectuals, and indeed as virtual Socratic gadflies, stinging the noospherical horses of state by posing potentially upsetting questions that challenge mendacious or nonsensical narratives intended to fetter consciousness itself.

And please do not commit the error of believing that well-educated cosmopolitan populations in the developed world no longer require such gadflies. It is far more prudent to take William Shirer's lesson to heart. A German-speaking American journalist stationed in Berlin during Hitler's 1930s transformation of the Weimar Republic into the Third Reich, Shirer himself unwittingly fell prey to the interminable propaganda that spewed from Nazi-controlled media. Only when he travelled to a still-free Paris on furlough did the proverbial scales fall from Shirer's eyes. As he later wrote in his definitive history:

I myself was to experience how easily one is taken in by a lying and censored press and radio in a totalitarian state ... a steady diet over the years of falsifications and distortions made a certain impression on one's mind and often mis-led it. No one who has not lived for years in a

totalitarian land can possibly conceive how difficult it is to escape the dread consequences of a regime's calculated and incessant propaganda<sup>19</sup>

One can only lament that propaganda has lately been diversified, intensified and amplified, not merely in rogue dictatorships as usual, but pervasively in formerly free democracies that now ruthlessly suppress freedom of thought, opinion and expression. This unwholesome state of affairs was accelerated by COVID-19 and its forced migration of consumer consciousness into the noosphere, and is driven by the transformation of mainstream news media into platforms for radical ideology that spew brazen baloney, curated by technocratic oligarchs in partnership with the political parties they support and help finance.<sup>20</sup> Critics are censored, silenced, shouted down, shadow-banned, de-platformed, demonized or “cancelled.”<sup>21</sup>

Bertrand Russell would surely spin in his grave if he could witness the full extent of his prophecy as it plays out in contemporary mainstream American media. Owing to calculated and incessant propaganda emanating from the radical Left, dozens of millions of credulous Americans daily and mindlessly parrot back regnant nonsense across a spectrum of issues: e.g. that inflation is a sign of a healthy economy; that eliminating police reduces crime; that America is an “institutionally racist” country; that climate change poses an “existential threat” to humanity; that sexual dimorphism (biological maleness and femaleness) is a “social construct”; that more than five hundred urban riots during 2020 (killing dozens of people and costing billions in property damage) were “peaceful protests”; that the January 6, 2021 riot in the Capitol (killing five

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<sup>19</sup> Shirer, W.: *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, Book Club Associates, London, 1959, pp. 247–48.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online/>, last access November, 20th, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Hawley, J. *The Tyranny of Big Tech*, Regnery Publishing, Chicago, 2021.

people and resulting in superficial vandalism) was an act of “domestic terrorism” comparable to Pearl Harbor and 9/11; that President Donald Trump was “a dictator comparable to Hitler or Stalin”. The “dread consequences” of enforced mass-indoctrination and uncritical belief in these and kindred idiocies—repeated hourly and daily as gospel truths—include the extinction of America's former beacon of liberty, the collapse of her civil society, and the sacking of her Republic by a congeries of “home-grown” barbarians.

We know that the noosphere is a product of rational consciousness, for we know its history from credible independent accounts in the oral, written and visual traditions, now folded digitally into the noosphere itself. But if the noosphere were to become a full-blown epistemic tyranny, then this thinking envelope of earth, a second-order product of rational consciousness meant to house a virtual record of the entire first-order output of rational consciousness, would be commandeered by a cartel of ruling elites who predetermine its contents, thus exercising censorship over rational consciousness itself. That would constitute an ironic injustice, beside which mere book-burnings would pale. In the Anglophone precincts of the noosphere, and undoubtedly among those of other language groups as well, mindless apparatchiks trumpet Orwellian slogans like “diversity,” by which they mean unquestioned acceptance of their monolithic political narrative as the sole permissible and incontrovertibly true account of the world's problems.

This will not stand unopposed by free-thinking philosophers, for we possess one meta-truth that cannot be censored by fiat: namely, that nobody governs truth itself. This happens to be the motto of the APPA, founded in 1999: *Nemo veritatem regit*. Nobody governs truth. Not Wikipedia. Not CNN. Not *The New York Times*. Not the FANG. And most assuredly not woke mobs and their zealous propagandists.

The pandemic and its accompanying intensification of authoritarian control of the noosphere can be interpreted in a variety of ways. We have already had recourse to the allegory of Plato's Cave. Perhaps one day, if and when the truth about the origins of COVID-19 come to light, we will be able to narrow the field of contending hypotheses. Meanwhile the spectrum of our oral and written traditions provide ample food for interpretative thought about the current state of the world.

Our Indian friends can remind us that we are inhabiting nothing more or less than Kali Yuga.<sup>22</sup> Our Greek friends can remind us of the myth of Prometheus.<sup>23</sup> Our British friends can remind us of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, the tale of a laboratory monster who turns on his mad scientist creator.<sup>24</sup> Shelley's tale seems particularly apt, for COVID-19 makes potential Frankensteins of us all.

Yet the origins of Frankenstein pre-date Mary Shelley. They lie in the Kabbalistic lore of the Golem, a man-made creature formed from clay.<sup>25</sup> In some accounts, a Golem is brought to life by inscribing on its forehead the Hebrew word "EMET", meaning

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<sup>22</sup> "During this age all things will decline, and the deterioration of mankind will be general . . . The minds of men will be wholly occupied in acquiring wealth; and wealth will be spent solely on selfish gratifications. Women will follow their inclinations and be fond of pleasure . . . The least moral merit obtains in this age, the greatest reward . . . Princes, instead of protecting, will plunder their subjects . . . Endowed with little sense, men, subject to all the infirmities of mind, speech, and body, will daily commit sins; and everything that is calculated to afflict beings, vicious, impure, and wretched, will be generated in the Kali age" *Vishnu Purana*, John Murray, London, 1840, pp. 623-625.

<sup>23</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York City, 1988, lines 509-615.

<sup>24</sup> Shelley, M. *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mayor & Jones, London, 1818.

<sup>25</sup> AAVV: "Golem". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available online at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/golem-Jewish-folklore>, last access November, 20th, 2022.

truth. The Golem then becomes responsive to its master's commands, until it becomes sufficiently self-aware to disobey them. This is the Kabbalistic prototype of Frankenstein. But the Golem can be deactivated by the expedient of erasing the first letter of “EMET” (the letter aleph) from its brow. The remaining word is “MET”, meaning dead, whereupon the creature reverts to its inanimate state. Thus the Golem allegorizes those who quest after the “one true vaccine” that will decisively deactivate the virus.

But the origins of Golem itself are much older than the Kabbalah. For the first Golem is none other than Adam in the Garden of Eden: the very first man, whom God fashioned in His image, out of geospheric earth,<sup>26</sup> into which He breathed biospheric life, and imbued with noospheric consciousness. Adam and Eve likewise disobeyed their Master's commands, and ate the fruit of the forbidden tree: not the tree of knowledge *per se*, but rather knowledge of Good and Evil.<sup>27</sup> Our subsequent expulsion from Eden is a tale retold in every generation, and no more poignantly than during this time of COVID, when so many have been expelled from the geosphere and biosphere themselves, and into the noosphere.

Since a man-made biological plague has herded us—whether accidentally or by design—into the noosphere, I will conclude by quoting J.B.S. Haldane, a British-Indian biologist, geneticist, and philosopher. He portrayed the appearance of *Nova Aquilae* in 1918, as witnessed by

three Europeans in India looking at a great new star in the milky way. These were apparently all of the guests at a large dance who were interested in such matters. Amongst those who were at all competent to

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. see <https://www.hebrewversity.com/hebrew-origins-adams-name-connection-ground/>, last access November, 20th, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> *The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1960, *Genesis*, parts 1-3.

form views as to the origin of this cosmoclastic explosion, the most popular theory attributed it to a collision between two stars, or a star and a nebula. There seem, however, to be at least two possible alternatives to this hypothesis. Perhaps it was the last judgment of some inhabited world, perhaps a too successful experiment in induced radioactivity on the part of some of the dwellers there. And perhaps these two hypotheses are identical, and what we were watching that evening was the detonation of a world on which too many men came out to look at the stars when they should have been dancing<sup>28</sup>

While our species has indeed become capable of wreaking nuclear havoc on our own geosphere, as well as toxic havoc on our biosphere, gain-of-function viruses like COVID-19 confine their damage to the very species that created them, claiming its victims with a whimper instead of a bang. Perhaps Haldane would change his tune today, since what we are watching is the implosion of a socio-economic world order in which too many scientists stay indoors tampering with genetic codes, while too many technocrats likewise remain indoors manipulating algorithms, when they too should be dancing.

But now that dancing has been displaced into the noosphere, it is no longer a physical and social activity. Rather, the noosphere is a dance-hall of ideas, whether in- or out-of-step with the divine music of even-tempered consciousness. Philosophical practice seems particularly well-suited to this kind of dancing, so I hope that you are eager to strut your stuff while the band plays on. The hall is thronged with displaced and de-synched people, whose philosophical dance-cards are more empty than full.

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