THE PRECARIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMBODIMENT AND DIGITAL RELIGION

Tobias Friesen

Introduction

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a notable increase in the prevalence of religious content on the internet. In Germany, Protestant and Catholic theologians have undertaken critical examinations of this phenomenon, with a particular focus on digital rituals such as the digital celebration of the Eucharist.[1] One common objection to these forms of mediatized religion is that online interactions lack physical co-presence, which is considered indispensable for Christian rituals. This position can be based, in part, on recent research on embodiment, particularly the tradition of enactive embodiment, which argues for a sensorimotor coupling between a dynamic organism and its environment. This excludes the possibility of a static digital interaction, as might occur in a Zoom conference. The Zoom conference, in the context of the ongoing pandemic, has rapidly become a prominent example within the field of embodiment research, serving to illustrate the phenomenon of disembodiment in the digital realm. It is posited that there is no interaffective and interbody resonance between users in Zoom conferences, no possibility of eye contact and no sense of shared

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spatiality.[2] These arguments gained significant plausibility during the pandemic and the subsequent fatigue associated with the use of Zoom.[3] In light of the aforementioned arguments, it can be posited that the relationship between embodiment and the digital is a precarious one, with the digital sphere representing a domain of disembodiment. This article presents an opposing argument to this thesis. It will be argued that this is an unnecessary restriction of the discourse on embodiment, which is neither necessary nor desirable. This paper posits that embodiment is inherently precarious and that the digital sphere necessitates a theory of multiple modes of embodiment rather than the creation of a dichotomy between embodiment and the digital.

To substantiate this thesis, the initial section of this article will present an initial overview of the relationship between embodiment, religion and the digital. This section will introduce the thesis of Charles Taylor, which posits that religion underwent a transformation from an embodied ritualistic practice to a rational belief system during the Enlightenment. It will also present Richard Kearney's analysis of the role of touch in the digital sphere. Subsequently, the article will undertake a critical analysis of Thomas Fuchs's work on embodiment and virtuality. Finally, Lucy Osler's work will be considered as an alternative approach proposing the creation of regional and diverse phenomenologies of the body in the digital age. Following Osler, the article will defend the thesis that embodiment is inherently precarious, which in turn will lead to some suggestions on how these ideas could be applied to the field of digital religion. It will conclude with some tentative theological reflections on the ritual of the online Eucharist.

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[2]   For a critical discussion and overview of these arguments, cf. Lucy Osler and Dan Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment: Online Communication During and After Covid-19," *Foundations of Science* 28 (2023): 1129–1124, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-022-09861-1.
[3]   Jesper Aagaard, "On the dynamics of Zoom fatigue," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 6 (2022): 1878–1891, https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221099711.

Setting the Stage: Are We Living in a Time of Excarnation?

In his magnum opus *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor posits that the Enlightenment has led to a time of excarnation and disembodiment, a state of being that we continue to wrestle with today. According to this view, Kant, Descartes, and other thinkers have put forth the idea that humans are fundamentally thinking beings. Their critique of reason also included a critique of religion, which in Kant's case, took aim at a religion within the bounds of pure reason. In this context, excarnation is thus defined as "the transfer of embodied, enfleshed forms of religious life, to those which are more 'in the head'."[4] This process is then further described as the "Great Disembedding."[5] This means that before the Enlightenment, religion was connected to ritual, practice, and community. However, following the Enlightenment period, religion became individualized and rationalized in modernity. As plausible as Taylor's individual theses are, this grand narrative can become voracious and obscure the view for precise phenomenological analyses. If, for example, the digital age is categorized in such a history of decline, it is only seen as a continuation of the "Great Disembedding." The question of how digital religion is to be assessed is thus already decided a priori by the discursive framing and the grand narrative. Digital religion must be disembodied, individualistic, and inferior compared to *real, embodied* rituals of discrete communities. In this light, a fair assessment of the possibilities of embodiment in digital religion can hardly be expected.

An example of such an integration of the digital age into the narrative of the secular age can be found in Richard Kearney's book *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*. In this book, Kearney takes the notion of "excarnation" from Taylor and applies it to the digital age. More specifically, he argues that the sense of touch is being lost in a digitized world. Thus, the last chapter of his book is titled "Reclaiming Touch in the Age of Excarnation." In this chapter, he narrows Taylor's big story of excarnation from the Enlightenment to a problem of contempo-

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[4]   Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 613.
[5]   Ibid., 146–158.

rary times: "Clearly, the current generation is becoming increasingly dependent on electronic devices that connect them with virtual worlds while disconnecting them from real ones. At the touch of a tab, we gain a digital universe but lose touch with ourselves. We create virtual profiles at the price of tactile experience. Omnipresent access at the cost of real presence."[6] In addition to the metaphysical assumption of a clear separation between *real* and *virtual* worlds, Kearney also acts as an admonisher here, citing statistics on young people's mobile phone use and criticizing the loss of *real* corporeal contact. This criticism is articulated in the light of two highly controversial topics of contemporary culture: sexual harassment and sex work. In the context of sexual harassment, Kearney points to the *#MeToo* debate. For Kearney, a key part of this debate is due to "attitudes of suspicion and confusion making genuine erotic exchange more difficult."[7] This argument is rooted in the idea that there has been a "move from tactile contact to optical vision,"[8] which in turn leads to "[t]he flight of erotic-romantic behavior, from communal rituals to digital fantasies."[9] He then rejects the idea that we must return to the "courtship rites of yesteryear"[10] but continues by asserting "the need for novel pedagogies of bodily wisdom."[11] This analysis may have a point, but it also overestimates the harmoniousness of interbody tactile contact before the digital age. One can at least claim that Kearney is very silent here about the abysmal nature of touch (harassment, violence, and unwanted touch), a fact that is particularly unsettling in the context of the sensitive *#MeToo* debate. The objective of this article is to examine the implicit discourse pattern that lies behind Kearney's analysis, namely the pattern of harmonization versus over-problematization. The concept of harmonization implies that the domain of inter-bodily contact is perceived solely in terms of its favorable aspects, while the potential drawbacks associated with physi-

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[6]   Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 117.
[7]   Ibid., 121.
[8]   Ibid.
[9]   Ibid.
[10]   Ibid.
[11]   Ibid.

cal exposure are overlooked. On the other hand, over-problematization means an overemphasis on the disadvantages of the digital world that leads to a narrow perspective that fails to recognize the positive aspects of online contact. For instance, the loss of physical contact is often viewed as a negative consequence of digital communication, but the opportunities for remote collaboration and the enhanced accessibility of information are frequently overlooked. Regardless of one's opinion of Kearney's analysis, the following examination will provide insight into this discourse pattern of harmonization vs. over-problematization. The initial aspect to be considered is the pattern of harmonization. Kearney diagnoses a flight from the collective practices of erotic-romantic behavior without engaging with the problematic aspects of this phenomenon. As a result, he fails to acknowledge the potential risks associated with touch and unwanted contact. In this context, Kearney's analysis of the concept of "tact" is undoubtedly insightful, but he does not fully elucidate the inherent fragility, contextuality, and precariousness of this concept. The harmonization of interbody contact is accompanied by an over-problematization that pejoratively talks about the lack of "bodily wisdom" and "digital fantasies."

A second example of Kearney's implicit harmonization narrative is his analysis of sex work. In this analysis, he posits that the transition to digital platforms has resulted in a decline in interbody contact. He writes: "Moreover, it is telling that most urban sex shops and red-light districts are disappearing with the rise of the online sex industry where consumers now avail themselves of streamed simulations or direct-order products at the tap of a screen. Just as Amazon is closing bookstores, Pornhub is closing public venues of erotica."[12] It needs to be acknowledged that this quote has been taken out of context, as it forms part of a larger project by Kearney. While this project has the potential to offer a positive critique of the present, it is still surprising to find that the quote in question implicitly valorizes the real-world embodiment of sex work. Two aspects of the quote warrant further examination: first, the omission of certain elements, and second, the concealment of alternative analyses. Kearney does not address the potential dangers and vul-

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[12]   Ibid., 120.

nerabilities inherent in sex work conducted in the context of a direct, physical encounter between individuals. Additionally, he does not provide a detailed account of the advantages associated with the transition of sex work to the digital domain, including reduced vulnerability, empowerment, and independence. The implicit logic that emerges from Kearney's analysis of these two examples can be summarized as follows: first, there is a discursive framing with unevenly distributed problematization; second, there is the concealment of theoretical alternatives, which is driven by the grand narrative of the "Great Disembedding." This again shows that the discursive framing of harmonization vs. overproblematization makes it impossible to see the good sides of the digital. These examples illustrate the potential for hidden assumptions to influence theories of embodiment. They also highlight the limitations of some phenomenological analyses, which may appear neutral but are in fact shaped by underlying normative beliefs.

Thomas Fuchs's Critique of Virtuality

This article now turns to an examination of Thomas Fuchs's critique of virtuality, situated within the tradition of embodied cognition and phenomenology. Fuchs is a prominent voice offering a critical perspective on the digital age, raising key concerns that need to be addressed by any conceptualization of the digital that rejects a clear-cut distinction between embodiment and digital media. In his article, "The Virtual Other: Empathy in the Age of Virtuality," Fuchs focuses on the possibility of empathy in the digital age. He posits that empathy is primarily an embodied phenomenon, manifested in corporeal face-to-face encounters. This assertion bears a resemblance to Kearney's perspective. However, Fuchs's argument is not as straightforward as it may initially appear. He first delineates a broader spectrum of empathic phenomena, distinguishing between: (1) Primary, intercorporeal empathy, (2) extended empathy, (3) fictional empathy.[13] All three are rooted in an

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[13]   Thomas Fuchs, "The Virtual Other: Empathy in the Age of Virtuality," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 21, no. 5–6 (2014): 157–63, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192898197.003.0004. This text was published again: Thomas Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being: Foundational*

embodied understanding of human beings. Furthermore, a positive understanding of virtuality is grounded in the uniquely human capacity for as-if consciousness. Humans can imagine, fantasize, and virtualize, a capacity that is rooted in the embodied nature of human beings. Additionally, he underscores that empathy is a complex, multi-level process, which this article will now examine in greater depth.

First, primary empathy begins at the level of intercorporeal resonance. At this level of empathy, there is no simulation of the mental state of another person; rather, one perceives a loud voice as threatening, as evidenced by the bodily tension and tendency to withdraw. The "as" in the previous sentence is therefore not a cognitive operation but an embodied and precognitive process. This level of interbody communication takes place before conscious reflection. In the field of embodiment research, this is referred to as the *direct perception theory*.[14] Thus, prior to the emergence of perspective-taking, simulation and imagination, empathy manifests as a phenomenon of bodily resonance. This conceptualization of empathy challenges the prevailing theories of empathy, which posit that empathy necessitates some form of cognitive simulation. Second, "extended empathy"[15] represents a more cognitive and imaginative level of empathy. It follows a standard case that can be imagined like this: I project onto the other person how I would feel in their position. Finally, "fictional empathy"[16] is the capacity to empathize with figures in a novel, a character in a movie, or an avatar in an online game. Fictional empathy also demonstrates the extensive capacity of humans to empathize with non-human entities, such as robots or other inanimate things. Extended and fictional empathy are rooted in the human capacity for as-if consciousness. To illustrate, children may engage in play with a stick *as if* it were a laser sword. This form of as-if

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Questions of an Embodied Anthropology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 83–103, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192898197.001.0001. The two text versions vary slightly and, therefore, the cited version will be indicated by the publishing year.
[14]   Cf. Dan Zahavi, "Empathy and Direct Social Perception: A Phenomenological Proposal," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 2 (2011): 541–558, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-011-0070-3, and Shaun Gallagher, "Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context," *Consciousness and Cognition* 17 (2008): 535–543, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2008.03.003.
[15]   Fuchs, "The Virtual Other" (2014), 158.
[16]   Ibid., 159.

immersion is also evident when an actor is wholly immersed in their role. Nevertheless, it is crucial for Fuchs to acknowledge that even in a state of complete immersion, a liminal as-if persists, serving as a reminder of the fictional nature of the immersion.

These considerations appear to culminate in a high valuation of fictional empathy, whereby immersion in media technologies is entirely possible and a clear-cut distinction between reality and virtuality is no longer necessary. This is also evidenced by certain sections of Fuchs's text, in which he asserts that "we are indeed bodily present in virtual spaces,"[17] and that one could even posit an "incorporation of virtual space"[18] into the lived embodied reality. He even goes so far as to state that: The relationship to smartphones is characterized by an "almost erotic quality,"[19] evident in the "fascinated immersion in the screen and the gentle stroking of the touch screen."[20] This immersion is further enhanced by online gaming, which incorporates the sensorimotor and enactive agent aspects that are so important for embodiment theory.[21] In this context, Fuchs also points to Baudrillard and his figure of the simulacrum "as a media-based, simulated hyperreality, which no longer allows the differentiation between the original and the copy, between reality and imagination."[22] Fuchs points to "9/11" as an example of such a simulacrum since it "consists more in its media images than in a real event," and one could speculate that "mass media themselves create reality by making events such as "9/11" and other terrorist attacks or rampages possible, or even causing them, in a certain sense, through their public portrayal."[23] Here, Fuchs shows a sensitivity to media-theoretical considerations in which media become conditions of possibility for new realities. The ontologically clear distinction between real and virtual is thereby softened. This appears to support a very open

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[17] Fuchs, "The Virtual Other" (2021), 90. This quote cannot be found in the original text from 2014.
[18] Ibid., 96.
[19] Ibid., 95.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 96.
[22] Ibid., 94.
[23] Ibid., 95.

position toward virtual reality that circumvents the dichotomy of real and virtual, as seen in Kearney.

However, Fuchs is also highly critical of virtual reality and immersive media. This critical stance contends that immersion has its limits and that the blurring of the difference between real and virtual can become problematic. Going back to the example of 9/11, Fuchs also states that "the ambivalent ontological status of a 'media event' seems to have contributed to the mistrust of some viewer groups, which manifested itself in conspiracy theories of a staging of the attack."[24] Even though he contends that there is an ontological ambivalence at work in media events, he thus refuses to celebrate this ontological ambivalence and therefore turns the ontological ambivalence into a moral ambivalence. Returning to the phenomenology of the smartphone as an erotic device of immersion and computer games as a sensorimotor coupling of body and computer, Fuchs also states:

This would seem at first to contradict the thesis of 'disembodiment' formulated above. However, it is in fact the almost perfect visual, tactile, and motoric coupling between user and computer that circumvents the experiences of resistance and foreignness that are characteristic of our normal bodily encounters with the world. This manifests itself not least in concepts such as 'internet surfing,' 'browsing,' or 'skimming': they indicate the minimization of resistance in a medium that offers limitless possibilities for movement and, thus, an almost omnipotent self-experience.[25]

This shows that Fuchs wrestles with the thesis of disembodiment in the virtual world and that it is not justified to say that he is missing the inherent problematic of a dualization between virtual and real. But what this quote also shows is that Fuchs's main argument against the celebration of new embodiment relations in the context of digital media is that online communication limits the resistance and the foreignness of the body. This means that the body in real-world encounters is a hindrance for our projections. It is this characteristic that, for Fuchs, is diminished in the virtual world.

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[24] Ibid., 95.
[25] Ibid., 96.

Fuchs' second argument for the limits of embodiment in the virtual world is derived from psychopathology. He makes the argument that a liminal as-if consciousness is operative during immersion in virtual worlds. Hence, he states that in fictional immersion, one is aware of the fictionality in a very weak sense. Fuchs explains this with the concepts of "iconic difference"[26] and the "paradox of fiction."[27] The iconic difference refers to the oscillation between the image in its materiality and the image as immersive. The paradox of fiction states that although one knows that a character like Anna Karenina is not real, one still feels her story *as if* it is real.[28] This leads to a seemingly clear-cut distinction between real and fictional. However, this ontological claim is not philosophically argued for; rather, it is exemplified by psychopathology where it can be observed that there are instances where the as-if consciousness collapses, which in turn results in psychic suffering.

The mental illness corresponding to the iconic difference is *psychosis*. In psychosis and delusion, one loses the sense of the mediating object. The oscillation stops and one becomes "incapable of differentiating between the mediating carrier object and the mediated reality."[29] Applied to online gaming research, addictive computer gaming can lead to the belief that computers themselves are alive. In general, delusions also tend to blur the distinction between reality and fiction, with reality appearing fictional. For instance, a person in a delusion may feel like the character in The Truman Show, where nothing is real and reality itself feels staged and surreal. This loss of the sense of reality is often accompanied by profound anxiety and suffering in patients. This dem-

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[26] Ibid., 89. Referencing: Gottfried Boehm, "Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes," in *Die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften* ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gottfried Boehm (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), 444–447.

[27] Fuchs, "The Virtual Other" (2021), 91. Referencing: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (London: Blackwell, 2007).

[28] Thomas Fuchs' use of these concepts and his way of linking them to psychopathology will not be critically discussed here. One could disagree with Fuchs, i.e. with Jean-Luc Nancy, who points to a specific kind of awareness when dreaming that meets some of Fuchs' criteria for psychosis. One could also further differentiate Fuchs' rather simplistic account of 'normal' and 'psychotic' perception. This is beyond the scope of this article. For Jean-Luc Nancy's elaboration of awareness during dreaming, cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 7–8.

[29] Fuchs, "The Virtual Other" (2021), 91.

onstrates that in cases of normal media immersion, there is still a minimal sense of fictionality and that diffusion of the line between real and digital is neither necessary nor desirable.

The mental illness that corresponds to the paradox of fiction is the phenomenon of *transivism* in schizophrenia. This phenomenon is characterized by a loss of the perception between the self and other. Parnas describes a case that exemplifies this phenomenon by describing a young man who "was frequently confused in a conversation, being unable to distinguish between himself and his interlocutor," and who, seeing himself in a mirror, "felt uncertain on which side he actually was."[30] This further illustrates that typical experiences of immersion in digital media involve a sense of differentiation between the self and others. From a psychopathological perspective, Fuchs advocates an ontological distinction between appearance and being, as well as virtuality and reality. In this perspective, the replacement of direct interbody contact between individuals with digital communication becomes a cause for concern. This is because digital media work to blur the distinction between virtuality and reality. They tend to erode the iconic difference through the dissolution of the *as-if* aspect. Thus, Fuchs's argument can be summarized as follows: empathy that is detached from intercorporeal communication tends to give free rein to the imagination. While in the physical situation, the foreignness of the other and their resistance keeps the sense of reality alive, the digital situation is characterized by the fact that I no longer encounter the other in real life and therefore need to fill the gaps left by this imaginatively. According to Fuchs, digital media tend to be transparent and minimize the resistance of the other. That this needs to be prevented was precisely the point of the psychopathological cases: one must always maintain the distinction between the medium and mediated as well as the self and other. Thus, the primary form of empathy is of particular significance in Fuchs's thought. It serves as the foundation for the subsequent levels of empathy, and when this foundation is lost by replacing 'real-world' com-

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[30] Josef Parnas, "Self and Schizophrenia: A Phenomenological Perspective," in *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*, ed. Tilo Kircher and Anthony David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 232, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511543708.012.

munication with digital communication, the resulting embodiment becomes precarious, and the tendency toward illusionary consciousness is purported. This ultimately leads Fuchs to a critique of the digital, which is, in his view, apt at supporting conspiracy theories, filter bubbles, and echo chambers. In conclusion, it can be stated that Fuchs believes that online interactions lack the qualities of alterity and interbody resonance, which are essential for the richness of personal interactions. Consequently, he places greater value on offline encounters.

Lucy Osler's Phenomenology of Online Interactions

Having provided a comprehensive overview of Fuchs's position, this article will now present a comparative analysis of his perspective with that of Lucy Osler. Osler is similarly engaged in research within the domains of phenomenology and embodiment, and her theoretical approach aligns closely with that of Fuchs. Conversely, she adopts a distinct stance with respect to the potential of online embodiment. The following section will present a synthesis of Osler's arguments against Fuchs's position. This synthesis will identify four key points of critique against Fuchs and will also supplement these points with some material that goes beyond Osler's own considerations.

1) The assumption that the digital is a replacement for the real is erroneous. Rather, the digital should be conceptualized as a modification of embodiment.

One of the fundamental arguments presented by Osler against the phenomenological critique of online spaces as disembodied is that such critiques tend to view these spaces as mere replacements for traditional real-world interactions. Osler and Zahavi argue that this apprehension of replacement is, in part, prompted by transhumanist perspectives positing that "virtual worlds will be 'indistinguishable' from our non-virtual ones."[31] This conceptualization of substitution is then subjected to a phenomenological critique, which asserts that phenomena such as

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[31] Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1126. In this context they are citing David Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (Allen Lane, 2022), xiv.

eye contact, touch, a shared perception of space, and affective attunement are particularly challenging to replicate in online communication contexts. In other words, phenomenologists demonstrate the deficiencies of online communication. Nevertheless, this is done within the context of the substitution framework. In this context, Osler and Zahavi make the following observation: "Baked into the term 'replacement' is the implication that we must give something up. […] No wonder that many are put off by the idea that technologically mediated forms of sociality might replace non-mediated ones, for it suggests that in embracing digital forms of sociality, we must do so at the expense of traditional styles of face-to-face encounter."[32] Osler and Zahavi therefore argue against the framing of replacement and in favor of a framing of multiplicity: "Instead, we should see digital communication as opening up new ways that we can engage with one another in addition to our myriad offline interactions."[33] In advocating for multiplicity, one can then incorporate the aforementioned critiques of online communication by asserting that a particular mode of online communication diminishes a specific sense of embodiment. However, these descriptions need to be "platform-sensitive"[34] and should not encompass a general critique of online communication. The multiplicity thesis can also connect with the concept of the extended body. In this sense, Osler points to texting on WhatsApp as an example of expressive and immersive conversation that includes the lived body. Osler attempts to demonstrate this through a thought experiment in which one engages in conversation with a chat partner named Diego, with whom one is acquainted in real life:

The pace of Diego's messages, the patter of his speech, his choice of words, his use of emojis and wild punctuation all form part of the field of expression I directly perceive. The style of his texting has a certain 'vitality' to it that is not contained in the texts but unfolds through the texting itself, giving his messages a certain expressive tone. […] To reduce Diego's messages to disembodied signs and symbols misses the way we experience speech (either spoken or texted) as expressive. Indeed, that we do experience Diego's messages as

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32   Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1136.
33   Ibid., 1137.
34   Ibid., 1129.

expressive at all should itself prompt us to understand that empathy is at play here.[35]

Osler thus refutes the thesis that online empathy excludes the direct perception of an embodied other. Conversely, she posits that "our perceptual grasp of Diego is even less rich, as we are limited to perceiving him via text."[36] However, she swiftly counters this argument with the assertion that "to empathetically perceive someone does not require that I perceive them with all my sensory capacities. Indeed, such a position would have worryingly ableist implications."[37]

Osler provides an additional illustration of online embodiment, namely expressive avatars. In a paper coauthored with Ekdahl, she posits that online gamers perceive other avatars as expressive: "Our analysis shows that the informants experience human-based avatarial interactions as qualitatively different from interactions with bots, that the informants see the movements of other players' avatars as having different expressive styles, and that the informants actively use and manipulate this avatarial expressivity during performance."[38] In conclusion, Ekdahl and Osler demonstrate that the phenomenology of online gaming encompasses a multitude of characteristics typically attributed to real-world embodiment, such as a rich expressive style. This challenges the assertion that such gaming is inherently limited in its expressivity.[39]

2) The prioritization of interbody contact over online communication establishes a false duality and has problematic normative implications.

Osler and Zahavi also posit that phenomenology tends to establish offline interactions as the "gold standard"[40] of communication, thereby proposing a renewed dualization of the on- and offline realms. In relation to the second point, it is possible to concur with Osler and Za-

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[35] Lucy Osler, "Taking Empathy Online," *Inquiry* 67, no.1 (2021): 19.
[36] Ibid., 20.
[37] Ibid.
[38] David Ekdahl and Lucy Osler, "Expressive Avatars: Vitality in Virtual Worlds," *Philosophy & Technology* 36, no. 24 (2023): 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-023-00628-5.
[39] Ibid., 19–21.
[40] Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1137.

havi that this dualization is contingent upon the replacement thesis and fails to acknowledge that we are typically engaged in both online and offline communication. The two are inextricably connected and mutually reinforcing. This can be linked to the thesis of deep mediatization, which posits that deep mediatization "is an advanced stage of the process in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures."[41] Moreover, the juxtaposition of online and offline relations "fails to consider how online social encounters might, in some cases, be desirable precisely because they are differently embodied to offline ones."[42] One example of this is the alternative social network cited by Bail, which provides a forum for the anonymous discussion of political issues. Bail's studies have demonstrated that, with regard to such a network, anonymity and the absence of embodiment do not result in increased aggression or decreased empathy. Instead, individuals communicate with one another in a more empathetic manner. To support this claim, Bail cites an example in which a Black woman and a white man engage in a constructive dialogue about police violence.[43] This is made possible by the absence of the other person's physical form and the associated prejudices and projections. Osler and Zahavi concur with this perspective, additionally challenging the "gold standard" viewpoint and questioning the neutrality of interbody contact: "What this overlooks is that we do not all experience physically co-present embodied social encounters in the same way. There are many cases where someone may experience altered styles of embodied interaction as preferable."[44] They then provide the example of autistic individuals who "often struggle with social attunement."[45] Their experiences of intercorporeality therefore "may work to negatively impact a social encounter, as well as result in experiences of anxiety and social doubt."[46] Osler and Zahavi also cite evidence

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[41] Andreas Hepp, *Deep Mediatization* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 5.
[42] Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1138.
[43] Chris Bail, *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 126.
[44] Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1137.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

indicating that "autistic communities have flourished on various online platforms."[47] This demonstrates that the phenomenology of intercorporeality is, in itself, normatively structured. It is therefore necessary to modify the notion of a neutral "gold standard" of interbody contact to account for the vulnerability and fragility of interbody contact. Furthermore, it needs to account for the political problem that different people experience interbody contact in different ways depending on their race, class, and gender. This demonstrates that a phenomenology of embodiment is not neutral but always political.

3) There is an inherent negativity in embodied sociality.

The focus on the normativity of the embodied encounter ultimately leads to the conclusion that the embodied encounter contains an inherent negativity. While Dreyfus, for instance, emphasizes that the vulnerability that is intrinsic to being human is lost in the online encounter, Osler and Zahavi highlight that this vulnerability is not always desirable. They ask: "Why assume that a position of vulnerability is desirable?"[48] This question is followed by some quite convincing remarks that highlight the "violence, abuse, and discrimination that many people experience in the physical co-presence of others."[49] From this perspective, the reduction of vulnerability can be viewed as a positive outcome rather than a negative one. Therefore, it is imperative to emphasize that the concepts of embodiment and vulnerability need to be considered within a political framework. This also gives rise to a critique of an account of vulnerability that is solely based on the subject's capacity. In this context, vulnerability is defined as the capacity to expose oneself to others and to form connections with them. The potential for injury from the other is seldom contemplated and must be addressed politically, given the unequal distribution of vulnerability within society. In this sense, one could adopt a similar approach to that proposed by Butler, who asks which lives are considered grievable

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.

and which are not.[50] This could then be further specified through the application of a phenomenology of violence and a phenomenology of racism.[51]

4) There is alterity and vulnerability in online spaces.

In a final argument, Osler and Zahavi posit that a distinct form of vulnerability exists within the digital domain. They argue that the opposing position "overlooks the extent to which we remain emotionally vulnerable online."[52] The initial level of this vulnerability arises from the material interface or the algorithms of specific platforms that are beyond an individual's control. Osler and Krueger thus claim that "while the Internet can profoundly augment and enrich our affective life and deepen our connection to others, there is also a distinctive kind of affective *precarity* built into our online endeavors as well."[53] This precarity has its roots in the fact that we transfer some of our affect regulation to the online world or to certain platforms over which we have no control. The second level of vulnerability is associated with the concept of the extended body. The aforementioned example involving WhatsApp has demonstrated that technology can result in the expansion of the self into digital media. This phenomenon can also be observed in the context of wearable technology, smartphones, and online profiles. In a certain sense, these can become integrated into the self, and attacks on the digital self (such as hacking or bullying) are thus perceived as attacks on the self and can lead to reactions such as panic, anxiety, or depression. It would thus be erroneous to assert that the online realm is devoid of physicality and, consequently, of genuine vulnerability. The third and most extreme case of vulnerability would be instances of cyber rape in

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[50] Cf. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).
[51] Cf. Michael Staudigl, "Towards a Relational Phenomenology of Violence," in *Human Studies* 36 (2013): 43–66, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-013-9269-x; Michael Staudigl, "Racism: On the phenomenology of embodied desocialization," in *Continental Philosophy Review* 45 (2011): 23–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-011-9206-5.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Joel Krueger and Lucy Osler, "Engineering Affect: Emotion Regulation, the Internet, and the Techno-Social Niche," *Philosophical Topics* 47, no. 2 (2019), 207, https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201947223.

virtual environments. In this context, Radde-Antweiler draws attention to the studies of Kirwan, which suggest that "gamers who experienced such offenses and violations often show the same after-effects as victims of offline rapes."[54] She then adds that "even if the physical body was not attacked, the social body was under attack, and the user experienced a trauma. A reduction to only the physical body and the assumed strict distinction between offline and online bodies, therefore, falls short."[55] This illustrates the multiplicity of ways in which the body is affected by online interactions, whether directly or indirectly. Phenomenological concepts such as the notion of the lived body or concepts like the social body or extended body thus demonstrate that vulnerability extends beyond mere physicality.

Regarding the alterity of the other and its resistance to projections in embodied communication, one can cite the above-mentioned example of social media and the role of anonymity. This demonstrates that the body of the other is not only an alterity and a resistance to one's projections but is in fact – at least sometimes – the surface for one's projections and biases. Once more, it is necessary to challenge the notion of a "gold standard" of embodied interaction. Intercorporeality in the real world is complex and precarious, with bodies susceptible to biases, projections, and prejudices. This is further open to connections with political phenomenologies, such as the phenomenologies of racism.[56]

Outlook: Precarious Embodiment and Digital Religion

What are the implications of these considerations for the study of digital religion? It can be argued that the study of digital religion needs to differentiate itself from the discourse around excarnation and disembodiment, as exemplified by the contributions of Kearney and Taylor. This is vital in order to circumvent the impediment to perceiv-

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54 Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, "Embodiment," in *Digital Religion Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media,* 2nd edition, ed. Heid A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 111.
55 Ibid.
56 Cf. Sara Ahmed, "A phenomenology of whiteness," in *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–168, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139.

ing the nuances of digital religion. Moreover, digital religion research must address the criticisms put forth by Fuchs in a clear and comprehensive manner, avoiding premature dismissal. Fuchs' critique of virtuality cannot be simplistically dismissed as naive or culturally pessimistic. Instead, it encompasses a nuanced perspective on the expansion of embodiment into the digital sphere. However, it also needs to be considered how Osler and Zahavi challenge the discursive framing of replacement, disembodiment, and vulnerability. It is therefore recommended that the analysis of digital religion should aim to achieve a nuanced and platform-sensitive understanding of the alterations of embodiment in different online interactions. It is of crucial importance that the understanding of altered embodiment does not deviate from the established "gold standard" of embodiment derived from offline interactions. In examining Osler's position, it became evident that the political implications of the theses on embodiment and vulnerability must be duly considered because of their normative implications, which must be subjected to explicit discussion and analysis. In light of the evidence indicating that embodiment is a vulnerable state whether in offline or online contexts, it can be proposed that embodiment is, in fact, inherently precarious. It is therefore evident that digital religion must demonstrate its benefits in its productive relationship with certain aspects of embodiment and vulnerability. In line with Osler's argument, digital religion research could ask how online religion can offer unique benefits to individuals facing social challenges, such as social anxiety, autism, or trauma. This perspective could be further reinforced through the application of theological lenses, such as the concept of neighborly love or a theology of the cross, as exemplified in Christian theology. In this manner, digital religious rituals can be subjected to reflection in the context of normative theological considerations that can be integrated with Osler's insights. In light of these considerations, the discussion about online Eucharist can be re-examined. For some commentators, the offline materiality, sociality, and embodiment are an inherent component of the ritual's theological efficacy. Consequently, the replacement of the ritual with an online format during the global pandemic was met with considerable criticism. With Osler, it is pertinent to question whether the necessity of the notion of replacement that underlies

this argument remains valid once the COVID-19 pandemic has come to an end. Against the notion of replacement, it would be advantageous to consider the development of hybrid formats, whereby some participants engage online while others do so offline. This could be particularly beneficial for vulnerable groups who are still unable to attend church in person. Furthermore, these online rituals have the potential to facilitate connections between individuals from disparate backgrounds, thereby fostering a sense of unity and bridging the gaps that often exist within communities with geographical and social limitation. It is important to note that the objective is not to replace one Eucharist ritual (offline) with the other (online), but rather to supplement the existing ritual with the online element or to provide more individuals with the opportunity to engage with the ritual on different levels. This illustrates how Osler's considerations on online embodiment facilitate a more sophisticated theological discourse that acknowledges both the conventional embodiment of the Eucharist and the ethics of solidarity and vulnerability.

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