The World Wants to Be Deceived

In October 2021, Facebook changed its brand name to Meta. "We believe the metaverse will be the successor to the mobile internet," CEO [Mark Zuckerberg said in a speech](#) announcing the change. "We'll be able to feel present—like we're right here with people no matter how far apart we actually are." Never mind that this noble intention of connecting people is predicated on an almost $117 billion annual profit, a profit made largely by showing people only what they want to see and what will keep them coming back.

Zuckerberg's statement, alluding as it does to the emotional satisfaction of close human interaction, could have been written by a sophist, one who uses words for purposes other than the conveyance of reality, and particularly for personal gain. Twentieth century German philosopher Josef Pieper discussed sophistry in his 1970 book, *[Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power](#)*. A brief and incisive work, the book focuses on the nature of language—of words—as a mediator between mankind and the reality he inhabits, the conduit to truth. It is through words, Pieper wrote, that we can both grasp and communicate truth. This is the essential nature of language.

However, when the sophists don't use language to communicate truth, they corrupt the very essence of language—and therefore also of human existence. "Word and language form the medium that sustains the common existence of the human spirit," Pieper wrote. "And so, if the word becomes corrupted, human existence itself will not remain unaffected and untainted."

Unfortunately, this is what we are seeing unfold today with the internet, with social media in general, and most especially with Zuckerberg's Metaverse. Pieper's words offer a prescient analysis of these developments, providing insight

for those who have eyes to see past today's stream of digital consciousness.

Man, as Aristotle observed, is a social animal. To communicate with others is fundamental to us. But when words are divorced from reality, Pieper postulates, we lose our ability to communicate and ultimately cease to respect people as human beings. Despite this possibility of abuse, Pieper goes on to state, comfortingly, that all vehicles of language (song, print, film, broadcast, etc.) are nevertheless "designed … to capture and communicate reality."

But what about the Metaverse? Pieper, after all, was writing before the dawn of the internet. Is social media designed "to capture and communicate reality"? Pieper described a future kind of communication in chillingly prophetic fashion: "It is entirely possible that the true and authentic reality is being drowned out by the countless superficial information bits noisily and breathlessly presented in propaganda fashion. Consequently, one may be entirely knowledgeable about a thousand details and nevertheless because of ignorance regarding the core of the matter, remain without basic insight."

Another German philosopher, Arnold Gehlen, labeled such ignorance a "fundamental" one, "created by technology and nourished by information." Pieper elaborated that "the place of authentic reality is taken over by a fictitious reality … a *pseudoreality*, deceptively appearing as being real, so much so that it becomes almost impossible any more to discern the truth."

One need only replace the term "pseudoreality" with the term "virtual reality" to realize that the scenario Pieper proposes as "readily conceivable" is here and that the upsurge of Facebook's Meta will only accelerate the situation. Though the phenomenon Pieper identifies saturates almost all of the internet, social media is perhaps the epitome of this—a

constant stream of information completely devoid of real insight.

Mundus vult decipi. The world wants to be deceived.

Could it be that, through the internet and other digital media, we have finally developed a means of "communication" that is designed to subvert the function of words in human discourse? Have we entered an age where the line between fiction and reality has, by means of sophistry, become so blurred that we cannot always tell the difference?

The speech of sophists, Pieper wrote, is driven by flattery, or language intended not to communicate reality but to get something from the listener. The sophist's statement itself may or may not be true; it is the intention that is key, an intention divorced from the essential truth-communicating nature of language. And we, being a fallen race, often prefer flattery to the truth. Pieper painted for us a picture of the man enthralled by sophistic adulation:

What the world really wants is flattery, and it does not matter how much of it is a lie; but the world at the same time also wants the right to disguise, so that the fact of being lied to can easily be ignored. As I enjoy being affirmed in my whims and praised for my foibles, I also expect credibility to make it easy for me to believe … that everything I hear, read, absorb, and watch is indeed true, important, worthwhile, and authentic!

Here we have a perfect description of the echo chamber created by social media: curated newsfeeds, Google search suggestions, targeted advertising. On and on, the complex algorithms that drive the virtual world have a very specific purpose: they are there to show us not the truth, but what we want to see. And too often we are more than willing to be deceived.

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