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FACEBOOK: VIRTUAL OR VIRTUELESS REALITY?

Facebook has announced that they will create 10,000 new jobs in Europe, many of them in Ireland. Should we rejoice, or despair? Are we to be grateful to Mark Zuckerberg for creating these jobs, or should we trust our moral compass and feel uneasy?

Those who think that these new jobs are unqualified good news for Ireland have a simple line of argument: a job is a job is a job. Admittedly that's a strong line of argument, not only because of the economic benefits to the country, but because work is necessary for a person's fulfilment, self-esteem, and the sense of being connected to something larger than oneself. Following Aristotle, we could say that we value work not only for the salary at the end of the month, but because work is an activity (*praxis*) that has an intrinsic value.

But it is not so simple, it never is. We would not rejoice if these new jobs were created by a gas fracking company, or a tobacco company. I agree with Aristotle on the importance of work, but I would rather be unemployed than work, for example, in the unit that administers lethal injections to inmates on death row. Yes, a job is a job, but ethics is ethics. Money in the coffers will not make a moral dilemma disappear.

There are some worrying issues of a moral nature afflicting Facebook, which will not go away even if Zuckerberg decides to change the name of the company. We all know that a leopard cannot change its spots. Facts are facts: there is growing evidence that Instagram (owned by Facebook) is toxic to young people, especially younger girls, being linked to increases in the rate of anxiety and depression; there are serious allegations that Facebook puts profit before safety, and even abetting human trafficking; there is a concern that Facebook is not doing enough to stem the tide of fake-news, allowing the forces of post-truth and misinformation to cause unimaginable social harm by tearing a hole in the fabric of factuality. Under the flag

of freedom of speech Facebook is profiting from a nasty and brutish unregulated forum, where people feel it is their fundamental right to abuse others.

These new Facebook jobs will create a new exciting future, and we are told that the future is 'metaverse'. Sadly, 'metaverse' is not where philosophy (metaphysics) meets poetry (verse), instead in the words of Zuckerberg metaverse is the 'convergence of physical, augmented, and virtual reality in a shared online space'. This is Zoom on steroids, with a touch of magic mushrooms.

The selling point of metaverse is that it is bigger and better virtual 'reality', where we can have more thrilling interactions with our many 'friends' on social media platforms. This is precisely what I find disconcerting. Whatever the benefits of metaverse, let's not kid ourselves: it has very little to do with reality, and even less to do with friendship. There are no virtues in Facebook's virtual reality.

Back in 1974, many years before the internet was invented, and ten years before Zuckerberg was even born, Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick came up with the thought experiment of 'the experience machine'. Suppose there were a machine that would give you any experience you desired, by stimulating your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, pre-programming your life experiences? Nozick argued that it would be foolish to plug in, because living life through the experience machine would remove any meaning from our lives. He was right, of course.

Zuckerberg's metaverse is not 'reality', and the people we interact with on social media are not our 'friends'. The Roman philosopher Cicero, writing on friendship in 44 BC, said that "life without friends is simply not worth living". Cicero would be appalled by the idea that life without friends *on Facebook* is not worth living, and that what makes life worth living is having access to a more augmented virtual reality inhabited by virtual friends.

But speaking of reality, let's be real: money talks in capitalism, Facebook (or whatever it will be called) is not going anywhere, and Zuckerberg will create many jobs and even more experience machines. We could try to change the status of Facebook from a tech platform to a publisher or a media company, so that it takes some responsibility for what passes as news, or we could try to break up the company in the spirit of antitrust law. Or maybe we should all cancel our online profiles and vote with our feet, or mouses. I have an idea, let's keep this conversation going on Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. Above all: follow me! @BufacchiV.

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