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Contemporary communication and ratiomorphization of meaning

Introductory remarks

Meaning is an extremely polysemous term, and the issues associated with meaning maybe and are analysed in various areas and from diverse perspectives, often out of relation.[1] In this article I shall discuss the issue of meaning from the communicological[2] and evolutionary perspectives, which does not make the analysis of the term any more stable. Such terms as "communication" and "evolution" refer to processes, changes, and dynamics; to "weak" ontology, the ontology of relations, not substances. Therefore, the perspective is much closer to Heraclitus' "fluid" thought than to Plato's constructs. Of course, I shall strive to, as much as it will be possible, indicate and explain the various referential shifts associated with the term "meaning", yet it seems impossible to ensure comprehensive precision of definition.

In reference to the in-depth analyses conducted in the previous century by Władysław Stróżewski, I combine meaning, as per philosophical traditions, with rationality and purposefulness, yet being inspired by some propositions of evolutionary epistemologists, I focus on a phenomenon which I call the "ratiomorphization of meaning." This new phenomenon emerged only two decades ago – it is inseparably linked with modern media technology and contemporary

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1 Cf. W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i sens*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Krakow 1994, pp. 423–437.
2 I am using the term "communicology" to emphasise the philosophical dimension of the reflection, which particularly in Poland is marginalised in media and social communication sciences. Vide, e.g. M. Wendland, *Filozoficzne i metodologiczne podstawy historii komunikacji*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2014, pp. 15–26.

communication practices. In most general terms, ratiomorphization of meaning consists of "washing out" rationality from meaning and applying a radical change of the goals which traditionally have been assigned to meanings. In the process of ratiomorphization, rationality and axiology are ousted by ratiomorphism, i.e. a form of quasi-rationality.[3]

In the context of rationality, Stróżewski wrote that "something has meaning if it is rational, if it can be identified, explained, and justified. Something is meaningless if it does not meet those postulates. Meaninglessness is then the only possible case of irrationality."[4] I, in turn, shall try to indicate that along the revolutionary changes in modern communication and media technology, meaning offers more and more ratiomorphism, which, however, cannot and should not be equated to irrationality.

In the context of purposefulness, Stróżewski associated meaning with the cause or rationale for something. "In that sense 'meaning' exists, e.g. in questions about the meaning of life, meaning of one's existence, etc. Since a purpose is sometimes associated with goodness or, more broadly, with value, the understanding of meaning assumes an axiological tint, even though in its core it possesses a metaphysical nature."[5] I, in turn, stress that in the era of the new media, there has occurred a very visible axiological shift, which also applies to the sphere of traditional values, goals and meanings.[6] In this area, too, ratiomorphism has nowadays a major presence.

The term "ratiomorphism" binds my discussion. I have borrowed it from the evolutionary theory of cognition, which is located at the intersection of philosophy and biology; as far as I am concerned, in humanities (except philosophy) and social sciences, the term is basically non-existent.[7] Therefore, I devoted the first two sections of the article to clarifying in which contexts it can be used and how ratiomorphism is related to communicational phenomena and processes. I wish to indicate that in modern communication, i.e. also in social life, ratiomorphic

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[3]   I shall discuss the term "ratiomorphism" in detail later in the article. At this point I wish to note that it is somewhat confusing as it suggests that ratiomorphism is a derivative of rationality, while in fact it is quite the opposite: it is rationality that is a derivative of ratiomorphism.

[4]   W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i sens...*, p. 425 [unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

[5]   Ibidem, p. 425.

[6]   Of course, the notion of values entails problems of no lesser extent than those associated with the notion of meaning. Lesław Hostyński wrote that values "are probably one of the few most ambiguous notions in philosophy." (L. Hostyński, *Wartości utylitarne*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 1998, p. 27). Vide also, e.g.: W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i wartość*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Krakow 1981, pp. 11–15.

[7]   "As far as I am concerned" because that is something of which I cannot be sure. "Basically" because in my publications on communication and media I have used it often.

mechanisms exist at an unprecedented scale. As a result, the cultural sphere of meaning and values becomes dominated by ratiomorphism. That tendency is so distinct that one could even talk about a ratiomorphic turn, while the term ratiomorphism could be considered as a major cognitive category.[8] Its introduction to humanities and social sciences seems justified to me as the reflection on the communicational outcomes of modern media technology demands multilateral approaches which uncover new scenes and other logics, which have previously been sparsely noticed or not noticed at all.[9]

Further in the article, I shall focus almost exclusively on the phenomenon of the ratiomorphization of meaning. I shall indicate that the terms which have traditionally been associated with the term *meaning*, i.e. rationality and purposefulness, are no longer fully adequate, or at least they should be applied with more caution than before, considering the new communicational contexts. Yet in order to avoid the shattering of established references associated with the term *meaning* and to avoid unnecessary chaos, I shall introduce the term *ratiomorphic meaning*. *Ratiomorphic meaning* is the outcome of modern ratiomorphization of meaning.

Please note already at this point that one should not confuse *ratiomorphic meaning* and the *meaning of ratiomorphism*. When I write about *ratiomorphic meaning* I am referring to certain characteristics and properties of the modern sphere of meaning, whereas the meaning of ratiomorphism refers to the epistemological and ontological importance and function which ratiomorphism plays in the world of all living organisms, i.e. also in the world of humans; it is the only one we know and to which we have and can have access.[10]

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[8] I discussed the ratiomorphic turn in a book which, hopefully, will be released in 2021. Of course, I realise that the term "turn" is abused and almost every theoretical proposal claims to be a turn. Nonetheless, I believe that the emergence of ratiomorphism in modern communication, and in turn in social life, has reached such intensity that in its case the use of the term "turn" is justified.

[9] As Dariusz Czaja noted "narrow specialised approaches often miss that which is central in humanistic cognition: the meaning which cultural artefacts offer for the answer to the basic question: who is man? who is that anthropos whose expressions we study with such diligence?". Vide: D. Czaja, "Żarliwość i melancholia. Dylematy humanisty", *Przegląd Polityczny* 2018, issue 151/152, p. 7.

[10] The fact of considering the human world as the only one which we know and which we can know is, of course, a very strong ontological and epistemological declaration. The space of the article is insufficient to justify that, which is why I wish to refer those interested in it to: J. Pleszczyński, *Epistemologia komunikacji medialnej. Perspektywa ewolucyjna*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2013, pp. 87–143.

Ratiomorphism, culture, and communication

The term ratiomorphism was popularised in the 1970s and 80s by evolutionary epistemologists gathered around Konrad Lorenz, the Nobel Prize laureate in physiology and medicine. Ratiomorphism can be defined in various ways. I usually define it as unconscious, innate, genetically-determined and teleonomically survival-driven cognitive faculties, skills and patterns of behaviour present in all living being, including humans. Ratiomorphism, although deeply hidden because suppressed by culture, is constantly present in all interpersonal relations and communication. Ratiomorphic activities and behaviour give the impression of being rational though they are not. Some examples of those include the production of honeycombs by bees, and the construction of nests by birds or hills by some species of insects. Such creations and structures seem to be the results of thinking, of planned activities, yet we assume that insects do not think–that is why biologists refer to that purposefulness as teleonomy, not teleology.

Ratiomorphic mechanisms are binary; they clearly indicate how to act: move closer or withdraw, fight or flight, become interested or ignore. However, ratiomorphicality cannot be reduced to emotions, nor ratiomorphism can be associated with irrationality.[11] Of course, ratiomorphism is also emotions, though mainly a permanent inalienable component of the ontology of the world of living organisms, present in all cognitive processes and phenomena, i.e. also in interpersonal communication. Therefore, it can also be treated as an onto-epistemological (or epistemo-ontological, depending on the presumed perspective) category. Ratiomorphism, rationality and irrationality meet and intersect at various orders and various ontological and epistemological planes: the rationality – irrationality dyad belongs solely to the epistemological order while the rationality – ratiomorphism dyad both to the epistemological and ontological orders. It is important not to confuse ratiomorphism with irrationalism.

The cognitive, both epistemic and epistemological, dimensions of ratiomorphism was best indicated by Konrad Lorenz:

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[11] In the case of such a reduction, the theoretical and explanatory potential of the notion truly becomes negligible or disappears altogether. That was actually somewhat the case: in contemporary times, the term *ratiomorphism* very rarely appears in philosophical or biological literature, and it has been replaced by other terms which are more precise and adequate to the current state of knowledge. For example, Daniel Kahneman developed a theory of "fast" and "slow" thinking, in which fast thinking would correspond to ratiomorphic cognitive abilities, while Keith Stanowich and Richard West proposed "System 1" and "System 2", the former of which corresponding to the ratiomorphic system. Nonetheless, the term *ratiomorphism* may, in my opinion, be useful in other areas of knowledge: humanities, and social sciences.

The analogy between the rational processes of thinking considered by the most radical scientists as scientifically valid and the ratiomorphic efficiencies of perception is an extremely convincing argument suggesting that such cognitive efficiencies which surely do not possess a rational character, must also be accepted as valid sources of scientific cognition. Rational and ratiomorphic processes constitute a further proof that our cognitive apparatus could have often developed two different independent of each other functioning organs for fulfilling the same task. The neglecting of any cognitive efficiencies equals to abandoning knowledge, and that is the highest transgression against the spirit of seeking truth, which a learned person cannot commit.[12]

The quotation explicitly indicates the cognitive dimension of ratiomorphism, yet it also enables one to notice its ontological dimension. Within the epistemological aspect, ratiomorphizm is a cognitive "efficiency", a very specific one, yet also valuable and necessary knowledge, though it does not possess the attributes which it is assigned by the ages' long epistemological traditions of the West, starting with Plato and Aristotle. Within the synchronic perspective, that is innate knowledge, with which every living organism is equipped, and within the diachronic perspective it is acquired knowledge accumulated through millions of years of evolution. That was why Lorenz, and many other evolutionary epistemologists following his footsteps, already in 1941 wrote on ontogenetically *a priori* knowledge, which is also philogenetically *a posteriori* knowledge, a species-wide experience.[13] Ratiomorphism is a constitutive onticity of the animate world governed by the laws of evolution, and, therefore, one can also talk about its ontological aspect.

Ratiomorphic mechanisms often also fulfil quasi-axiological functions:[14] for example, they regulate the forms and the level of inter-species aggression, which over 50 years ago enabled Lorenz to convincingly prove that in the animal world that is seemingly evil, "the so-called evil."[15] That kind of aggression combined with ritual fights constitutes the necessary component of the lives of various species of animals. Among humans it is too often manifested as ruthless rivalry, nonetheless, even that type of fight, provided it is conducted according to certain

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12 K. Lorenz, *Regres człowieczeństwa*, trans. A.D. Tauszyńska, PIW, Warsaw 1986, p. 68.

13 K. Lorenz, "Kants Lehre vom Apriorischen im Lichte gegenwärtiger Biologie", [in:] K. Lorenz, F.M. Wuketits, *Die Evolution des Denkes*, Piper Verlag, München–Zurich 1983, pp. 95–124 (originally printed in: *Blätter für Deutsche Philosophie*, issue 15, 1941).

14 Such a quasi-axiology can be defined, in analogy to ratiomorphism, as axiomorphism.

15 K. Lorenz, *Tak zwane zło*, trans. Z. Stromenger, PIW, Warsaw 1996 (original edition 1963). Naturally, one should bear in mind that humans are also animals, so when I write about animals I am referring to "animals except humans." Vide, e.g. I.S. Fiut, M. Urbaniak, *Wiedza w perspektywie ewolucyjnej*, Wydawnictwo Aureus, Krakow 2017, p. 162.

pre-established rules which are respected, is a significant component of social life. Societies in which there is no fight are in danger of developing authoritarianism or totalitarianism based on unidirectional communication leading to cooperation devoid of dialogue, understanding or agreement. However, in the human world, the rules of the fight prescribed by ratiomorphism are defined by culture. Even more so, then, one must remember that it is only a thin layer covering the thick deposits of nature, and it has much lower power at its disposal. Biological apriorisms, though suppressed and concealed based on the pressures from culture, are much stronger. Of course, even a fight conducted according to cultural rules shall destroy the social fabric if it becomes the dominant element in the sphere of inter-subjectivity.[16]

Clearly then, ratiomorphism should not be viewed as something undesirable, which should be suppressed to the minimum or eliminated from the human world altogether. In fact, if that should ever be the case, humans would become a completely different species, possibly androids. Nonetheless, in the human world which we know now and in which we still live, ratiomorphism must be controlled; the role of the controller is played by culture and its pressures. As I have written in another text: "the original biological *a priori* receives a superimposed, and often colliding, cultural *a priori*. That collision means the emergence of uncertainty and problems, and the paradoxical question about to which necessity one should conform: believe others, i.e. culture, or keep their own sensations and intuitions, i.e. trust biology?"[17]

In the ontology of the human world, culture occupies a special place. Regardless of whether one defines it as a set of intentional, material and immaterial products of man or as a relational object or something else entirely, it is a real onticity the subjectiveness of which is expressed in its agency and its cultural *a priori*.[18] Culture, which in the technical language of sociology or philosophy can be defined as a form or aspect of a collective subject, includes common knowledge, it filters individual experiences, it creates images and visions of the world, etc. Individuals, i.e. separate entities, have access to culture through communication, the form and framework of which are defined by communication media.

Communication, then, is a fundamental relation in the human world: it fulfils the bond-building, cognitive, and knowledge-building roles. It is an active relation

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16 Cf. J. Pleszczyński, "O tożsamościach komunikacyjnych, intersubiektywności i przymusie komunikowania się", [in:] *Komunikatywizm – przyszłość nauki XXI wieku*, ed. G. Habrajska, Wydawnictwo Primum Verbum, Łódź 2016, pp. 18–34.

17 J. Pleszczyński, *Epistemologia...*, p. 45.

18 Vide, e.g. K.R. Popper, J.C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and New York 1983, pp. 9–11.

which carries agential power.[19] Communication is *first*; it binds the human world: it precedes and conditions all human projects and actions. It *governs* economics, e.g. in the form of stock exchanges and advertising, and politics through the mass media and new media, and all other social phenomena and processes. Economics, politics, epistemology, morality, institutions, personal and collective convictions, inter-personal relations, etc. are the by-products of communication. Other by-products of communication are meanings: they form, they are discovered, they develop, evolve, sometimes disperse and disappear in communication processes and phenomena.

Communication is a social relation: even a hermit who has not communicated with anyone for decades constantly *produces* and discovers meanings using their earlier communicational experiences drawing from cultural resources.[20] In social life everything *passes* through communication, i.e. recognition and evaluation proper of its determining factors has major practical importance. In contemporary times ratiomorphism has become, in my opinion, an extremely important communicational determiner. Modern media technology has revolutionised, within just two decades, the area of communication by introducing in it technological mechanisms and rules while emphatically reducing and eliminating cultural mechanisms and rules. Those new rules are fundamentally, and if not fundamentally then at least in very many aspects, analogous to ratiomorphic mechanisms.

Technology + media = communicational technoratiomorphism

The human world, just as everything else, is subject to the laws of evolution, which are universal and they can never be suspended or annulled. Since the world is evolving, its ontology changes as well. Within only the past 20 years ontology of the human world, and with it social life and practices, have changed to such a degree that it is extremely difficult not only to describe and explain them, but even to specify as much as possible the problems of that which we attempt to study.

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19 Of course, such a perspective requires one to accept relational ontology which assigns ontic primariness to relations and not material objects, items or things. According to the ontological relationism, relations have a primary status in ontology; objects are secondary to relations. In such an ontology, it is relations which define what objects are, not the other way around. Vide, e.g. J. Pleszczyński, *Epistemologia…*, pp. 22–28, 474.

20 Naturally, the scope of the term *communication* could be defined very broadly; that is conventional. One could talk about, e.g. human communication with God, or the communication between the cells in the body. Here, I shall limit myself to social communication. Vide, e.g. J. Pleszczyński, "Komunikacja: natura i kultura", *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 2011, issue 2(59), pp. 255–274.

Jakub Nowak noted quite cautiously that the new media "are truly new in that the social practices associated with them and some of the outcomes of their operation constitute major phenomena new in terms of their quality."[21] As I see it, one should put it even more strongly: as a revolution in communication, a completely new communication era or epoch. Modern technology is not just tools, machines or automatons designed and controlled by people, but emancipated subjective ontic entities which possess constantly growing agency, which to a significant extent force, i.e. somewhat determine, various social practices and the specific behaviour of individuals under the threat of exclusion. Ratiomorphism is that mode or mechanism – it seems today the greatest determiner of communicational processes and phenomena. To paraphrase the *bon mot* once popular amongst sociobiologists which stated that nature holds culture on a short leash[22], in the epoch of the new media one could say that modern communication technology holds culture on a lead; a lead which is even shorter than nature as biological mechanisms were amplified by technology. I refer to that technological variety of biological ratiomorphism as technoratiomorphism.

In order to identify ratiomorphism in contemporary social life, one should examine according to which rules modern technology operates, mainly the technicised media as they define the dominant forms of communication, and those, in turn, define the forms of social life. What stands out immediately is their binary and algorithmic nature which continues to increase its influence on the organisation and, to some extent, determination or interpersonal communication.[23] Similarly to ratiomorphic mechanisms, technoratiomorphic rules unify and flatten communication reducing it towards signals. Twitter is a good example of such a reduction. The typical long-lasting discussion which was the model in

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21   J. Nowak, *Polityki sieciowej popkultury*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2017, p. 72.

22   Vide, e.g. E.O. Wilson, *O naturze ludzkiej*, trans. B. Szacka, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1988. This is a good opportunity to add that the ideals proposed by the evolutionary theory of cognition lost their popularity at some point, e.g. due to the radical propositions by sociobiologists, with Edward O. Wilson in the forefront. As one might expect, sociobiology quickly proved an approach which was too unilateral and it had to temper its radicalism, yet the evolutionary theory of cognition, despite the support from such authority figures as K.R. Popper, was not able to regain its position.

23   For example, sometimes students *have to*, though they do not want to, be present in some areas of the internet as that is the way in which they communicate with their instructors. Yet I am far from considering myself as a technophobe. On the contrary: I share Steven Pinker's, a renowned philosopher, optimistic view and hopes he associates with technological progress (vide: S. Pinker, *Nowe Oświecenie. Argumenty za rozumem, nauką, humanizmem i postępem*, trans. T. Bieroń, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2018). Despite that I believe that one should be aware of the ratiomorphic mechanisms linked with modern technology and outcomes of ratiomorphism.

the Cartesian rationality of the Western civilisation was gradually reduced to a discussion in which two opposing positions were confronted rationally, then, in the mass media era, those positions were only presented without any discussion, and now, in the new media era (like Twitter) it has been reduced to a presentation of only one's own extremely subjective positions, often in the form of a single word or a few words, sometimes offensive in nature. That reduction has been the result of the ratiomorphic turn, in which the Cartesian doubt was replaced by the maxim: I do not doubt, therefore I am. People have started to act just like machines because it is machines that have no doubts. That entails serious social, epistemological, axiological, and anthropological (or other – basically, the list could be extended much further) consequences as ratiomorphism is good for organising herds but not societies. The same could be said about technoratiomorphism, which is why it is quite misleading when people term Facebook or Twitter as social media without specifying what they understood as a *society*.

One of the simplest examples of how ratiomorphism in communication is promoted by media technology is the phenomenon of hate speech. One might see in it a form of technological determinism.[24] I am referring to the fact that in communication organised by new media technology hate speech had to emerge – that is the logic of the technicised anonymous communication in which analogue faces and masks were replaced with digital masks.[25] Then, one of the most sophisticated examples is the "publish or perish" principle, in which the axiological demand to share knowledge was complemented by the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest. The common acceptance of the principles by the global academic community proves the power of ratiomorphic mechanisms. That should not come as a surprise since humans are not fit for such rapid changes in their environment as the ones happening today; evolution has not prepared them for electronic communication. Moreover, humans are not able to identify modern threats because technology, unlike nature, does not warn about a danger; *homo sapiens* have not developed the "electronic instinct" which would identify and signal danger.

Since those areas of the human world, to which we refer to as culture, have become dominated by a new form of ratiomorphism: technoratiomorphism, the

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24 Obviously, that depends on how the term "technological determinism" is understood. Modern scholars of communication try to avoid it and rather indicate the social and political contexts of the expansion of technology than their (allegedly) deterministic nature. However, I believe that the potential of the term "determinism" makes it far from outdated and worn in the philosophical reflection on technology, i.e. also in the media and in modern communication.

25 Cf. J. Pleszczyński, "Maska i anonimowość jako problem komunikacji", [in:] *Literatura. Media. Polityka*, ed. M. Piechota, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2014, pp. 107–122.

collective subject transforms into technoculture.[26] In the final years of the 2010s, the use of the smartphone could be considered as its symbol. In the pre-internet era, culture, the material expression of which were the numerous libraries, structures, paintings, etc., constituted a filter, and defined the references and meanings of the human world. Culture accumulated common knowledge, negotiated the references and meanings, and defined the frameworks of human understanding and agreement. Nowadays, all those functions have been taken over by technology which fits inside mobile devices (bit containers). It is the smartphone and not culture that fulfils the function of a filter and a lens.[27] At the same time, smartphones and other such devices are proof of the real existence of a collective subject, which can emerge in different forms, yet it is always necessary in the human world. Unlike in the model of the subject-object dyad proposed by Descartes, human cognition is intermediated through the collective subject or its analogue. Despite the fact that people develop software, it is technology that programs people; the result is, as Kazimierz Krzysztofek termed it, a technomorphization of people which is accompanied by the anthropomorphization of machines.[28] Within the techno-culture, meaning has been linked with software, algorithms, and procedures.[29] The "publish or perish" principles have been witnessed and globally accepted by the academic community because in the era of new technology, which has a global nature, a scholar has simply become the "endpoint" of a programme and they fulfil the programme's ratiomorphic meaning (e.g. in the form of the necessity to publish even if the scholar has nothing to say).

Technoratiomorphism, just as biological ratiomorphism, is a master imitator. It pretends and mimics rationality – which is not difficult as it is a fact that the rationality of technology is incomparably greater than the rationality of individuals, just as the rationality of culture was incomparably greater than the rationality of individuals – yet, at the same time, it perfectly conceals the fact that it is rationality without value or meaning, i.e. without axiology. Paradoxically, then, technoratiomorphism is also technorationality, and thus technology has

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[26] That new previously unknown type of culture can be defined in different ways. The researchers of the new media often refer to cyberculture. Vide, e.g. J.P. Hudzik, *Wykłady z filozofii mediów. Podstawy nauk o komunikowaniu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2017, p. 38.

[27] In 2017, 3.47 billion people were online; 2.73 billion went online via cellular phones, nearly 90% of those via smartphones. Vide E. Bendyk, "Krytyka rozumu cyfrowego", *Przegląd Polityczny* 2018, issue 149, p. 15.

[28] K. Krzysztofek, "Wrażliwość zapisana w algorytmach? Między technomorfizacją człowieka a antropomorfizacją maszyny", *Kultura Współczesna* 2018, issue 4, p. 25.

[29] There is an "infinite" number of publications on this matter. Vide, e.g. J. Kreft, "Władza algorytmów mediów – między reifikacją a rynkiem", *Zarządzanie w Kulturze* 2018, issue 19, pp. 11–28. In Polish, the matter was discussed the most comprehensively by Jakub Nowak in: *Polityki sieciowej popkultury…*

continued to grow in power as the constantly perfecting hybrid of rationality and ratiomorphism.

In the context of techno-culture, the ratiomorphism turn it is return to old pressures. Nature used to tell humans: you have to! Culture over-saturated with axiology responded: you do not have to! Now, techno-culture is saying once again: you have to!

From the Oneness of values to meaning

In human life, the need for meaning, purpose, and values does not directly come from biology, though it belongs to humans' highest needs. Even if one cannot precisely define the term *meaning*, one intuitively senses that it is something primary and essential in the human world and life. Meaning is also important for those who arrived at the conclusion that life and the world bear no meaning.[30] In order to justify the meaning of the universe some, inspired by Plato, indicate the mathematical organisation of nature; for others it is sufficient that nature can be mathematicised, i.e. can be described and explained using rational methods, among which mathematics is the most perfect.[31]

The need and necessity of meaning has an a priori nature; it defines human existence. Marcin Napiórkowski, a semiotician of culture, author of various significant academic and popular science publications, and the author of an extremely interesting blog, concluded, though in a maybe overtly popular style (which should not, however, mislead anyone):

> A person can survive three weeks without food, three days without water, three minutes without air, yet they cannot survive even three seconds without meaning. Even though those values are not excessively accurate, the principle which underlies them is undoubtedly true. The need for meaning, at least from the point of view of humanities and social sciences, is the fundamental force organising our culture and the lives of us all.[32]

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[30] As Michał Paweł Markowski wrote "man becomes a nihilist having emotionally over-invested in the meaning of the world and for whom at some point the return on the investment appeared lost. Then their ire turns not to their erroneous decision (i.e. themselves) but to the object of the investment transforming into hatred." M.P. Markowski, "Cioran. Portret fanatyka", *Przegląd Polityczny* 2018, issue 150, p. 119. Emil Cioran was a nihilist, at least declaratively; as Markowski wrote (ibidem, p. 122) Cioran believed that "man is a creature who lost, nothing has any meaning anymore, so why would anyone assign any value to anything at all."

[31] Vide, e.g. A. Lemańska, "Matematyczność czy matematyzowalność przyrody", *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 2013, issue 3(49), pp. 5–24.

[32] M. Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2018, p. 7.

This quotation should be understood as stating that that which is imprecise yet understood intuitively is defined as "meaning"; it constitutes some extremely important value, not so much vitality-related since vitality refers to biology as existential which is the reason why our life is "human life". The need for meaning prevents one from reducing human life to *zoe*, i.e. "life in general"; human life exceeds biology. Meaning is not only value but also a need–not biological, rather existential. We perceive lack of sense and meaning as an existential threat. The understanding of meaning as a correlation of an existential situation refers to the humanistic concept of man, which assumes the existence of "a certain essence of the human nature"[33], the mode of being inherently human, which does not necessarily need to be viewed within the tension between that which is supranatural and transcendent and that which is natural and material.[34] It is inscribed in the existence of *homo sapiens*, which, I believe, enables one to consider that the notion has the status of a primary category or a boundary concept.[35]

Since meaning is a value and an existential need, even a subjective sense of its lack is perceived as a threat. Archbishop Józef Życiński, a philosopher and an excellent intellectual, told Aleksandra Klich that "a society without grand ideals, without sublime values, in which people chew gum and share the latest gossip, can exist, but I am afraid of such a world. The world has to have meaning."[36]

The question about meaning is also a question about values. The dispute on whether they exist has existed for centuries and it is, as all such issues, impossible to solve. The way in which one perceives values depends on their philosophical assumptions.[37] For Życiński, who in terms of ontological matters followed Plato

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33 H. White, "Posthumanizm a wyzwolenie ludzkości", trans. A. Czarnacka, [in:] ibidem, *Przeszłość praktyczna*, ed. E. Domańska, trans. J. Burzyński, A. Czarnacka, T. Dobrogoszcz, E. Domańska, E. Kledzik, A. Ostolski, P. Stachura, E. Wilczyńska, Ł. Zaremba, Wydawnictwo Universitas, Krakow 2014, p. 267.

34 Ibid.

35 Primary categories, i.e. categories which cannot be "attached" to some "higher" categories, are undefinable and therefore their epistemological status is fairly unclear. Additionally, that which we consider as a primary category may no longer be that tomorrow. The epistemological status of the term "boundary concept" ora "boundary notion" seems much more durable and therefore much safer. I think that the need for meaning can be considered a primary category or even a boundary notion as it is even more fundamental than the need for health and the need for autonomy, which, according to Len Doyal and Ian Gough, are two universal human needs. Cf. L. Doyal, I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, The Guilford Press, New York 1991, pp. 49–75.

36 *Świat musi mieć sens. Przerwana rozmowa arcybiskupa Józefa Życińskiego i Aleksandry Klich*, Agora, Warsaw 2012, p. 11.

37 Vide, e.g. W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i wartość*. Similarly, the ontological status of meaning also depends on the assumptions of a metaphysical nature. Vide, e.g. W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i sens...*

and was a fierce and consistent critic of philosophical post-modernists, values had a universal nature and therefore at least some of them could not be relativized. He argued: "My basic claim towards Rorty is: if there are not universal values, then anti-Semitism is good, and so is cannibalism. I do not want to live in a world which is governed by such principles. It would be a terrifying world as it would be devoid of universal values, those which make us human."[38]

Both statements by Życiński convey some existential angst and subjectivity laced with ratiomorphism: "I am afraid", "I do not want to." Of course, such a form of communication was a result of the nature of the conversation. In his numerous publications, archbishop Życiński stated the same thoughts in objective language, referring to philosophical and scientific arguments, mainly in physics, biology, and the theory of science.[39] That indicates the complementary nature of rationality and ratiomorphism in human life, and it triggers the question of whether the author of those statements was "afraid" and "did not want" because his mind told him that the world has to have meaning or maybe he sought meaning in the world because it is a deep existential need. Or maybe it is both.

The theory of values originated, as almost all notions in the Western cultural circle, from Plato, who in the *Phaedrus* indicated three autonomous, universal and objective most important values. "Thus," as Władysław Stróżewski argued, "the triad of our values was established: truth, goodness, and beauty. Once revealed, they seemed not only to uncover the goals of human strivings, but also to govern everything that exists."[40] Stróżewski mentioned *truth* first, though in both Polish translations what is listed first is *beauty*.[41] In Plato, those three fundamental values constituted 'the Oneness', so their ordering should not be important; nonetheless, in the modern era of communication dominated by the new media, the hierarchic sequence of Plato's triangle: beauty-goodness-truth has suddenly become significant – I shall return a bit later to this issue important for this discussion.

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38 *Świat musi mieć sens...*, p. 14.

39 Vide, e.g. J. Życiński, *Granice racjonalności*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1993; ibidem, *Struktura rewolucji metanaukowej. Studium rozwoju współczesnej nauki*, trans. M. Furman, Copernicus Center Press, Krakow 2013.

40 W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i wartość...*, p. 12.

41 The well-known fragment 246D of the *Phaedrus* in Władysław Witwicki's translation reads: "A boski pierwiastek to piękno, dobro, rozum i wszystkie tym podobne rzeczy" (Platon, *Fajdros*, trans. W. Witwicki, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1958, p. 72), while in Leopold Regner's translation it reads: "Boskim zaś jest piękne, mądre, dobre i wszystko, co jest w tym rodzaju" (Platon, *Fajdros*, trans. L. Regner, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2004, p. 30) ["But the divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and all such qualities." Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 trans. H.N. Fowler, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925].

Plato's rationally developed construct has been permanently ingrained in all the areas of the Western thought. Plato's 'the Oneness' organised axiology, epistemology, and ontology. Beauty did not have, as it does today, a subjective-aesthetic nature; it was rather something objective, like goodness and truth. In fact, beauty, usually in the form of simplicity, was until the modern times treated by mathematicians and physicists as a special criterion of the epistemic (and epistemological) value of equations, formulas, and theories. Nonetheless, everyday life's practice, with its inherent inalienable ratiomorphism, constantly questioned that highly refined and intellectually alluring concept. It proved emphatically that which is real is not always good; that which is beautiful it not always true; that which is good is not always beautiful, etc. The everyday life's experience put pragmatics above epistemology; life required people to break Plato's 'Oneness' when making practical choices. Actually, the triumph of technology and medicine proves that the approach is successful, even though its outcome and price has been the gradual instrumentalization of values: uncovered or established truth no longer acquires the status of an absolute value–it is always, though in silence, considered within the categories of its utility, i.e. as a tool. The foundation of epistemology is no longer the Truth (with a capital 'T'), but a partial truth, and rationality has been equalled to the methodology of natural sciences.[42] Similar relativisation applies to goodness and beauty.

It is difficult to evaluate the pragmatic stratification or even the decomposition of Plato's 'Oneness' unequivocally. The extraction from the triad of only one value within some areas of life dictated by the rational analytical mind had negative outcomes, e.g. veritism which shattered social bonds. Then again, it was often everyday life practices that proved that truth, goodness and beauty were somehow, though it was unclear how, connected. The universalising and synthesising mind suggested combining, the analytical and methodological mind suggested dividing, while the pragmatics of everyday life suggested that the complete shattering of Plato's triad and complete 'Oneness' remained in dialectic tension and had to be constantly negotiated in communication. The human world is a relational and functional whole. Truth, goodness and beauty are relational values and therefore it becomes inevitable that a person accepts some form of relativism. Sometimes we prefer goodness sacrificing truth, other times we value beauty over goodness, and sometimes truth obscures goodness and beauty.

Such tensions and contradictions have been the sources of social and personal frustrations for centuries, and yet they also induced people to "revert", take a step back to a category which preceded Plato's 'Oneness' of values. That category is meaning. The meaning of ratiomorphism consists of repetitions, returning to

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42 Vide, e.g. N.C.A. da Costa, S. French, *Science and Partial Truth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 8–20.

the same thing which had proved to work in the several-thousands-year-long evolution of *homo*. The existential need for meaning arose a long time before Plato constructed or discovered 'the Oneness' of universal transcendent values. The turn from objective and universal values towards the category of meaning is also a ratiomorphic turn, i.e. a turn from a refined theory to ratiomorphic existence. Ratiomorphism and meaning are intertwined just as rationality and truth are.

Ratiomorphic meaning

Meaning can be treated as species-specific, since it applies only to *homo sapiens*, the mental element as whole in itself, which constitutes a rational-ratiomorphic (or ratiomorphic-rational) hybrid. The rational component directs towards epistemology and axiology, with truth, goodness and beauty as lead categories which pertain to objectivity, while the ratiomorphic component towards such categories as acceptance, utility, and attractiveness, i.e. values with a ratiomorphic basis, which is deeply subjective. In the ratiomorphic approach, meaning is mainly an anthropological category; it applies to cognition devoid of the important ontological foundation which for Western epistemology is a value which is considered as rational and universal.[43] Consider beauty, which occupied such a major place in Plato's 'Oneness': since the 18th century it has been a category almost exclusively concerned with aesthetics, and to associate it with subjectively understood attractiveness was only a matter of time. As Arthur C. Danto wrote: "In the 18th century, when aesthetics was invented or discovered, the thought was that art contributed beauty, hence gave pleasure to those with taste."[44] In the ratiomorphic triad which includes acceptance, utility and attractiveness, the goal is also to ensure pleasure or avoid unpleasantness, not about absolute and common values.

Allow me to reiterate: meaning is a correlation of an existential situation. The emphasis on existence means that meaning covers the past, the present, and the future. Therefore, hidden behind the questions about meaning there is always the question about a choice, and choice applies to a goal, i.e. the future. A choice, in turn, demands a criterion. Ratiomorphism suggests that one should choose that which is more advantageous and attractive, while rationality suggests a choice based on or at least a choice from among options filtered by universal values. In practical situations such as choosing, the clash of values is very often unavoidable; some values must be assigned priority: either universal or ratiomorphic values. And those values are not

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[43] More on the relationships between epistemology and axiology vide, e.g. Z. Hajduk, *Nauka a wartości*, Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 2008.

[44] A.C. Danto, *Czym jest sztuka*, trans. A. Kunicka, Wydawnictwo Aletheia, Warsaw 2016, p. 11 [English version: Arthur C. Danto, *What art is*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013].

equivalent, though they are complementary since humans are animals. Yet one must stress that the fact of utilising in choices of rational or ratiomorphic values always means making decisions as per meaning: understood traditionally, as indicated by Władysław Stróżewski, or as per ratiomorphic meaning.

The fragmentation of Plato's 'Oneness' triggered by the pressures of everyday life is the reason why in every existential situation, the case-specific evaluation of the relation between truth, goodness and beauty, and acceptance, utility and attractiveness defines a direction of will, which, understood in line with Arthur Schopenhauer's thought, is an anthropological and not ontic, epistemological or aesthetic category. One's will decides whether a goal will be pursued, while the mind fulfils a selecting function. But since in contemporary times rationality is more and more transferred to technology, will becomes deprived of a strong mental and axiological support. Therefore, to speak of *ratiomorphic meaning* instead of *meaning* seems today justified and sounds very "Schopenhauery". As Rüdiger Safranski argued, according to Schopenhauer "there are no prescribed horizons to meaning and no guarantee of meaning."[45] That is because human will is determined to a considerable extent by biology, and the goals only seem rational while "in fact" they have a ratiomorphic nature. In the 19th century, such opinions could seem, and did seem, excessively extravagant[46], yet they can no longer be shocking in the 21st century.

Following Erich Fromm one could state that nature somehow "made an arrangement" with culture (and vice versa), and ratiomorphism with rationality (and vice versa) since the biological-cultural co-evolution developed through the tens or even hundreds of thousands of years some forms of symbiosis. Yet neither nature nor culture were able to handle modern technology which at a pace unknown in human history entered the human world. The digital revolution in communication has been happening for only the past two decades. That is why the currently fashionable inter and transdisciplinary debates on post and trans-humanism should not be treated as the manifestations of intellectual play or unwarranted prophesying. Similar distance was applied in the 1970s and 80s to post-modern philosophers when in fact their diagnosis, despite the various *fashionable nonsenses* which they produced[47], proved fundamentally legitimate.

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45 R. Safrański, *Schopenhauer. Dzikie czasy filozofii*, trans. M. Falkowski, Wydawnictwo Prószyński i S-ka, Warsaw 2008, p. 382 [English version: R. Szafranski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1991].

46 It is worth mentioning that Schopenhauer published his main work *The World as Will and Representation* 40 years prior to the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*.

47 I am, of course, referring to the famed book from two decades ago *Fashionable Nonsense*: A. Sokal, J. Bricmont, *Modne bzdury. O nadużywaniu pojęć z zakresu nauk ścisłych przez*

Along the shift of rationality to technology and the replacement of cultural rules with technological ones, it is increasingly difficult to refer to universal values. Plato's triangle is gradually yet consistently being ousted by the ratiomorphic triangle. Truth is that which I consider to be true, good is that which is good for me, and beautiful is that which I consider likeable. The place of the rational truth-goodness-beauty triad was taken by the triad of: acceptance-utility-attractiveness. An individual mind has become a special kind of a "reverse category" – it is used for justifying the ratiomorphic triad. The mind has ceased to be common, universal, and absolute. Thus, modern humans ceased to be Cartesian logical entities who discover meaning, but people who need to sense meaning ratiomorphically: sense which they need, which is beneficial to them, what people are going to say. Convictions are no longer based on rational justifications and arrangements made via communication but on individual sensations and the experience of ratiomorphic meaning. Subjectified technology demands ratiomorphic reactions from users, e.g. to push a specific key on a laptop's keyboard, i.e. they force ratiomorphically meaningful activities, i.e. without understanding. In the pre-internet era, rationmorphism defined, as Konrad Lorenz intended, some cognitive efficiencies of living organisms, i.e. their species-based specific "perceptions."[48] In the era of the new media, ratiomorphism must be treated more broadly: as a very important cognitive category.

Paradoxically, such a strategy bears the trademarks of a rational strategy: in the internet era people live in a technological surrounding, their communication with others is increasingly conducted in the environment of the new media. Social bonds which we knew in the pre-internet era are being eliminated from personal experiences. There is no longer a sense of common knowledge, nor common culture; there is even no one common internet because, as everyone knows, there are as many internets as there are users. In the environment of the new media and in contemporary communication, ratiomorphism remains the only thing common for all people regardless of the various internet bubbles in which they live. In a situation when rationality abandons the organisation of social life, reference to ratiomorphism and transferring it onto the social level is, from an individual's perspective, sensible as messages are being expressed in a form clear for everyone. The Facebook clicking of the "like" button, internet hate speech, and the "publish or perish" principle are examples of the push of ratiomorphism which is no longer being suppressed or corrected by culture; on the contrary, it is being amplified by technoculture.

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postmodernistycznych intelektualistów, trans. P. Amsterdamski, Wydawnictwo Prószyński i S-ka, Warsaw 2004.

48 K. Lorenz, Regres…, p. 68.

In the pre-internet era, ratiomorphism was mainly visible in the relations between individuals. In the era of modern media technology, it has also made a massive invasion into the relations between individuals and collective entities, and it works bilaterally. On the one hand, technoculture is governed by ratiomorphic mechanisms, they are inscribed in it. On the other, individuals, lacking the rational and axiological cultural protection, find existential meaning in ratiomorphism. The ratiomorphic shift which is observed nowadays from the level of the individual to the level of a community is extremely dangerous within various dimensions, e.g. it fosters populism, nationalism, hate speech, and the creation of an amorphic mass instead of a diverse society.

Nonetheless, to make sure that the article does not appear too pessimistic, allow me to once again reiterate that according to Lorenz and evolutionary epistemologists ratiomorphism is something fundamentally positive, necessary for life, and which favours life; something which can unite in situations when almost everything divides. Therefore, the act of falling back on ratiomorphism, at least in some existential situations, is justifiable. Yet the question up to what point one can go back relatively safely remains open. People who abandon, be it voluntarily or out of necessity, the pressures and rules of culture are not actually withdrawing to a position of a friendly animal. They fall much further, outside the ratiomorphism which exists in the world of non-human animals.[49]

Final remarks

The main thought of my article could be summarised as the following: Since meanings are produced and discovered in communication and ratiomorphic mechanisms are being revealed in contemporary communication ever so emphatically and strongly, the meanings which are an existential need, which have been filtered for millennia by culture, with its rationality and axiology, are currently to an ever increasing extent defined by technoratiomorphism devoid of axiology. Therefore, in the era of the new media, ratiomorphic meaning begins to dominate. Then, since the need for meaning is a basic value and the existential need of humans, that ratiomorphic turn must possess a very important, though surely fairly unrecognised, consequences in the human world and in humans themselves. Nonetheless, somewhat paradoxically, that new strategy of finding and creating meaning is a rational strategy in the contemporary communicational environment: ratiomorphism is that which is common for all people; something to which everyone can refer.

Biologically humans are defined as *homo sapiens* while culturally as *homo communicans*. In the era of modern technology, humans have been evolving

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[49]   Cf. J. Pleszczyński, *Epistemologia...*, p. 320–321.

towards *homo ratiomorphicus*. Only after that can one expect post or trans-humans, whose prompt arrival has been discussed ever so seriously. They might be able to live completely devoid of any need for meaning, including ratiomorphic meaning–and longer than for three seconds. Such post or trans-humans would, however, be a different species. For now, at least I assume so, we are still *homo sapiens socialis et communicans*, and therefore we cannot live deprived of that which we call meaning. Even if that meaning has been taking increasingly more ratiomorphic forms.

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Jan Pleszczyński

Współczesna komunikacja i racjomorfizacja sensu

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W artykule próbuję pokazać, że we współczesnej komunikacji, a zatem także w życiu społecznym, ujawnia się coraz więcej racjomorfizmu. Racjomorfizm definiuję jako wrodzone, determinowane genetycznie, nieświadome, ale teleonomicznie ukierunkowane na przeżycie zdolności poznawcze organizmów żywych. Nie można go jednak utożsamiać wyłącznie z emocjami ani z irracjonalizmem. We współczesnej komunikacji zdominowanej przez nowe media racjomorfizm przybiera formę technoracjomorfizmu. Jest zatem oczywiste, że racjomorficzność pojawia się także w sferze sensu.

W epoce przedinternetowej sens wiązał się z racjonalnością i uniwersalnymi wartościami, takimi jak prawda, dobro i piękno. W epoce internetu następuje zwrot ku wartościom racjomorficznym: prawda jest zastępowana przez akceptację, dobro przez pożytek, zaś piękno przez atrakcyjność.

Paradoksalnie, ta nowa strategia odnajdywania i tworzenia sensu, jest we współczesnym środowisku komunikacyjnym strategią racjonalną.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja społeczna, nowoczesne technologie medialne, epistemologia komunikacji, racjomorfizm, sens, aksjologia.

Contemporary communication and ratiomorphization of meaning

S u m m a r y

In the article, I attempted to indicate that in modern communication, i.e. also in social life, ratiomorphism has been appearing. I define it as an unconscious, innate, genetically determined and teleonomically survival-driven cognitive faculties, skills and patterns of behavior present in all living being, including humans.

It cannot be, however, associated only with emotions or irrationalism. In modern communication dominated by the new media, ratiomorphism takes on the form of technoratiomorphism. Therefore, it is obvious that ratiomorphism also appears in the sphere of meaning.

In the pre-internet era, meaning was associated with rationality and universal values such as truth, goodness, and beauty. In the internet era, there has been a turn towards ratiomorphic values: truth is being replaced with acceptance, goodness with utility, and beauty with attractiveness.

Paradoxically, than new strategy for finding and creating meaning is a rational strategy in the contemporary communicational environment.

Keywords: social communication, modern media technology, epistemology of communication, ratiomorphism, meaning, axiology.

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