

With the Ring of Gyges during the Difficult Adolescence of the 21st Century: The Effects of Technological Progress on Impressionable Adolescents

By Mando Malamou*

At the end of the 16th century, when Francis Bacon formulated his famous phrase “knowledge is power”, which is essentially the starting point of man’s attempt to subjugate nature, after he has first submitted to it by studying its laws, etc., he couldn’t imagine –we think– that, at some point, he would neither find in the future technology its absolute application with the opposite result, nor, of course, the “existential threat” as it has been called, posed to modern man by the latest explosion of AI. On November 30, 2022, OpenAI put the AI application ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) into widespread use, conquering the global audience with unimaginable speed: 100 million users in just two months! This application, which allows dialogue and answers on any subject, as it has already “read” all the books of the world, a humanly impossible task, has caused fear in the world community; its operation is constantly proving to be more effective than human intelligence – therefore, it is dangerous. The time is ripe for us to reformulate some old questions about the technology’s negative uses, since its beneficial effects are self-evident. We are talking about reformulation, because the more general question has long since occupied human thought.

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In Book II of his *Republic* (*Πολιτεία*)¹ Plato, exploring the issue of human justice, narrates the myth concerning Gyges's magic ring. Gyges, a shepherd in the lands of Lydia, after a double disaster, a violent storm and an earthquake, which caused the ground to retreat, falls into the chasm of earth that was created. There, he discovers a giant skeleton of a man wearing a ring. Gyges takes the ring and wears it himself. One day, by accidentally turning the ring's gemstone, he discovers its magical properties: The ring, when spun, can make him invisible. When he returns it to its original position, he becomes visible again. With this "weapon", Gyges, the good shepherd, is gradually transformed into an adulterer and murderer; he reaches to the point of entering the palace invisible, seducing the queen and killing the king. Thus, a ring, an object with supernatural qualities, became the cause of the destruction of a soul that, until that moment, was simple and virtuous. The fall into sin in Platonic philosophy is called *ἀδικία* – the abrogation of justice. In Genesis, the fall of man is connected with the eating of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge: «τοῦ ξύλου τοῦ γινώσκειν καλὸν καὶ πονηρόν»². In contemporary childhood and adolescence, the technology's uncritical and uncontrollable use can easily turn into a modern-day Gyges's ring, as today's way of life has prematurely matured children in the ugliest ways, eliminating innocence and childishness. This is what happens in our de-sacralized daily life. We'll come back to this later in the paper.

Aristotle, in the 12th chapter of his *Rhetoric* (*Ῥητορική*)³ describes unforgettably the manners of young people, their emotions, passions and corresponding behavior. Let us, therefore, briefly have a glance at the general features of adolescence according to Aristotle, in order to trace the possible differences from contemporary the contemporary one. Young people are generally good-hearted and rather gullible, because they are inexperienced. Hence, they can be easily deceived. They are excessive in everything – in their anger and wrath; under the influence of these emotions, they act completely impulsively without thinking and considering the consequences of their actions. They are impetuous like

1. Plato, *Πολιτεία* 359d-360d.

2. *Gen.* 2, 17.

3. Aristotle, *Ῥητορική* 1389a3-b18.

“torrents of spring” – to recall Ivan Turgenev’s novella with the same title - and this impulse can manifest itself as a destructive force for their environment, when it functions extrovertly, or it can be proved self-destructive if it functions introvertly. To these timeless characteristics of adolescents, it is necessary to add a few present-day traits, such as, first and foremost, the accumulated anger towards their parents, due to the multiple crises the family institution is going through. This anger, however, is not limited to their parents; it extends to those adults who remind them of them, particularly their teachers, to whom, in most cases, they unconsciously project their negative feelings, being intensively aggressive. Another feature of the contemporary adolescents is the pervasive notion of *absolute entitlement*, which is cultivated to an overwhelming degree by modern parents in a variety of ways, such as, for example, the children’s addiction to material benefits from their infancy, or their inability to take a firm stand on the serious existential questions of adolescents, usually for fear of appearing backward or insufficiently modern... As the situation has been dangerously deteriorated in recent years due to our compulsory confinement, we can easily understand the children’s need to escape into the virtual reality that our age so abundantly offers. Their addiction to the Internet, despite the consequent reduction in their sleeping hours as a rule and the obvious effects that this entails, has in many cases been offered to them as a safe haven for the painful emotions to be avoided, as well as an antidote, sometimes to the ever-increasing depression caused by failed expectations and, for many children, by a lack of love.

The most visible –we could say, tangible– consequences brought about by the indiscriminate intake and use of technology during childhood and adolescence, refer to the educational and, more generally, learning process. Since this reality is not only a Greek affair, let us see what is happening in other countries, leaving the experts in the field to enlighten us. Michel Desmurget, PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience and director of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS: Centre national de la recherche scientifique) in his book *La fabrique du crétin digital: Les dangers des écrans pour nos enfants* (2019), sounds the alarm,

even by the title he had chosen for it⁴ he exposes there all the learning parameters of the problem by using statistical data. Already from the age of two, children in Western societies spend on average almost three hours per day in front of screens. Between the ages of eight and twelve they spend four hours and 45 minutes per day in the same way, and between the ages of eighteen and eighteen they spend six hours and 45 minutes. If these uses are added up annually, they cover 1000 hours for a kindergarten student (i.e. more than the hours he or she spent in school during the whole year), 1700 hours for a primary school student (i.e. the equivalent of two school years) and 2400 hours for a high school student (the equivalent of two and a half years). Finally, he draws the attention to the following assessment: The generations born after 2000, bombarded by the multiscreen (smartphone, tablet, PC, TV), are the first generations whose intelligence index will be lower than that of previous generations – with, in addition, a whole series of symptoms and problems, which will, it seems, sustain legions of child psychiatrists for decades to come: problems in the fields of language, creativity, memory, concentration of attention⁵, adaptation to the social school environment, and also emotional problems, aggression and anti-social behavior, as well as problems associated with classical pediatrics: mobility difficulties, obesity, early diabetes. The link between digital consumption and this whole range of problems is now undeniable.

Now, regarding the reality which we are facing in the school environment, we could reasonably argue that all of the above is true on a much larger scale. Every day and at all levels, we are unexceptionally confronted with these phenomena, constantly enriching our vocabulary with interesting terms that are mainly indicate the linguistic deficiency of our students. As far as language disorders are concerned, the terms that describe them usually have as their prefix the inseparable particle *dys-*, such as dyslexia. We have very recently heard of the term *dysanagnosia*

4. His previous book, *TV Lobotomie*, was published in 2012.

5. The maximum attention span is nowadays 6 minutes from 40 minutes that was in earlier times, when so many screens were absent. In fact, in the school, we can observe this tragic situation on a daily basis: there are children who are unable to concentrate on the lesson for more than 5 seconds!

[reading disability]. It should be noted that the most effective treatment for dysanagnosia, as demonstrated daily in the classroom, is to read the text under discussion many times. It is needless to once more point out the students' great inability for complex, long-term discourse even in higher education, while the total absence of memory takes on frightening proportions every single day – to such a degree that we can jokingly speak of... the adolescent's Alzheimer! The obvious consequence of the above is the misperception of objective reality in such a way that one wonders about the already completed "construction of the cretin" mentioned above. We provide here a few tragicomic examples from our daily experience: A student from the eighth grade, intelligent in other respects, was for long unable to understand where his mistake was in the following sentence about the *Seal's Lament*, a short story by Alexandros Papadiamantis: "They knew that Akrivoula was dead when they saw her drowned coming out of the sea". Similar confusion can also be observed at the university level. I'm quoting here two illustrative incidents; they are testimonies by friends who teach at the university: In the last semester of a Literature Department, one of them dictated a topic with the question: "What is Tellos Agras's opinion of Andreas Kalvos?"; 27 papers were found with the following wording: "What is your opinion of the perfect man"! And a second one coming from a friend that teaches at the National Technical University of Athens. Two hours after he had given the questions to his students, when he went to post the solutions on his page so that they could see the correct answers, he realized that they had been given by mistake together with the questions. He rushed to the auditorium to find out that a lucky student has not written a single word! Surprised, he asked him what he has been doing for two whole hours; and he angrily replied, "Why, sir, have you given us so many questions?"!

As an antidote to the construction of the digital cretin, Michel Desmurget proposes his book. You should bear in mind that the French expert uses the Greek word *ἀντίδοτο* (antidote) which is literally used for poisons! It is also very well known that the Swedish educational model of the last decade, which introduced the exclusive use of technology, explicitly forbidding the use of books and notebooks, has miserably

failed. Ingmar Bergman's compatriots are now returning in droves to books, pencils and notebooks! In this material, tangible reality one will also find answers to the existential question raised by the explosion of technological progress.

We've summarily presented the technology's negative effects in the educational process and highlighted some of the reasons that force children to resort to the immaterial reality. Nevertheless, according to my opinion, the most serious problem is not the children's poor performance at school. The most severe consequence of the technology's uncritical, uncontrollable use is that it leads to the disappearance of childhood, i.e. innocence. According to teachers' testimonies, there are no more children. There are, they claim, grown men in miniature! This is the peculiar difference of our age, which causes some to speak of transhumanism and other ominous things. Here is a friend's testimony of his teenage nephew's reaction after his experience of being "initiated" into the ChatGPT's "brave, new world": "Now you've just talked to God!". For many children, this is the new "metaphysical" reality; it promises to provide infinite possibilities with zero effort: autonomy, freedom, easy profit and the power that money gives. How bleak the reality may be in the foreseeable future, since our age not only abandons the ascetic spirit taught by our Tradition, but has been described as an age of desirous promiscuity. It is enough to recall the timeless motto of advertising: "Your desires cannot wait to be satisfied!"

In this spirit of our age that regulates the young people's behavior, parents have a major share of responsibility with the tactic of *appeasement*, which they often apply by providing more and more material and technological goods to their children, in order to relieve them of the increased responsibilities of their role, forgetting the elementary folk saying that "eating feeds the appetite", it does not satisfy it. All these has resulted to a flexible consciousness and the abolition of moral barriers on the part of young people, since from the cradle, to put it hyperbolically, parents have cultivated a sense of their absolute uniqueness and superiority at the expense of all others, i.e. the worst form of sick narcissism and excessive arrogance. Or, to put it more realistically: Most children are nowadays growing up with the impression that each of

them is the absolute master, not only of our planet but of the whole universe; everyone else is de facto obliged to serve them! In this way, though, the sense of omnipotence –aided by technology– increases, and the Nietzschean “will to power” is hyperinflated. The “be thyself” motto, a more modern version of *carpe diem*, which was used in earlier times (and not the Pindaric «γένοιο οἶος ἔσσει μαθών», which presupposes wisdom) with which children are nowadays raised, means that, once they will attain power, no one can foresee the consequences.

During the last decades, we are experiencing on a daily basis, another novel feature of the younger generations is the disorganization of identity, not to say the multiple identities of children, as we are daily experiencing it. It is easy for them to lie without being aware of what they are saying; not out of malice but out of a misperception of reality, mainly as a consequence of the virtual reality they are experiencing on a daily basis. And this is where the lack of interiority that reading gives to man and the breadth that it implies becomes apparent, since modern children – always with a few bright exceptions – do not read anything. Hence the logic that usually prevails is that of “black and white”, while the slogan’s subsequent dynamic very easily leads to group violence and, more generally, delinquent activity. Thus, the repetition of negative examples combined with the nonexistent memory of positive models subsequently produces the elastic consciousness mentioned above and the confusion of the boundaries between good and evil. The addiction⁶ of children and adolescents to virtual reality constitutes the greatest threat to their mental balance; it suffices for us to only consider one basic parameter: the vast majority of video games reproduce and promote violence⁷.

A manifest example of our claim is the film *Benny’s Video* by the Austrian director Michael Haneke, who, having thoroughly immersed himself in

6. As it is well known, Aristotle asserts that the word *ἥθος* etymologically derives from the word *ἔθος*; habit shapes the character of man.

7. We as teachers are the recipients or witnesses of daily conversations between children, where they boast about the “levels” they have reached, or the bonuses they have won the day before in the corresponding games depending on the number of “opponents” they have killed.

the problem of violence⁸, as early as 1992, understood and recorded with astonishing accuracy the then future, and now, unfortunately, pervasive destructive effect of violent images on the psyche and mind of children. In the 1992 film, we are watching the fourteen-year-old Benny, son of a wealthy family but almost unsupervised by his typically cultured parents, spending his time watching videos and filming everything from his room, even street scenes, with multiple cameras.

Familiarity with violence and its constant experience through the images that are repeated *ad nauseam*, as he watches and re-watches similar videos, brings him to the point of killing a little girl of his age, whom he invited to his house to watch movies, without any awareness of what he is doing, simply by playing with the gun that his father had left in the drawer. When the little girl drops dead, he calmly wraps her in bath towels and hides her under his bed. All these are recorded by the cameras scattered around the room. When his parents return from the weekend and realize what has happened, they wonder –as in any crime– what to do with the girl’s body and worry for themselves, as they will be charged with child neglect. The most tragic of them all is the fact that the days go by and no one is looking for the little girl. Of all the horror that the work exudes, we only need to point out the parents’ concern about the corpse’s fate: “If we cut it into pieces and throw it in the toilet bowl, the drain will be clogged by the big bones and we will be discovered”... In this way, the director most graphically portrays not only the irresponsibility but also the perverted conscience and the complete obsession of the parents. And also, how far we are from Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger*, which describes the complete alienation of the hero, who kills without any passion, the complete opposite of killing in the heat of the moment, but only because the Mediterranean sun has blinded him. Today, more than 30 years that have passed from Haneke’s film, the kind of violence portrayed in his film seems not to be exaggerated at all; on the contrary, the violent incidents involving underage offenders are increasing daily at a geometric rate.

8. We recall here, among others, his award-winning film *The White Ribbon* (2009), which deals with the pervasive violence prevailing on a micro-scale in the aftermath of the First World War, as we are watching the events unfolding in a small German village during the summer of 1913.

Having already referred to the great literature of the past, let's get back to the upcoming AI potential applications in this field, such as ChatGPT, which is designed to understand and create texts similar to that of humans based on the data it receives. It is therefore to be expected, as some people are already claiming, that in the near future AI will "write" literary masterpieces by "studying" the great works of world literature. But before that happens, it would be wise to remember how some of the latter have predicted, not to say literally prophesied, our tragic times. And we're not so much referring to 20th century authors, like Aldus Huxley, who in his novel *Brave New World* (1931) articulately described the dystopian reality of modern technology, or George Orwell, who envisioned the ominous future in his famous work *1984*, published in 1948⁹. The destructive force to which the sense of superiority and power results, irrespective of how it has arisen or is expressed in the age of innocence – childhood/adolescence or physical goodness in young adults, such as the simple shepherd of the Platonic myth– if the spiritual conditions are absent, it has been traced and recorded by great authors very early on, as we have already seen in the case of Plato's famous myth of the Ring of Gyges in the *Republic*. According to our opinion, the matter that should primarily concern us is our unshakeable faith (not to say unforgivable naivety) in the so-called childlike innocence – a faith causing immense problems. The great creators are much less gullible than most of us are, so as to believe blindly in man's inherent goodness – in our case, to that of minors. It suffices to recall here two well-known aphorisms of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the "great anatomist of the human soul", as he has been aptly called: "Psychologically speaking, a nine-year-old child can already be a consummate killer", and: "Each and every one of us is a potential killer¹⁰, provided the conditions are right and the weapon is in place".

On the subject of the children's innocence, we will not dwell on William Golding's iconic work *The Lord of Flies*, where juvenile

9. By anagramming the last two digits of the year during which he had been writing the book.

10. Attention: killer, not murderer (with malicious intent), as we very often hear, especially in the Media the two terms to be confused!

atrocities transcend all the boundaries, but we will briefly refer to some of Alexandros Papadiamantis's short stories. Having a profound knowledge of the psychology and the sometimes dark world of children, Papadiamantis describes with astonishing accuracy both the infantile cruelty and the dangerous display of power, when they acquire it, as well as the negligence, euphoria, and, finally, indifference of the adults; at the same time, he exquisitely formulates, sometimes directly and sometimes cryptically, views taken from our Philocalist Tradition that may prove useful even nowadays, under very different circumstances, since man's nature essentially remains the same. These characteristics of children and adolescents with their occasional tragic consequences are mainly found in three short stories: *The Aerie/Spirit in the Tree*, *The Demons in the Stream* and *The Voice of the Dragon*. The infantile innocent is totally absent. There is violence, cruelty, envy, selfishness and hypocrisy – qualities that characterize grown-up people. In the first short story, the older children of the town, the teenagers, scare and abuse the younger children of the village, just as a show of strength. In the story *The Devils in the Stream*, the title is self-manifest. The author, a homodiegetic narrator, recalls a highly traumatic experience he had at a tender age. Wishing to join in the older children's game, he is subjected to their wild scolding and their practical abuse, just because he was an altar boy, risking his own life by being left to perish in the dark ravine. Initially, the author refers to his "friends" in an almost harmless way: "the children, my unsympathetic and unloving companions"; then we have the following extremely strong description: "*those little incarnate demons*"¹¹ of the stream and the rocks". It is worth noting here the obviously hypocritical attitude of the children, especially towards the priest-father of the narrator, implied by the author, as well as the indifferent(?) attitude of the adults who do not bother to take a closer look at what was taking place: "The other children, as much respect they show in the presence of my family's elders, they reserved all their envy and treacherous behavior against me"¹². And, of course, the final

11. The emphasis is ours.

12. See Al. Papadiamantis, *Άπαντα*, critical edition by N. D. Triantaphyllopoulos, Domos Publications, Athens 1984, vol. 3, pp. 242-243.

command of Saint Chaeremon the monk, who miraculously saved the child, to his priest father: “Go forth, he said; make your father to repent, and tell him on behalf of me that he ought *to be stricter with youth*”¹³.

The deflecting of the responsibilities as well as the collective guilt of the society’s adult members –parents, teachers, members of the judiciary and even church officials– towards the delinquent behavior of children, culminates in the masterful *The Voice of the Dragon*. The central character of the story, the unfortunate fifteen-year-old teenager Kotsos, is the victim of brutal gossip and the maliciousness of the “old hags” of the small town, whose final ruling was to question his legal paternity, he is doomed to suffer from a very early age the verbal abuse of other children, who, every time they meet him, hurl the curse of illegitimacy at him; until they finally exterminate him: The child will be killed by falling from a great height, when an “innocent” lad will see him perched on the towering poplar tree (a tree he was climbing to avoid his adolescent tormentors) and hurled at him the fatal characterization.

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From this exquisite short story (its interpretation requires much more time and space), in which Papadiamantis, instead of just simply describing manners with the multitude of folklore elements at his disposal (dragons, caves, etc.), as so many other writers of his time would have

13. *Op.cit.*, p. 247. The underlined phrase is Papadiamantis’s choice.

done, he reaches the psychology of depth without the help of Sigmund Freud; for the topic of our paper, only one remark, which refers to the education of toddlers, will suffice: The aunt of the maltreated boy, the unmarried sister of his mother, who has substantially borne the whole burden of his upbringing, when she reveals to him in her loving way her own truth about his birth, concludes: “And if your mother had conceived you with someone else, again, it’s not your fault, and you shouldn’t be teased about it; forget what they are telling to you, they are just children, and they don’t realize what they are saying... Be wise and good, and you’ll see that this cannot hurt you... May God make you to prosper, and be a useful man, and the very ones who are now saying names to you will, one day, come to regret it... and then you’ll be the tough one...”¹⁴. Here is the crux of the matter. The “useful man” in Kotsos’s mind is translated as a thirst for power and imposition through money on those who now doubt and ridicule him; hence his traumatic experience in the dragon’s cave, into which he entered at night in search of the dragon’s treasure, and his daydreams of the wealth he would amassed from his travels thereafter: “With those gold coins he would look good in the eyes of those envious children, which are now his enemies, and they *would prostrate before him*¹⁵, as his aunt was saying to him”. As we’ve noticed, there is no substantial reference to the orthodox experience and living according to God’s commands, as it is the prevalent perception about Papadimantis’s heroes. But it’s time to get back to the technological progress of our time.

If the dominant frame of mind in Silicon Valley, as MIT professor Daron Acemoglu argues, is that “humans are imperfect machines and the debate about AI is in the hands of naive techno-optimism”, all that is left is our “perfection”, as nightmarishly envisioned by Dostoevsky in his novel *The Possessed* by the words he puts on Kirillov’s mouth: “A new man will come”, says feverish Kirillov. “And if man does not care if he will be dead or alive, he will be the new man. He who overcomes pain and stress, he will be God himself. But that God will no longer

14. *Op.cit.*, p. 614.

15. *Op.cit.*, p. 617; the emphasis is ours.

exist”. “God is the suffering that comes from the fear of death. So, whoever overcomes pain and agony becomes God. Then a new life will be born, a new man, everything will be renewed”. Man will become a god and his physical construction will be altered. The world will also be transformed, its actions, thoughts and feelings will change. “Whoever dares to kill himself, he is God. In the new state of things everyone will be able to do so, for God and nothing else will have ceased to exist”. Kirillov does not believe in a future eternal life but in an earthly one, “when suddenly time stops and eternity enters into the world. The world will be “complete and its name will be superman”. “God-man?” corrected Stavrogin. “No, superhuman”, Kirillov replied, “that’s the only way to see the difference”¹⁶ –we can find all these in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the chapter with the eloquent title “The Devil, Ivan’s Nightmare”¹⁷, where we follow the spine-chilling dialogue between the atheist hero and the devil over several pages, we read the following:

Oh, I love the dreams of my ardent young friends¹⁸ quivering with eagerness for life! ‘There are new men,’ you decided last spring, when you were meaning to come here, ‘they propose to destroy everything and begin with cannibalism. Stupid fellows! they didn’t ask my advice! I maintain that nothing need be destroyed, that we only need to destroy the idea of God in man, that’s how we have to set to work. It’s that, that we must begin with. Oh, blind race of men who have no understanding! As soon as men have all of them denied God—and I believe that period, analogous with geological periods, will come to pass—the old conception of the universe will fall of itself without cannibalism, and, what’s more, the old morality, and everything will begin anew. Men will unite to take from life all it can give, but only for joy and happiness in the present world. *Man will be lifted up with a spirit of divine Titanic pride and the man-god will appear*¹⁹. From hour to hour

16. N. Berdyaev, *Τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ Ντοστογιέφκι*, transl. N. Matsoukas, Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki 1972, pp. 216-217.

17. F. Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, translated into English by Constance Garnett, <https://www.globalgreyebooks.com/brothers-karamazov-ebook.html>.

18. We should remind here that Dostoevsky has also written *The Adolescent*, one of his most mature novels.

19. The emphasis is ours.

extending his conquest of nature infinitely by his will and his science, man will feel such lofty joy from hour to hour in doing it that it will make up for all his old dreams of the joys of heaven. Everyone will know that he is mortal and will accept death proudly and serenely like a god. The question now is, my young thinker reflected, is it possible that such a period will ever come? If it does, everything is determined and humanity is settled for ever. But as, owing to man's inveterate stupidity, this cannot come about for at least a thousand years, everyone who recognizes the truth even now may legitimately order his life as he pleases, on the new principles. In that sense, 'all things are lawful' for him. What's more, even if this period never comes to pass, since there is anyway no God and no immortality, the new man may well become the man-god, even if he is the only one in the whole world, and promoted to his new position, he may lightheartedly overstep all the barriers of the old morality of the old slave-man, if necessary. There is no law for God. Where God stands, the place is holy. Where I stand will be at once the foremost place... 'all things are lawful' and that's the end of it!

This is what great literature has recorded more than 140 years before the existential threat posed today by the frightening evolution of technology. However, the question remains the same: In the *eu*-daemonism of our age will man continue to strive with all his might to become Superman or will we return «*ἱματισμένοι καὶ σωφρονοῦντες παρὰ τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Θεανθρώπου;*» (=Clothed and in their right mind at the feet of the God-Man?).