The Collapse of Western Metaphysics: Covid-19 and Digital Literacy

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Abstract

This research deals with the aftermath of Covid-19 and its impact over some aspects of western metaphysics such as literacy and the human freedom. Speech has been privileged over writing for hundreds of years in the western thought. The human freedom is also considered a main pillar of the western metaphysics. These key aspects of western metaphysics have been challenged and questioned seriously by Poststructuralists and Marxists who argue for privileging the written form of words over utterances and the false status of human freedom. Although these issues have been subjects for rigorous debate in modernism and poststructuralism, western metaphysics has never been challenged, as it is the case since Covid-19 has broken out few months ago. The pandemic has forced us to adopt new habits, which have ultimately changed and demolished some basic aspects of western metaphysics. The human freedom, literacy, digital literacy and student-teacher relationship before and after Covid-19 are reevaluated and reconsidered to show the devastating consequences of the pandemic over western metaphysics.

Keywords: Covid-19, human freedom, literacy and orality, digital literacy, western logocentrism, and western metaphysics.

1. Introduction: The Origins of Western Metaphysics

The word 'metaphysics' came into English as a translation of the Greek word 'Ousia', first used by Aristotle. In *On Metaphysics* and precisely in 'Book VII,' Aristotle not only describes 'metaphysics' as the abstract nonscientific fields of knowledge, but he also sets out the foundation of what is known later as "western metaphysics." He defines 'metaphysics' as "the knowledge of immaterial being," or of "being in the highest degree of abstraction" (104,105). He refers to metaphysics as "first philosophy" and "the theologic[al] science"(110,112). He concludes that a particular substance is a combination of both matter and form (114). As C.D.C. Reeve simplifies it to readers in his introduction to Aristotle's *On Metaphysics*, "Metaphysics" is any field of knowledge that does not deal with "natural sciences" like physics or mathematics (xxviii). In the very same book, Aristotle insists on the process of understanding and grasping theory "through induction, some through perception, and some through some sort of habituation and some through other sorts of means" (xliv). The process of learning which ultimately is based on students-teacher paradigm or audience-performer one dates back to Aristotle and his teacher Plato and is a crucial part of his 'metaphysics.'

Aristotle is not the first Greek philosopher to whom we trace the rise of western metaphysics. The shift from orality to literacy has been one of the most important and influential steps that contributed to the final form of western metaphysics as we know it today. In his *Preface to Plato*, Eric Havelock sheds light on the extent to which the shift to literacy in ancient Greece and the ideas of Plato in particular have influenced the final product of western philosophy and metaphysics. Havelock's insights about Plato's contributions to western metaphysics are really important but the task of discussing them in this article would be overwhelming. Among the issues Havelock points out are two important concepts which are considered basic pillars in western metaphysics; the first one is the concept of human freedom and liberty. The second one is how western metaphysics privileged speech, utterances or the spoken form of language over writing, sings or the written form of language. These two topics are focused on because they are related to the subject of this article. In order to understand these concepts and their rise in western metaphysics, it is better if we consult the original texts in which Plato discusses them.

The allegory of the cave in 'Book VII' of *The Republic* is associated with one key concept in western metaphysics which is the human freedom. In this allegory, Plato imagines a group of people who live in a cave

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forever, facing a blank wall. The cavers watch shadows showed on the wall when things pass in front of a fire that exists behind them. They think the shadows they see are real while they are merely a reflection of reality. If the cavers get out of the cave, they would not recognize the shadows they used to see inside. They would recognize that they had been deceived. In this allegory, the cavers stand for ordinary people who think what they see is real and the people who live outside the cave are the philosophers who are the only people who have access to ultimate reality and truth. The outside of the cave might be a symbol of knowledge and the inside part of the cave might be a symbol of ignorance. The inside part clearly is an image of prison while the outside image is symbol of freedom. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger uses this allegory as a model when he talks about truth in his "On the Essence of Truth" but "furthers the idea a little more" (Farber 5). However, human freedom is always traced back to Plato's allegory of the cave. Plato is considered the father of western metaphysics and his ideas and philosophy relate to most fields in our modern culture. The second important issue Plato rises is language and its relationship to philosophy.

In *Phaedrus,* Plato introduces three speeches and discuses them with his teacher, Socrates. Lysias's speech is the first of the three which stands for writing—as a species of language. According to Socrates, this is the worst kind of speech since it is a dead text that might not defend itself and do not persuade all people—though it might persuade some others. It might only repeat itself over and over (22-27). Socrates' speech is the second type of speech which stands for the spoken form of language. This type according to Socrates is good by itself since it gives the speaker the chance to persuade the audience, but it is not the best type of language (43-48). The third type of speech is the spoken form of speech which is based on knowledge, talent, and natural aptitude of speakers (57). The spoken words might be accompanied with some form of written versions. According to Socrates, this type or species of speech is the best because it leads to truth since the speaker knows what he says and how he says it and the audience would be able to ask and get answers for problematic matters when existed. Thus, truth exists in scientific speeches (the third type) and in the soul of the listener and the mind of speaker. Meaning, truth and wisdom might only exist in powerful speeches that meet the aforementioned elements according to Plato's Socrates (68-79).

It seems to me that the third type—to which Socrates refers—includes literacy in the traditional sense we know (the ability to read and write). He also means that literacy is very important to establish a well educated society. Obviously Europeans agreed with Socrates since literacy has played a major role creating the European civilization which started to flourish right after people got to become literate in late 16th and early 17th centuries as they started to imitate the Greek culture and adopt its sciences and metaphysics. The ideals of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle on literacy and human freedom were largely accepted and sometime were taken for granted until the 20th century when the French philosopher Jacques Derrida questioned the position of speech as the superior species of language and Marxists started to question the principal of human freedom in the western cultures. The aforementioned concerns of the Marxists and Poststructuralists are discussed in the following parts of this article. These issues are also discussed in relationship to the impact of Covid-19 as well.

2. Western Logocentrism and Poststructuralism

It is overtly clear that Plato and Socrates support speech or the spoken form of language which they consider the true, masculine, powerful, effective, real, original, and scientific version of language. They also classify writing as an inferior, feminine, false and marginal species of language. For Socrates and Plato, the spoken form of the language is the norm while writing is the exception. They believe that writing by itself is not able to produce 'truth' unless it is explained by spoken words. Thus, writing is the poor version of language. This is what is known as logocentrism that had been dominant in western metaphysics for hundreds of years and deeply rooted in western philosophy. Discussions of logocentrism reappear frequently in the writings of Poststructuralists such as Jack Derrida and Walter J. Ong.

Derrida works on inverting the logocentric hierarchy, making writing the norm and speech the exception when he privileges writing over speech, which becomes but an inferior species to writing. Derrida argues that speech is a species of writing. In his essay, "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida talks about three major features of writing that prove speech a species of it and, hence, writing is the superior form of language. First, writing might be repeated in the absence of the receiver. Second, writing is subject to different meanings away from the intensions of the author or writer, while speech is clearly interpreted in context.

Third, writing might be a subject to spacing in two senses: it is separated from other signs in a particular chain and it is separated from a present reference that it might refer only to something that is not actually present in it (Selden 167).

In other words, writing might not be easily interpreted and the process of interpreting a written text might lead to a vicious circle of signifiers and signified(s). Derrida's project of having no final meaning is the

logical end of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes' theories (Newton 115). While Saussure talked about the signifier and the signified, Derrida goes beyond that to regard the "presence" of a signifier as a reminder of its absence (its opposite). In other words, the absence of something becomes a sign for its existence—this is what Derrida terms 'trace.' Hence, it is really hard to reach a final meaning of a signifier according to Derrida since such meaning becomes an impossible target or an unattainable "dissemination" (Derrida 18). Thus, for Derrida, the written form of language is the norm, while speech is the exception. The only point at which Plato's point of view overlaps with Derrida's philosophy is that the written text would be subject for various interpretation. Plato thinks that this vulnerability of text as a negative or even an inferior aspect while Derrida thinks it is a positive or even a superior element which puts writing in a superior position to speech.

While Derrida values the written form of language over the spoken one, Ong values the spoken version of language as he explains the differences between oral and literate cultures. He believes that orality, as he understands it, is "the primary orality, that of persons totally unfamiliar with writing" (6). He also regards languages as being an oral phenomenon rather than a written one. He has obviously a deep appreciation to visual arts when he devalues the importance of writing saying; "one picture is worth a thousand word" as he argues for the orality of languages as an everlasting issue because he thinks oral languages are there today although they might not have developed a written form yet (7). Thus, he thinks speech is a basic aspect of language.

However**,** literacy which is used to be defined as the ability to write and read has played a major role in developing humanities and establishing the basic forms of modern civilizations. Literacy enabled people to keep record of history and covey knowledge, and various experiences from one generation to another. Books and writing, I estimate, are the most important inventions in the positive history of humanity while orality is a good medium for people's daily communication. Still, the oral medium is not sufficient enough to convey sciences and humanities. We would not be able to enjoy our modern advances unless books and writing came to help people build on past experiences of which western metaphysics is considered a major part. Thus, western metaphysics, as I define it, is a general term that refers to all forms of knowledge, experiences and ways necessary for establishing a human society or any human practice that we have taken for granted in our social and educational practices. Among various practices, the five paragraph essay that we ask our student to write and set in examinations are nothing but part of this western metaphysics which dates back to Plato's Socrates. The student-teacher relationship and classrooms are nothing but part of it as well.

3. Covid-19, Digital Literacy and the Collapse of Western Metaphysics

For decades or perhaps hundreds of years and in almost all colleges and universities across the globe, we have been teaching and instructing our students in great consistency with western metaphysics. The take-home assignments and the in-class examinations among other daily practices we conduct in our classrooms are nothing but reflections of western metaphysics. We teach students in classrooms and students have to do a sort of written responses for tests and assignments. The grading system we still use in our present days and the oral defense of doctoral dissertations are deeply shaped by this western metaphysical sentiment.

It is true that 'western metaphysics' is a product of cumulative philosophies, ideologies and experiences which might be questioned every now and then. They became basic practices that might be modified or questioned but they were never nominated to collapse as these practices and ideas are products of cumulative western metaphysics for over than a thousand year. This attitude of the immortality of western metaphysics has been the case until the break out of Covid-19 few months ago. The pandemic has challenged and almost demolished some basic aspects of western metaphysics which we explore in the following section of this article.

3.1 The human Freedom and Covid-19

The human freedom is a well established aspect of western metaphysics that dates back to Plato's allegory of the cave we discussed in the introduction. For hundreds of years, the western culture has celebrated the human freedom which is considered a main pillar in a civilized culture.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Marxists have questioned the concept of human freedom claiming that we think we are free while we "terribly delude ourselves" because "we always have a certain margin of freedom." This margin is manipulated by the dominant ideologies of our society and such ideologies are "what causes us to misrepresent the world for ourselves" (Bertens 65). Our freedom is limited also to what we might afford since we are nothing but a product of our socioeconomic conditions (66). In other words, our freedom is limited to what we might afford. For instance, if we do not earn enough money, we would not be able to own a house or drive an expensive cars.

Although such Marxist approaches could question the human liberty in various societies including some western ones, human liberty and freedom have been always presented as solid concepts upon which many western country are established. The United States of America, for instance, is called the home of the free. Many other European countries such as France, England and Germany are presented always as countries that value liberty and the individual freedom. Thus, the Marxists' claims could not shake the concepts of human freedom and liberty in the western culture. However, what Marxists could not achieve in a century is achieved by a tiny virus in few weeks. The human freedom has been restricted in many western and nonwestern countries as the pandemic forced many nations including some states in the United States of America and many European countries to live under travel bans, lockdowns and curfews.

3.2 Covid-19 and Digital Literacy

Many instructors have started to question the practices they have taken for granted for many years in their classes as they experienced a sudden shift from in-class teaching to online teaching as a result of the pandemic and its consequences. The pandemic also has highlighted the importance of digital literacy which is a new form of literacy that neither Plato nor had Aristotle taken into consideration as they planned to establish western metaphysics. The new form of digital literacy imposed by Covid-19 requires certain skills and knowledge of some computer programs, software, internet, and digital technologies rather than having the traditional ability of reading and writing. For the first time we find ourselves forced to cope with these new technologies as a result of the break out of Covid-19. The pandemic has forced us to reconsidered what many scholars who have been calling for since 1980s. Many scholars called for integrating technology and internet into classrooms but few instructors were interested in providing practical plans for integrating digital literacy and technologies into their classrooms until they found themselves forced to adopt digital literacy and practice it online with their students.

Digital literacy and technologies have transformed teaching in many ways. A basic form of these transformations that we have already experienced after the break out of Covid-19 is the use of electronic discussion website that used to "complement traditional discussion" in classrooms (Moore & Miller 48). Websites such as "Moodle" and "WebCT" used to allow students to communicate and respond to each other over the weekends and after classes before the break out of the pandemic. Nowadays, I do believe that we are required to incorporate more internet and digital technologies into our classrooms which have become online classes in which students and teachers are forced to work on developing their digital literacy. The shift to online teaching and adopting digital literacy has for sure some positive sides. The easily accessible content of electronic essays has been rapidly affecting our online classes. Online research makes it possible for us to perform more comprehensive research in less time as well. Online research "supplements and sometimes replaces traditional library hunts and scrutiny of bibliographies" (Gilster ix).

Before the break out of Covid-19, many scholars have been trying to redefine literacy or at least have been talking about digital literacy which might be defined as "the ability to access networked computer resources and use them." It is really important for us to be able to cope with such electronic resources since the internet has become "a worldwide publishing and research medium open to anyone" (1). The traditional concept of literacy goes beyond the ability of writing and reading. "It has always meant the ability to read with meaning and to understand" and likewise digital literacy has something to do with understanding "what we see on the computer screen when you use the networked medium" (2) In recent times, different forms of digital literacy are being required from employees in all the different fields and disciplines. A greater demand is growing on those who have good computer and internet skills. The internet's universality has created "priceless resources for learning and self advancement" (3). The internet has influenced almost every aspect of our present life and has become the only alternative for the traditional method of teaching due to Covid-19.

We have started to feel the actual need for digital literacy since the break out of the pandemic as teachers, scholars and students need to perform research online on daily basis. The shift to digital literacy and online teaching requires adopting new teaching strategies and materials to cope with all these technologies and digital tools. One side of this process of shift into digital literacy is that it requires some major changes in our syllabi which might focus on developing students' skills in performing online research since it is important for students to be able "to make informed judgment" about what they find online (3). The internet is an open medium to which contributors have access across the globe and thus it might not be always a reliable source of knowledge. Students should be able to distinguish scholarly websites that they should trust when they perform research. It might be a must for students to develop a minimum awareness of skills that they might need to use while doing online research, and here comes our role as online instructors since we need to readjust our course materials to meet the minimum requirements of digital literacy. Paul Gilster points out that "while the internet offers myriad opportunity for learning, an unconsidered view of its content can be misleading and deceptive" (87).

Students, therefore, should develop certain skills that allow them to evaluate the content of online texts. They should be good readers and critical thinkers rather than copier of web content. It is a fact that makes it their own responsibility to "develop the critical skills necessary to evaluate such materials" and I believe that we have to share this responsibility with our students since we need make sure that our students are developing the skills and understanding the objectives of our online classes during these hard times of the outbreak of Covid-19 (89).

Developing online research skills are not the only steps that we have to take into consideration as we deal with Covid-19 and digital literacy. Integrating more digital technologies and tools into our online classes has become an urgent issue that we need to consider as well. It is important for online instructors to keep up with what is going on in the profession and should integrate more technology and digital tools into our class room such as voice recordings, recorded videos, and *YouTube* videos and even *live conferences* which would for sure make the process of learning much easier for students in most cases. In fact, such methods were used by few teachers across the world before the breakout of the pandemic and some thinkers expected digital literacy to replace the traditional literacy sometime in the future but they did not expect this process of replacement to take place this year. Few years ago, Richard Lanham was wondering whether we would ever use the traditional form of books in our class rooms in the near future. Electronic texts, according to Lanham, might not only replace traditional textbooks, but it might also "redefine the writing, reading and professing of literature." For Lanham, technology has been "forcing itself" into humanities (3). Gilster also believed that "the internet and related technologies [might] force the development of alternative educational strategies to supplement our current failed strategies" (257).

Before the break out of covid-19, Lanham touched on an important issue when he explained how necessary it was for instructors to shift for the online medium rather than sticking to the codex book as the main medium of teaching. He gave the example that many news papers had started to issue online instead of being printed on daily basis. He assumed that instructors were facing "the same kind of decision" to shift to digital forms of literatures (7). He also explained how hard it was for instructors to deal with Greek and Latin classics and how they used to misinterpret them when they used the traditional forms of textbooks as a medium for teaching. He insisted that the digital word had helped us better understand these classics since it is easy to see all the different translations online and since "the whole of Greek literature is now on disk" (10). He also pointed out the importance of those online scholarly journals (21). Lanham's calls for the shift for online and digital literatures did not receive enough attention until a very recent time and after the break out of Covid-19 in particular.

The present conditions of the pandemic force us to reconsider the importance of digital literacy. Needless to say, a close look at our online classes reveals the growing gap between education, society and students in one hand. It also reveals the gap between some teachers and their online students on the other one. Many scholars have talked about the need for widening the access to liberal arts "without trivializing them." Trivializing education is one of the major concerns that we should take into consideration as we think of new ways for widening the access for liberal arts and instructing humanities online. It might be even one of the major obstacles that we face once we think of offering online classes after the end of the pandemic if we think of moving forward toward digital literacy. For several years the fear of trivializing education has been responsible for the slow change in teaching and testing strategies. Perhaps, many professors do not want to omit the five paragraph essay from their syllabus only because they think that there is nothing else that can do good for students as it does.

Lanham suggests that "digital technologies and rhetorical theory offer the new ways we need"(103). It seems to me that these digital technologies do not only offer the solution, but they do offer also new ways for bridging the gap between the problematic conditions of traditional literacy and the society that has been moving rapidly to be highly dependent on such digital technologies.

The new technologies require us to contrive or come up with new teaching strategies as well. For Lanham, the five paragraph essay is out of date. He thinks that we should "teach a very different kind of composition" since the essay is "no longer the basic unit of writing instruction" (127). He also highlights the usefulness of the grammar and the spelling checks that we perform on a *Microsoft-word* document and he wonders if we might need to come up with new ways for punctuations as well. It is also inevitable that these digital technologies should "condition the teaching of literature" as well (129). Nowadays, teaching with digital tools has pushed us toward considering how interchangeable the teaching of art might be since "literature no longer can be taught in isolation from the other arts" (130). Digital tools might present new creative models for teaching that is more based on the internet, visual and audible signals, and animation. These tools might also "serve as a new vehicle for displaying all of Western literature in a new light.

Since much of this literature (Classical literature) is oral in nature" (131). I should add that while we are reading digital literature we might need to pay special attention to the different creative features of a digital text. I mean those features that are not available in traditional textbooks.

The content and the style of the digital text might not be different from its hard copy edition. For instance, when we read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a digital text, it would have the same style and the content of a *Hamlet's* traditional textbook. But the digital form might have more *hyperlinks* that help readers wherever they need them. These features do not exist in the printed textbook of the play. We also might need to reconsider new methods for teaching digital literature. The style and the content are not what matter here. What matters is "how that text is physically, spatially, bodily, socially accessed, encountered, and received by a reader" (Siemens & Schcriebman III 16). Certainly, the way students interact with a digital text is very different from the way they do with a traditional codex one.

In his recent article, "How the Literary Work Exist," Peter Shillingsburg does not seem very happy with what instructors have achieved in the field of digital literature. He invites them to produce more digital texts since he thinks digitizing is limited to Classical text and few famous textbooks (4). He thinks that teachers of literature need to be aware of the grammatical and the spelling mistakes in some digitized texts (8). He also calls for more awareness regarding the "direct examination of sources because the materiality of source texts is an important aspect of their cultural frame of reference" (9). Christine Borgman, on the other hand, focuses on the infrastructure requirements highlighting the difficulties we might meet at an age of declining budgets. It is true that one of the major reasons for slowing the shift to digital literatures is the bad economic conditions for most institutions across the globe. If we need to achieve more in this field, the English departments in particular need to hire more professors who have better digital experience and have a good budget to develop the digital literacy of their academic staff. They might need also to work on the infrastructures as well. Scott Rettberg also shares similar concerns regarding the need for more action in this field of digital literature while economic challenges prevent further developments even before the break out of Covid-19*.*

In close connection to a digitized text of Homer, Casey Due and Mary Ebbott demonstrate how the digital tools they use might help readers better understand Homer while listening to the oral performance of the epic. They claim that their experience with digital Homer made them come up with new interpretations of the epic (26). Similarly, Jeff Howard demonstrates how the quest that appears in some video games is nothing but an extension of the quest in literature. He thinks that what makes these games meaningful is "the literary quest element" (19). He tries to apply the theory of quest in games to literature because he thinks that students would be very interested in literature as a result (27). However, finding solutions for these problems becomes a must for all teachers across the globe since we are forced to adopt digital literature due to Covid-19 and its consequences.

4. Conclusion

Covid-19 has forced us to adopt new forms of digital literacy. The pandemic has demolished some basic aspects of western metaphysics and it has demolished what philosophers had built over hundreds of years. Digital literacy becomes an urgent need for teachers across the globe since digital teaching is the only feasible alternative for traditional classes due to Covid-19. However, digital literacy opens new avenues for instructors and students.

There are hundreds of ways in which instructors might use digital technologies. Still, digital literacy requires new models of teaching and testing as well. Moreover, the economic conditions and the budget-cuts created by Covid-19 seem to be the most challenging obstacle when we consider integrating more technologies into our online classrooms.

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