

THE OVERPOPULATION OF POPPER'S WORLD 3: RICK RODERICK'S VIEWS ON THE EXCESS OF INFORMATION IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

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Abstract. *The first part of this paper is an attempt to offer an overview of Popper's World 3 in the light of philosopher Rick Roderick's concerns about the growing excess of information in our times (be they modern or post-modern). The first part of the paper tries to place Roderick's important words of caution from "The Self under Siege" into the Popperian cosmology and to investigate the ways in which these views can be seen as fitting in Popper's World 3 framework. The second part of the paper is the extension of one of the most famous World 3 thought experiments. This extension allows us to test some effects of the bearing on the human species as well as to explore the kind of fear that it causes..*

Key words: *information overload, World 3, complex meaning, existence, epistemological fear*

INTRODUCTION

Rick Roderick, a philosophy professor at several United States universities, *l'enfant terrible* of American philosophy, famous for his humorous and Socratic style of teaching, died in 2002, leaving behind several recorded *The Teaching Company* lecture series, one book and two dozen articles. His philosophy teaching approach differed from the rest in terms of being essentially *human and humane*. He strived towards discovering the driving forces of our existence within society, paying enough attention to philosophers, intellectuals and common people, at the same time making very little difference between the three. He used various philosophical issues as the productive means of discussing a set of more general problems key to our understanding of the self and the survival in the world we live in. The last series of Roderick's lectures, entitled *The Self under Siege: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, released in 1993, serves as a kind of a warning for humanity at the end of the twentieth century. The overall message he conveys through these lectures is that the kind of world we have been building has gradually turned against our-

selves. He finds a vast number of examples confirming this in the works of the twentieth century Western philosophers (both continental and Anglo-American). He starts the series with the lecture named *The Masters of Suspicion*, in which, among other issues, he talks about the excess of information and the complexity of meaning in the contemporary world. If we view information and meaning as being segments of World 3, a part of Popper's theory of reality, this might lead us towards exploring the position of this world at the turn of the century, in the world that produces ever-increasing numbers of World 3 entities.

RICK RODERICK'S POST-MODERN WORLD IN POPPER'S COSMOLOGY

Karl Popper's theory of reality is a part of what one can call the "Popperian cosmology". (Popper 1945, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1996) It includes three interacting worlds: *World 1*, *World 2* and *World 3*¹. World 1 is the world of physical objects and events, including biological entities – the world "of stones and of stars; of plants and of animals; but also of radiation, and of other forms of physical energy" (Popper 1978: 143); World 2 is the world of mental objects and events – "the world of our feelings of pain and of pleasure, of our thoughts, of our decisions, of our perceptions and our observations; in other words, the world of mental or psychological states or processes, or of subjective experiences" (Popper 1978: 143); World 3 is the world of the products of the human mind. It contains abstract entities such as languages, scientific conjectures or theories, stories, mathematical constructions, myths, tools, social institutions and contracts, feats of engineering, works of art, as well as any other form of information². A physical object, such as a book, belongs to World 1. It contains information which belongs to World 3. Two books with identical contents are two separate World 1 objects containing identical World 3 contents. When read by any two different people, they give rise to two distinctive and private sets of World 2 events, mental states and procedures based on World 1 brain processes. If the two people attempt to communicate their understanding of the book in spoken or written form then the contents of their speech or writing belong in World 3. (Champion 2009) From this, we can see that World 3 is autonomous to a great degree. In Popper's words:

"I suggest that it is possible to accept the reality or (as it may be called) the autonomy of the third world, and at the same time to admit that the third world originates as a product of human activity. One can even admit that the third world is man-made and, in a very clear sense, superhuman at the same time. It transcends its makers." (Popper 1972: 159)

The difference between World 2 and World 3 is best seen in Popper's epistemology, especially in his theory of scientific knowledge. According to Popper, traditional epistemology has considered knowledge in a subjective sense - in the sense of the ordinary usage of the words 'I know' or 'I am thinking'. This, Popper asserts, "has led students of epistemology into irrelevances: while intending to study scientific knowledge, they stud-

¹ world 1, world 2, and world 3 (non-capitalized) spelling is also possible

² Theories containing similar divisions can be found in the works of philosophers that preceded Popper – his idea of World 3 can be compared to Gottlob Frege's *drittes Reich* (in the universe of objective contents of thought) and Binswanger's *Mitwelt* (Vidanović 1996, Frege 1967)

ied in fact something which is of no relevance to scientific knowledge. For *scientific knowledge* simply is not knowledge in the sense of the ordinary usage of the words 'I know'. While knowledge in the sense of 'I know' belongs to what I call 'World 2', the world of *subjects*, scientific knowledge belongs to World 3, to the world of objective theories, objective problems, and objective arguments." (Popper 1972: 108)

Scientific theories are formed in World 3 and this enables them to be criticised and potentially falsified, which brings us to another segment of Popperian cosmology – the theory of objective epistemology, also known as his theory of falsifiability³. The main argument for the existence of World 2 and World 3 is the direct or indirect causation on World 1. The idea of interaction between World 1 and World 2 is actually a theory alternative to Cartesian dualism, the dualism based on the theory that the universe is composed of two essential substances: *Res Cogitans* and *Res Extensa*. Popperian cosmology rejects this essentialism, but maintains the common sense view that physical and mental states exist and interact. The interaction of World 1 and World 2 is also opposed to epiphenomenalism, where World 2 objects and events are real but do not have any causal action on World 1; Popperian cosmology rejects this for the reason that downward causation is possible. The interaction of World 2 and World 3, as we could see, is based on the theory that World 3 is partially autonomous⁴. The development of scientific theories in World 3 leads to unplanned consequences, in that problems and contradictions are discovered by World 2. Another example is that the process of learning causes World 3 to change World 2. World 3 objects, although extant in World 1, are embodied and given extra meaning by World 3. Many of the objects belonging to World 3 belong at the same time also to the physical World 1. In Popper's words, "Michelangelo's sculpture *The Dying Slave* is both a block of marble, which belongs to the World 1 of physical objects, and a creation of Michelangelo's mind, and as such belongs to World 3. The same holds of course for paintings." (Popper 1978: 144) This idea would be something along the lines of a meta-object, or a form of a being.

A good way to start connecting Popper's ideas to Rick Roderick's warnings would be to mention some ideas found in the paper named "How to Stay Alive: Popper's World 3 and Survival" by Đorđe Vidanović. This paper reveals the importance of World 3 for human life in general by connecting it to the issue of human existence. Namely, while claiming that World 3 (as proposed by Popper⁵) helps our survival by means of allowing

³ discussed in detail in Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (1963)

⁴ using "partially" as a modifier here may be too strong for this purpose. Popper says, "One of the main reasons for the mistaken subjective approach to knowledge is the feeling that a book is nothing without a reader: only if it is understood does it really become a book; otherwise it is just paper with black spots on it. [...] This view is mistaken in many ways. A wasps' nest is a wasps' nest even after it has been deserted; even though it is never again used by wasps as a nest. A bird's nest is a bird's nest even if it was never lived in. Similarly a book remains a book - a certain type of product - even if it is never read [...] Moreover, a book, or even a library, need not even have been written by anybody: a series of books of logarithms, for example, may be produced and printed by a computer. It may be the best series of books of logarithms - it may contain logarithms up to, say, fifty decimal places. It may be sent out to libraries, but it may be found too cumbersome for use; at any rate, years may elapse before anybody uses it; and many figures in it (which represent mathematical theorems) may never be looked at as long as men live on earth. Yet each of these figures contains what I call 'objective knowledge'; and the question of whether or not I am entitled to call it by this name is of no interest." (Popper 1972: 115)

⁵ Plato's and Hegel's versions of World 3, for instance, are completely different from Popper's. (See Popper, 1972, Ch. 3 and 4) Popper himself notes that Plato's World 3 was divine; it was unchangingly true. We can, thus, see a big gap between his and Popper's World 3, which is manmade and changing. It contains not only true theories but also false ones, as well as open problems, conjectures, and refutations. Hegel was a Platonist whose

us to explore the limits of our existence, Vidanović summons and then expands Kierkegaard's spider metaphor. The spider stands for humanity, while the web stands for World 3 and human language within it, an integral part of this world. In Kierkegaard's words, "When a spider plunges from a fixed point to its consequences, it always sees before it an empty space where it can never set foot, no matter how it wriggles." (Kierkegaard 1971: 24) Vidanović adds that the spider weaves its web in order to explore the abyss in front of it. In the process, the only aid for the spider is the web. (Vidanović 1996: 35) The spider's web, i.e. our World 3 is the only way to move through that empty space. Having this in mind, we now have to understand the segment of Roderick's critique of the post-modern world dealing with the excess of information and the paradoxical lack of meaning in our times. Vidanović notes that the only true aid humans have in fighting the existential fear of the unknown, in the typical *horror vacui*⁶, is the extension of their own body and mind, through which they are able to transmit messages concerning the ways of survival. (Vidanović 1996: 35) On the other hand, the atmosphere created in Roderick's *The Masters of Suspicion* lecture reveals that the post-modern age creates something that we could label *the fear of information excess*⁷, an almost equally severe kind of fear that can be classified as epistemological. Although Roderick never actually gave a name to this kind of fear, what he describes can easily fit this label. While World 3 and our language capacities within it serve as a way to bridge *horror vacui*, they seem to be completely powerless in fighting the fear of information excess, actually being its main cause. Before we move on to exploring the difficulties in struggling against the fear of information excess, we must take a look at Roderick's views on the surfeit of data available at the turn of the century.

Upon introducing the three "masters of suspicion", Marx, Nietzsche and Freud⁸, Roderick tries to find some basic reasons why we live in "a [paradoxical] world filled with instrumental rationality, [...] which produces a situation in which human beings themselves don't feel rational," in which "self [is] being false to itself" and "belief systems have come under considerable suspicion." According to Roderick, in the post-modern world, the "new social factors have led to a kind of a pressure on human beings, not only as individuals [...] but anonymously as well", this being one of the main "pathologies of the late twentieth century." (Roderick 1993: L01) Firstly, Roderick attempts to show the failure of the twentieth century Western philosophy in meeting the real problems of meaning as connected to the self. He illustrates this failure with proper examples from Rorty's "The World Well Lost" (1972) and Tarski's *Theory of Truth* (1944). Basically, modern and post-modern philosophy fails to give a proper solution to the "great and overriding problem" and provide us with a satisfying theory about the self: "a narrative story to connect disconnected episodes in our lives." (Roderick 1993: L01) For

world of Ideas was changing and evolving. However, according to Hegel, though the Objective Spirit (encompassing artistic creation) and Absolute Spirit (encompassing philosophy) both consist of human productions, man is not creative. It is the hypostatized Objective Spirit, it is the divine self-consciousness of the Universe that moves man: "individuals... are instruments", instruments of the Spirit of the Epoch, and their work, their "substantial business", is "prepared and appointed independently of them". (Popper 1972: 122-125, Hegel 1971: par. 551)

⁶ literally, the fear of empty spaces, also known as cenophobia. In philosophy the *horror vacui* stands for a theory initially proposed by Aristotle stating that nature abhors a vacuum, and therefore empty space would always be trying to suck in gas or liquids to avoid being empty.

⁷ the term which could mark the phenomenon opposite of *horror vacui* is *horror redundantiae*.

⁸ labeled as such by Paul Ricœur (1969, 1970)

Roderick, the modern analytical theories of the self, or reality and of meaning are just "deflationary accounts."

After this, Roderick moves on to discuss the problem of "the information overload" and "the complexity of meaning", one of the main reasons for the existence of the abovementioned harmful development of the contemporary world. "The information overload" and "the complexity of meaning" are closely connected to the introduced term of "the fear of information excess". Namely, all of them, to a certain degree, refer to the post-modern condition in which the complexity level has reached a point at which nobody is able to find the adequate amount of meaning in the world around them, as there is "way too much to make sense about." (Roderick 1993: L01) In order to illustrate the contemporary condition of the human race, Roderick asks the listeners to compare their lives to those of Tonkawa Indians from West Texas:

"The Tonkawa Indian reservoir for meaning [...] were rich and holistic, but a limited array of roles, stations, things to be and so on,... When choosing who you will be, the decision was relatively simple [...] The load of information, the number of images that you saw, the number of things that touched your skin impinged upon your perceptual apparatus was quite limited"

Roderick claims that even in the societies which can be considered more complicated than the one of the Tonkawa Indians, such as our own, there have been culturally available reservoirs of meaning that were relatively stable and within which we could find a place for ourselves. However, the industrial progress that began in the nineteenth century seems to have brought and keeps bringing an increasing pressure of the things which shape our lives and the development of the self. The pressure grows even bigger with the emergence of new technologies, electronic devices and new means of communication, which marked the turn of the century. In the mentioned 1993 lecture, Roderick notes that "if you took all the information collected in the history of the world, beginning with the dawn of humanity [...] all the sensible marks left [...] I am almost certain that in the last eight years in Washington, there is more information palled in four buildings than the whole previous informational load of the history of the human species." (Roderick 1993: L01) Scientific and technological development has dramatically increased since 1993. The last decades of the twentieth century, as well as the first decade of the twenty-first century are marked by the blooming quantity of information⁹. The list of causes of this kind of increase is quite long – it includes the rapidly growing rate of new information being produced, the ease of duplication and transmission of data across the Internet¹⁰, the increase in the available channels of incoming information (cheap paperbacks, television, satellites, electronic libraries, telephone, broadband Internet), large amounts of historical information available nowadays, the low signal-to-noise ratio, contradictions and inaccuracies in available information and the lack of a method for the evaluation and processing of different kinds of information. Due to this, the human race is practically stricken by

⁹ This phenomenon is sometimes named *Information explosion*. Similar terms are *Overchoice* (the problem of too many choices, facing consumers in the postindustrial society) and *Information pollution* or *infollution* (the spread of excessive, useless or dangerous information via communication channels, defined as any undesirable side effect brought about by information technology and its applications. These side effects may be social, economic, cultural, political or psychological).

¹⁰ In the January 2009 Web-site survey, Netcraft received responses from over 185 million web sites. (Netcraft, 2009)

"the complexity of the systems within which we try to make sense." (Roderick 1993: L01) A real-life example Roderick provides in order to illustrate how the information overload affects everyday life is the assassination of John F. Kennedy. According to Roderick, we know "too damn much about it," as there are too many movies, stories, accounts, books and secret plots; "under this kind of complexity, the self finds itself in the position where the array of choices of what to believe or not to believe becomes bewildering, utterly bewildering." (Roderick 1993: L01) According to Steve Beller, a clinical psychologist, "information overload [is] a state of having more information available than one can readily assimilate, that is, people have difficulty absorbing the information into their base of knowledge. This hinders decision-making and judgment by causing stress and cognitive impediments such as confusion, uncertainty and distraction." (Beller 2006)

Since Roderick's death in 2002, the problems of "the information overload" and "the complexity of meaning," which cause the (post)modern phenomenon of the fear of information excess, have only kept multiplying. With the emergence of new technologies and the corresponding increase in available types and amounts of information, the selection of relevant material is more complex than ever. The fear of information excess may not be as terrifying as horror vacui, due to the fact that it is essentially epistemological and not existential, but it has a great potential in creating obstacles in everyday life. In order to determine this potential, it would be useful to create an expansion of Popper's famous World 3 thought experiments.

THE EXTENSION OF POPPER'S THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Popper's well-known World 3 'test' includes two experiments, which basically confirm Popper's claim that World 3 has autonomous existence and show the significance of this world for the human species:

Let me repeat one of my standard arguments for the (more or less) *independent existence of World 3*. I consider two thought experiments:

Experiment (1). All our machines and tools are destroyed, and all our subjective learning, including our subjective knowledge of machines and tools, and how to use them. But *libraries and our capacity to learn from them* survive. Clearly, after much suffering, our world may get going again.

Experiment (2). As before, machines and tools are destroyed, and our subjective learning, including our subjective knowledge of machines and tools, and how to use them. But this time, *all libraries are destroyed also*, so that our capacity to learn from books becomes useless.

If you think about these two experiments, the reality, significance, and degree of autonomy of World 3 (as well as its effects on worlds 1 and 2) may perhaps become a little clearer to you. For in the second case there will be no re-emergence of our civilization for many millennia. (Popper 1972: 107-108)

In order to test the seriousness of Roderick's warnings and the potentials of the fear of information excess as a whole, we have to introduce another thought experiment. The main purpose of this experiment is to expand the existing test procedure and allow us to

compare the new hypothetical situation, in which our world is filled with an emerging fear of information excess:

Experiment (3). All our machines and tools are destroyed, and all our subjective learning, including our subjective knowledge of machines and tools, and how to use them. The humanity is left with one and only giant library which contains all the information transmitted from one human being to another starting from the dawn of Homo sapiens until today. The data is classified alphabetically, without any priority or relevance markers.

With this experiment, we should be able to investigate the strength of the impact that World 3 oversaturated with meaning has on the human species. Our task is to imagine what would be the outcome of such a situation. Of course, the situation is closer to Popper's Experiment (1), as the re-emergence of our civilization in Experiment (3) is still probable to be shorter than "many millennia," but, at the first glance, it is obvious that, in the conditions summoned by Experiment (3), this would be a tremendously difficult task for the human species. There are two major problems – one is the lack of relevance markers (which starts being an everyday issue in our times) and the second is the extremely large amount of information. We can assume that a vast majority of data stems from the products of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, or any future year in which the experiment is carried out, while the minority consists of the data created in the previous epochs. The further we go into the future, the harder it gets to find the relevant data coming from the ages before the twentieth century and essential for understanding recent issues. The reason for this is the fact that the contemporary information sources are incomparable to the older sources in terms of their productivity. In the recent years, the internet has given us access to amounts of information that would surely keep suppressing the early findings of our race in the imaginary giant library. The suppression of data is carried out mainly in numbers, i.e. in terms of data quantity. Nowadays, thousands of books are published every day, conjoined by millions of newspaper and internet articles, as well as many feature films, documentaries, TV shows, blogs, podcasts and other modes of information. Each of these would lower the chances of finding important laws of physics, mathematics or chemistry in our giant library, as the daily influx of new data is beyond control and accumulating every day. Each day into the future would greatly increase the time required for the full intellectual revitalization of our species in Experiment (3). Language acquisition would appear to be a child's play as compared to the difficulties of setting priority markers in such a library. Humanity would recover its language capacities in probably up to two generations. However, many generations of our species would probably have to take part in the process of re-establishment of the basic pillars of the contemporary science.

Even in our own times, the quantity of data available to humans has long surpassed our natural organizational capacities, and this is why the information overload, the complexity of meaning and the overpopulation of World 3 have the potential of invoking the fear of information excess in almost everyone living today. People facing unbearably large quantities of data have different manifestations of the fear of information excess. The less experienced ones are petrified by the very amount of information, while the more experienced are haunted by the permanent fear of mistakenly leaving something important out of their articles, papers or books, or simply out of their lives. On many oc-

casions, we feel a strange kind of guilt for failing to grasp enough information, and this can be considered another symptom of the fear of information excess. Even the most experienced academics are under constant informational siege, as their natural organizational limits are simply not large enough to store, classify and make good use of all the data available. With every new day and load of information it brings, the chances of making a mistake and failing to read, hear or see something important are growing bigger.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, the fear of information excess is a (post)modern age disease. Unfortunately, it is almost certain that the remedy will never be developed. Treating such a disease would involve actions that will stop the overall progress of technology, which does not really seem stoppable unless it runs out of resources. Many academics and researchers seem to have already recognized the extent and growing impact of the described phenomenon. In 2008, a group of interested researchers from various academic institutions, corporations, companies and consultancies created the Information Overload Research Group¹¹, a non-profit interest group dedicated to raising awareness, sharing research results and promoting the creation of solutions around information excess. These solutions seem to be diverse. On the one hand, recent research suggests that an "attention economy" will naturally emerge from information overload, allowing people greater control over their information experience. (Franck 1999, Udell 2005) On the other hand, there are authors encouraging active awareness of information excess. (Lively 1996, Miller 2004) Having in mind all the consequences of excessive information, the latter choice seems to be more appropriate for our times. As Roderick claimed, the world we live in is fundamentally paradoxical. Although it seems likely that more information would bring more meaning into our world, what happens is actually quite the opposite of these expectations. In the postmodern world, meaning is very hard to find, especially those segments of meaning defining the self, explaining who we are and what we are supposed to do in this world. In such a world, we have to approach the available information with a kind of a permanent mind filter, so to avoid information pollution and suppress the fear of information excess. Individual mind filters would surely depend on our information needs, our jobs, interests and affiliations, the amount of time available and other specific factors.

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¹¹ IORG – <http://www.iorgforum.org/>

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PRENASELJENOST POPEROVOG SVETA 3: POGLEDI RIKA RODERIKA NA INFORMACIONI VIŠAK POSTMODERNOG SVETA

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Prvi deo ovog rada predstavlja pokušaj da se Popperov Svet 3 sagleda iz perspektive odnosa filozofa Rika Roderika prema pojavi informacionog viška u svetu u kome živimo (bilo da ga nazovemo modernim ili post-modernim dobom). Rad najpre pokušava da upozorenja kojima Roderik počinje niz predavanja pod nazivom "The Self under Siege" smesti u Popperovu kosmologiju i da ispita načine na koji se ona odnose na Svet 3. Drugi deo ovog rada je, u stvari, pokušaj proširenja postojećeg Popperovog eksperimenta za ispitivanje Sveta 3. Ovo proširenje nam omogućava da vidimo neke od efekata pritiska ovog informacionog viška na ljudski rod i da ispitamo strah koji ovakav višak izaziva.

Ključne reči: *informaciono preopterećenje, Svet 3, kompleksno značenje, postojanje, epistemološki strah*