



LANGUAGE, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM IN THE DIGITAL AGE: DIGITAL IDOLATRY AND THE CRISIS OF INTERIORITY

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the contemporary crisis of language in the digital environment as a structural transformation of human freedom. It argues that the corruption of language goes beyond a merely communicative problem and, instead, points to an anthropological disruption of interiority. The concept of “digital idolatry” is proposed as an interpretive framework for understanding new forms of symbolic and psychological dependence mediated by social networks. Drawing on philosophy of language, philosophical anthropology, and contemporary social theory, this paper contends that the dissociation between language and truth undermines personal self-determination, fostering mimetic identification and affective heteronomy (Pieper, 1992; López Quintás, 2015). As a counterpoint, Ignatian pedagogy is examined, not as an immediate normative solution, but as a historical model of interior formation in which language, discernment, and freedom are structurally integrated (Loyola, 1997; O’Malley, 1999). The originality of the proposal lies in articulating a diagnostic framework – digital idolatry – with a historical-contrastive analysis of interior formation, thereby bridging contemporary social theory and the tradition of Ignatian pedagogy. The article concludes that restoring the ontological

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function of language as a mediation of truth constitutes a necessary condition for the recovery of freedom in the contemporary digital context.

Keywords: Language and truth; Interiority; Digital culture; Mimetic desire; Ignatian pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The centrality of language in the constitution of human experience is widely acknowledged across philosophical traditions and the humanities more broadly. However, recent transformations in the digital environment appear to have done more than intensify communicative processes: they have qualitatively altered the function of language itself. Rather than serving primarily as a medium through which reality is disclosed, language increasingly operates as a performative mechanism oriented toward producing effects, shaping perceptions, and directing behavior.

This shift becomes particularly visible in the domain of so-called digital mental health, where actors who present themselves as mediators of subjective experience frequently offer pre-formatted interpretations of reality through simplified formulas, emotionally charged slogans, and conceptually ambiguous categories. In this setting, language no longer clarifies experience; it reorganizes it according to pre-established frameworks.

The hypothesis guiding this article is that this phenomenon cannot be adequately understood in sociological or communicational terms alone. It constitutes a transformation that reaches the core of human freedom by disrupting the relationship between language and truth. When language ceases to mediate reality and begins instead to produce it artificially, individuals progressively lose the capacity to orient themselves according to intrinsic criteria, becoming dependent on external structures of validation and recognition.

To describe this process, the concept of “digital idolatry” is proposed, understood here as the symbolic absolutization of performative authority figures within the virtual environment. The concept allows for the articulation of mimetic identification, affective dependence, and discursive manipulation within a unified analytical framework (Girard, 1978; Han, 2017).

As a counterpoint, the article examines Ignatian pedagogy from a historical perspective, with particular attention to the formation of interiority and the exercise of discernment. Rather than presenting it as a normative solution, the discussion treats it as a historical model capable of illuminating, by contrast, the contemporary mechanisms that undermine freedom.

In doing so, the article contributes to current debates by proposing the concept of digital idolatry as a framework for understanding the structural transformation of language and its implications for the conditions of human freedom in digital environments.

2. Language, truth, and the structure of freedom

The relationship between language and truth is not merely an epistemological question, but rather an anthropological one. Language is not merely a tool for expression; it is a condition for the intelligibility of experience itself. As Pieper (1992) states:

Word and language, in essence, do not constitute a specific or specialized area; they are not a particular discipline or field. No, word and language form the medium that sustains the common existence of the human spirit as such. The reality of the word in eminent ways makes existential interaction happen. And so, if the word becomes corrupted, human existence itself will not remain unaffected and untainted. (p. 15).

Freedom, in turn, cannot be reduced to the ability to choose among alternatives. More fundamentally, it implies the capacity to adhere to the

truth of reality. A choice becomes genuinely free only when illuminated by an adequate recognition of what is. Absent such recognition, freedom deteriorates into arbitrariness or mere reactivity – driven by external stimuli or unexamined impulses.

Philosophical traditions that emphasize the unity of language and truth make it possible to grasp why the corruption of language is far from a marginal phenomenon. When words cease to refer to reality and begin to function as instruments of persuasion detached from truth, the very structure of experience is altered (Pieper, 1992; López Quintás, 2015). The subject no longer orients herself according to what is, but according to what is presented as desirable, possible, or necessary within a preconfigured framework. That is, in the words of López Quintás (2015):

The power of language subjected to the art of manipulation is astonishing. When a term is charged with emotion, it leaves such a deep mark on the mind that everything we hear, see, and think about it subsequently becomes polarized around it and magnetized and oriented by it. (p. 40, our translation).

This transformation can be described as a shift from language-as-mediation to language-as-production-of-reality. In the latter mode, discourse no longer seeks to disclose the world but to configure it according to functional interests – a phenomenon increasingly evident in contemporary digital cultures (Han, 2022). The result is a subtle form of heteronomy in which individuals believe they are acting freely while, in fact, responding to externally structured stimuli.

This claim presupposes a more fundamental clarification regarding the nature of language itself. Language is not simply an external instrument that the subject employs at will; it is the medium within which reality becomes intelligible and, therefore, within which freedom becomes possible. To the extent that human experience is articulated linguistically, any distortion at the level of language necessarily reverberates at the level of experience. The problem, then, is not merely that language can be mis-

used, but that its misuse alters the horizon within which the real is disclosed. When this occurs, the subject no longer confronts reality as something to be recognized and responded to, but as something already pre-configured by discursive structures that anticipate and guide interpretation. In this sense, the crisis of language is inseparable from a crisis of access to reality itself.

3. Digital idolatry as a structure of symbolic dependence

Within this framework, the notion of digital idolatry becomes intelligible. It does not refer merely to excessive admiration for public figures but to the formation of symbolic systems in which certain actors come to occupy the position of privileged mediators of reality.

The dynamics of repetition and amplification characteristic of digital platforms sustain such a system. Algorithmic logic privileges content that generates immediate engagement, thereby favoring simplified, emotionally charged, and easily replicable discourse. Language is fragmented into units of impact – short expressions, fixed categories, rapid diagnoses – that displace more complex processes of interpretation.

Mimetic theory provides a crucial lens for understanding this process. Human desire is not autonomous but mediated through models (Girard, 1978). When these models present themselves as embodying superior forms of fulfillment, individuals tend to orient their desires accordingly, generating structures of dependence. Digital environments intensify this dynamic through continuous exposure to idealized representations and the pressure of constant comparison.

At the same time, contemporary analyses of digital culture highlight the role of performance and positivity in the shaping of subjectivity. Individuals are increasingly compelled to construct themselves under conditions of permanent visibility and evaluation, responding to expect-

tations they do not fully control (Han, 2017). Under these conditions, language functions less as a means of discernment than as a mechanism of adaptation.

Digital idolatry emerges precisely at the point where these dynamics converge and reinforce one another. The result is the formation of subjects who speak through categories they have not elaborated, desire what they have not recognized as genuinely their own, and evaluate their experience according to criteria imposed from without.

4. The erosion of interiority

Interiority, as understood here, designates the dimension in which the subject recognizes itself as capable of relating to reality reflectively and responsibly. It is not a closed psychological space but the locus in which experience is appropriated and made one's own.

The erosion of interiority occurs when this space is progressively colonized by external interpretive structures. As individuals begin to name their experiences using pre-fabricated categories, they lose the ability to recognize their interior movements. What ought to be the object of discernment is instead given from the outside, already interpreted. Indeed, understood as a dialogical openness to the other, interiority is not about welcoming the other as "content", but as a mystery that reflects one's own mystery.

The conditions of the digital environment intensify this process, often without being immediately perceived: temporal acceleration, fragmentation of attention, and continuous exposure to stimuli conspire to keep experience at the surface, depriving it of the depth required for genuine understanding. Language, under these conditions, reinforces repetition rather than enabling elaboration.

The loss of interiority entails a corresponding transformation of freedom. Without an interior space in which to examine one's motivations, the subject becomes increasingly vulnerable to external determination.

Decision-making ceases to be a genuinely personal act and becomes, instead, a reaction to stimuli.

Edith Stein's anthropological framework illuminates the mechanism at work in this process. In her analysis of the structure of the human person, the author distinguishes between the psychic dimension – encompassing the flow of lived experiences, emotional states, and immediate impressions – and the spiritual dimension, which involves the capacity for self-reflection, deliberation, and openness to meaning (Stein, 2003). The spiritual dimension does not operate in isolation from the psychic; it requires, however, a moment of recollection (*Sammlung*) in which the person gathers herself from the dispersal of impressions and achieves a certain interior distance. The digital environment characteristically produces a continuous agitation of the psychic surface, a ceaseless flow of stimuli that keeps experience circulating at the level of reaction and impression. The spiritual dimension is not thereby destroyed, but it is rendered structurally inaccessible: the person retains the capacity for depth while being systematically prevented from exercising it. The self, as Stein conceives it, is not a product of its own activity but is summoned by a foundation that precedes it; yet this summons can be heard only where the noise of the psychic surface has, at least momentarily, subsided.

This diagnosis resonates with phenomenological approaches to the human person that emphasize the unity of body, psyche, and spirit as the foundation for meaningful action (Stein, 2003). Where that unity is fragmented, where the psychic surface absorbs the space otherwise reserved for spiritual depth, freedom is not abolished but rendered hollow: the subject continues to choose, yet without the interior distance that would make choice an act of genuine self-determination. If interiority, thus understood, constitutes the structural condition of discernment and, therefore, of freedom, then its systematic obstruction represents not merely a psychological loss but a challenge to the very possibility of the subject constituting herself as free before reality.

5. Ignatian pedagogy as a historical model of freedom

The pedagogical tradition of the Society of Jesus offers a significant contrast to this scenario. Developed in a distinct historical context, it is grounded in a conception of freedom that does not equate with spontaneity but with the capacity to order one's desires according to a principle of truth.

Its central element is discernment: a systematic attentiveness to interior movements aimed at distinguishing between what leads toward fulfillment and what leads away from it (Loyola, 1997). This practice requires a language capable of naming experience with precision, avoiding both confusion and reductive simplification. It thus presupposes a genuine understanding of reality, where the individual is called upon to grasp the meaning of things, people, and present events, even if veiled by appearances, images, and "figures" of the world.

Ignatian formation thus structurally articulates language, truth, and freedom. Rhetoric, in this context, is not conceived as a technique of manipulation but as a mode of communication ordered toward truth—one aimed at promoting unity, community, and critical discernment, while resisting the risk of manipulation and the superficial use of language. Mastery of language implies responsibility toward reality and toward others (Franca, 1952; O'Malley, 1999).

Moreover, the communal dimension plays a decisive role. Freedom is not understood as isolated autonomy but as participation in a body that offers criteria, correction, and accompaniment. This stands in marked contrast to the logic of social networks, where validation tends to operate through quantitative metrics and immediate feedback (Compagnie de Jésus, 1997).

Considered historically, this tradition does not furnish ready-made solutions for contemporary problems. What it demonstrates, rather, is the

possibility of structuring experience in such a way that interiority is preserved as a condition of freedom – a possibility whose very intelligibility the digital environment tends to obscure.

6. Discussion

The preceding analysis suggests that the contemporary crisis of language cannot be reduced to a technical or communicational problem. Rather, it reflects a transformation that affects the very structure of human experience, particularly at the intersection of language, truth, and freedom. To grasp the full implications of this transformation, however, it is necessary to move beyond a merely contrastive reading of the Ignatian model and to consider what it reveals structurally about the digital condition itself.

A first step in this direction consists in recognizing that the dynamics described throughout this article – mimetic identification, symbolic dependence, discursive manipulation – are not foreign to the human condition. Susceptibility to influence, the need for models, and the mediating role of language are anthropological constants. What distinguishes the digital environment is not the emergence of these dynamics but their amplification and reconfiguration under conditions of unprecedented scale, speed, and abstraction.

From this perspective, the relevance of the Ignatian tradition lies not in offering a ready-made solution but in rendering visible a set of structural relations that the digital environment tends to obscure. In particular, it brings into relief the intrinsic connection between language and interiority. Where language is oriented toward truth, it functions as a medium through which the subject can appropriate experience, name interior movements, and exercise discernment. Where language is detached from truth and subordinated to performative or adaptive functions, it ceases to mediate interiority and begins instead to replace it.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the nature of digital idolatry. The problem is not simply that external figures acquire undue influence; it is that the very conditions under which influence operates have changed. When language becomes fragmented into units of immediate impact, it no longer sustains the temporal depth required for reflection. Discernment presupposes duration, differentiation, and interior articulation; the digital environment, by contrast, favors immediacy, repetition, and surface-level identification. In this sense, the erosion of interiority is not an accidental byproduct of digital culture but one of its structural tendencies.

Seen in this light, the Ignatian emphasis on discernment represents more than a historical curiosity. It constitutes a mode of organizing experience in which language, time, and interiority are aligned in such a way as to make freedom possible. Discernment, so understood, is not merely a technique but a form of sustained attentiveness that presupposes a language capable of maintaining distinctions, a temporal horizon that permits reflection, and an interior space in which movements can be recognized as one's own.

This observation permits a more precise articulation of the article's central claim: the crisis of language in the digital environment is inseparable from a crisis of the conditions that make discernment possible. Where the structures supporting interior differentiation are weakened, the subject becomes increasingly exposed to forms of heteronomy that operate not through coercion but through symbolic saturation.

A second line of objection might insist that such a diagnosis overstates the negative dimensions of digital culture, neglecting its capacity to expand access to knowledge, facilitate communication, and generate new forms of community. The objection is valid insofar as it calls attention to the ambivalence of technological mediation. It does not, however, invalidate the present analysis, which is directed not against digital technology as such but toward specific configurations of language within that environment. The issue at stake is not whether digital media can serve emancipatory

functions but whether the dominant forms of linguistic mediation they promote are conducive to the formation of interiority and the exercise of freedom (Han, 2022).

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge the limits of the present proposal. The restoration of language as a mediator of truth cannot be accomplished solely at the level of individual awareness; it depends on broader cultural, educational, and institutional conditions capable of sustaining forms of attention, dialogue, and formation that resist the logic of fragmentation. Nevertheless, the clarification of the structural relations outlined here constitutes a necessary first step. Without it, efforts to respond to the challenges of the digital environment risk remaining at the level of symptoms, failing to address the deeper transformations that bear upon the very possibility of human freedom.

7. Conclusion

The contemporary crisis of language in the digital environment is inseparable from a transformation in the experience of freedom. The dissociation between language and truth undermines self-determination, fostering forms of symbolic dependence and eroding the interiority upon which genuine agency depends.

The concept of digital idolatry provides an interpretive framework for grasping this phenomenon, bringing into focus the role of identification structures and discursive manipulation in the constitution of contemporary subjectivity. In contrast, the Ignatian tradition, considered from a historical perspective, reveals the possibility of a different articulation of language, truth, and freedom: one in which discernment, rather than performance, governs the relationship between the self and its world.

Recovering the structural articulation of language, truth, and freedom does not require the wholesale adoption of any particular model. It does, however, require the recognition that language is not a neutral instrument.

It is within language that the very possibility of human freedom is, to a significant extent, at stake.

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