



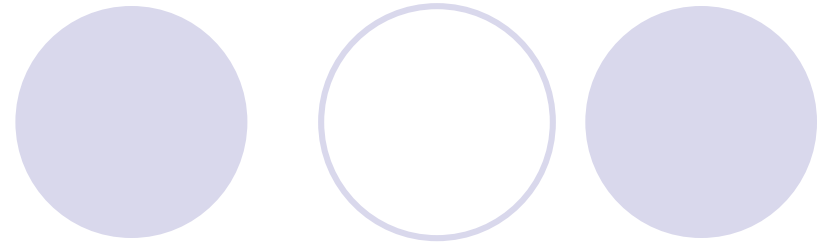
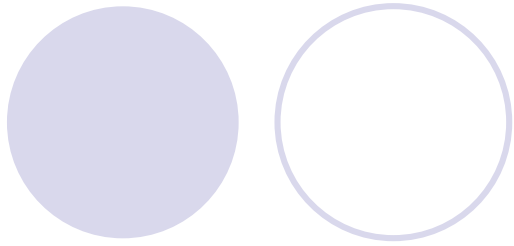
Enculturating Algorithms  
Rafael Capurro

Capurro-Fiek-Foundation for Information Ethics

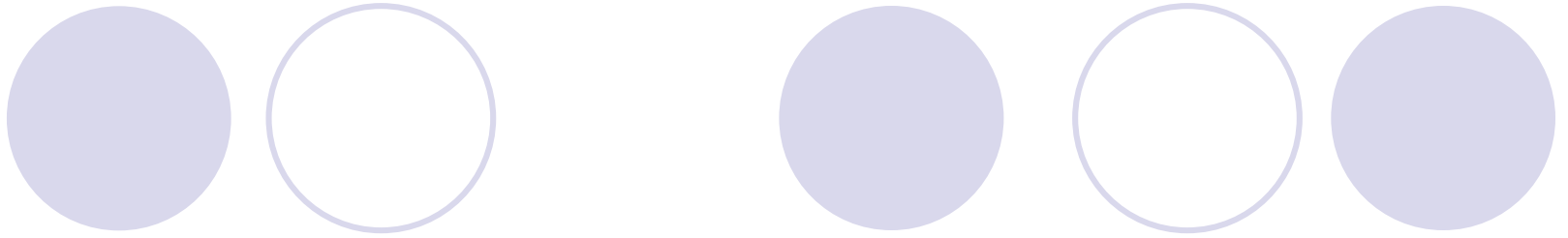
Visualising Homo Digitalis: Drawing pictures with Information Ethics  
Three pictures from Canada, Germany and South Africa

Symposium  
April 19, 2018

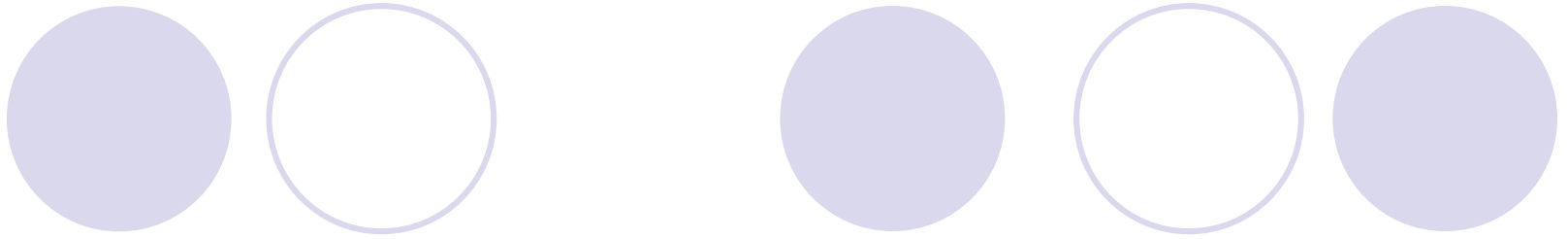
Hochschule der Medien Stuttgart



- Social life is increasingly ruled by algorithms.



- What happens when algorithms are at the core of all kinds of social processes, industrial techniques, and everyday routines?
- After the invention of the internet, the cultural dimension of algorithms has become apparent.

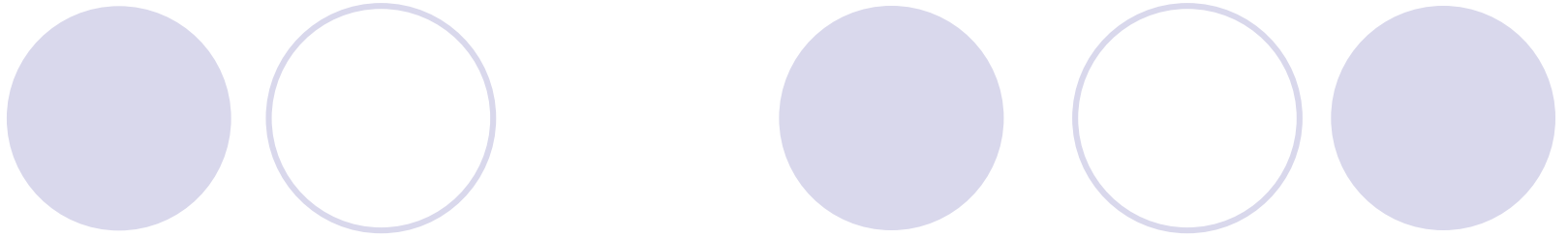


„On the most fundamental level, they are what one can call *anthropologically entrenched* in us, their creators and users.

In other words, there is a "constitutive entanglement" where "it is not only us that make them, they also make us" (Introna and Hayes 2011, 108).“ (Seyfert & Roberge 2016, 2)



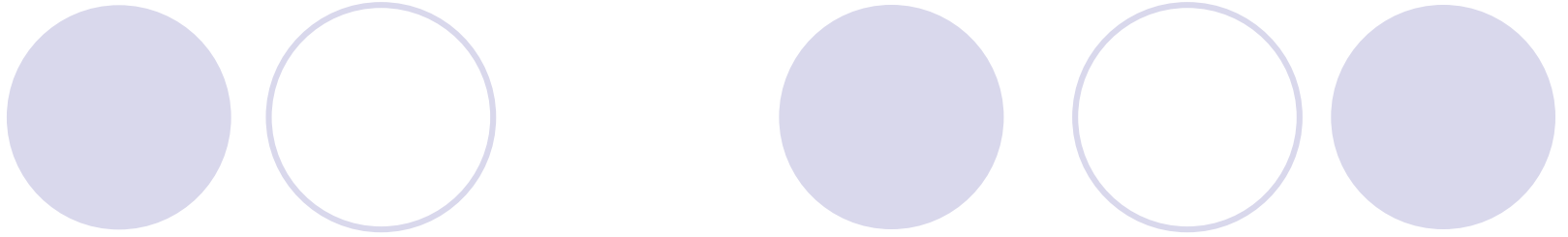
- Algorithms are implicitly or explicitly designed within the framework of social customs. They are embedded in cultures from scratch.



- According to the phenomenologist Lucas Introna, creators and users are "impressed" by algorithms (Introna 2016). The "impressionable subject," however, is not the modern subject detached from the so-called outside world, but a plurality of selves sharing a common world that is algorithmically intertwined.



- What is ethically at stake when dealing with algorithms becomes part of human *mores*?
- What is the nature of this entanglement between human *mores* and algorithms?



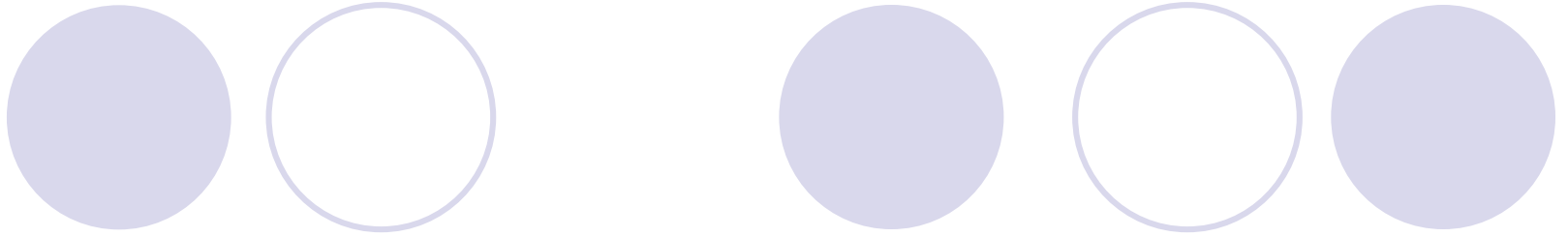
- To what extent can it be said that algorithms are, in fact, cultural?
- Who is responsible for the decisions taken by algorithms?
- To what extent is this anthropomorphic view on algorithms legitimate in order to understand what algorithms are?



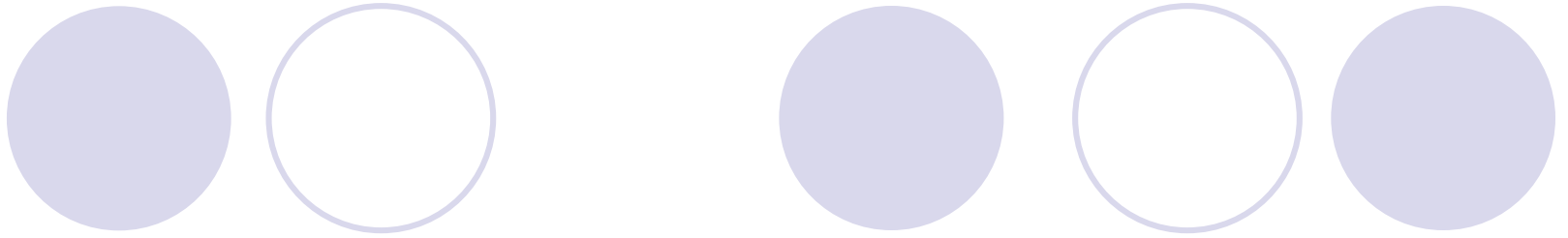


In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt writes:

“In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.



- This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does.”



- The reification of our "qualities, gifts, talents and shortcomings" in digital media is deeply ambiguous. It suggests it is the truth about who we are, while in fact it (re-)presents digital profiles of ourselves. An adequate medium to unveil this ambiguity is theatre.



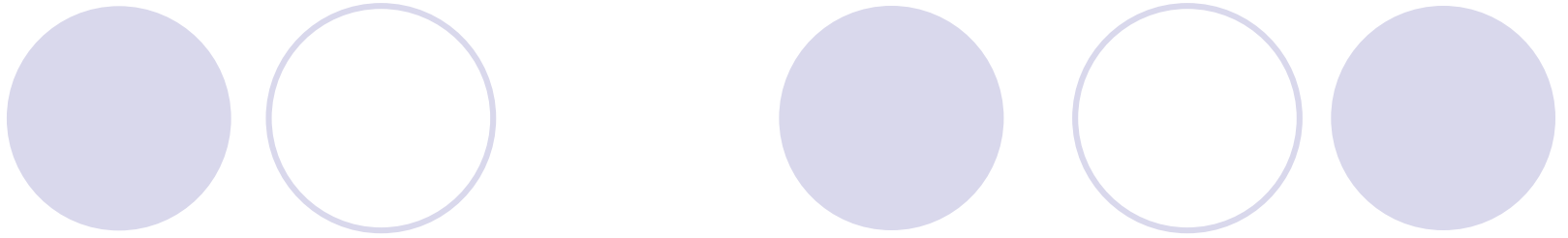
- Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is a paramount example of a plot that does not intend to offer a solution for the problem of life but to unveil it through questioning human identity.



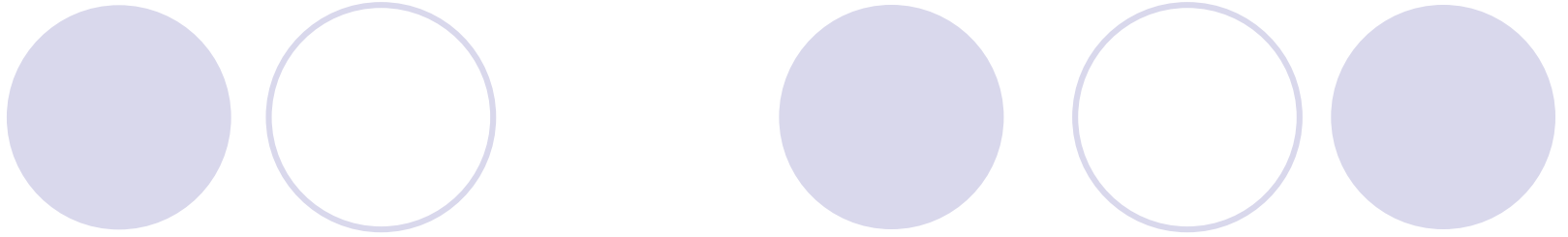
- Bernardo, an officer, starts the play by asking: "Who's there?" The question being repeated by Horatio, a friend to Hamlet. The Ghost enters.



- Bernardo says: "In the same figure, like the king that's dead." Horatio, desperately, says: "Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!" The Ghost exits. Marcellus, another officer, states laconically: "'Tis gone, and will not answer." (Shakespeare 2010, Hamlet I, 1, 2233-2235).



- "[M]en's minds are wild" states Horatio at the end of the play. "Music and the rites of war" should "speak loudly" for the dead Hamlet who is brought to stage "like a soldier." (Shakespeare 2010, Hamlet, V, 2, 2332)



- Who is Hamlet? "What is *behind* a name?" asks Thomas Ostermeier in whose staging of *Hamlet* he, Hamlet, is not present (Ostermeier 2017, 96).
- "The whole world plays the player" ("Die ganze Welt spielt den Schauspieler") is Ostermeier's German translation of "All the world's a stage" in Shakespeare's *As you Like it*.





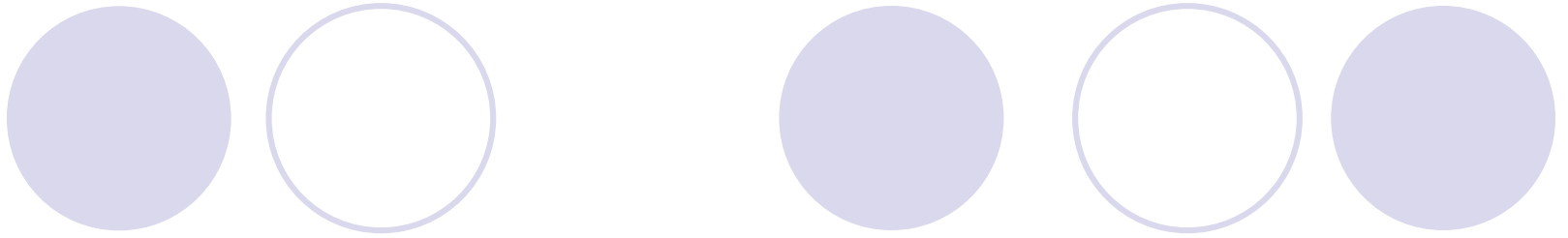
- "To act means to play" ("Handeln heißt spielen") writes Ostermeier (ibid.). Hesitation or delay in answering, is proper to *good* human interplay being exposed to "the whole world," i.e., to situations that she cannot foresee or even master in its entirety, requiring the possibility of taking her time for hesitation before decision-making.



- According to Ostermeier, many of the catastrophes of the last century "were due to a lack of time for hesitation that would have given place for thinking over and for reflection" (Ostermeier 2017, 99, transl. RC).



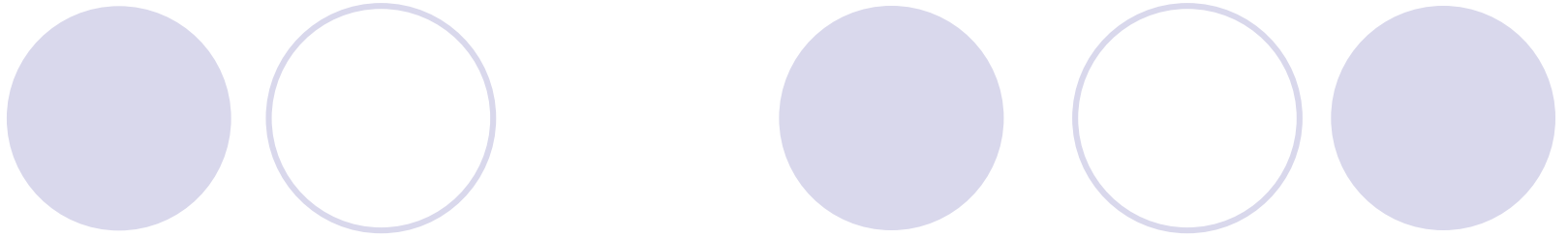
- Algorithms know nothing about hesitation. In fact, they know nothing at all and they do not learn. They are heteronomous. They are not played by the world, but by human designers and users.



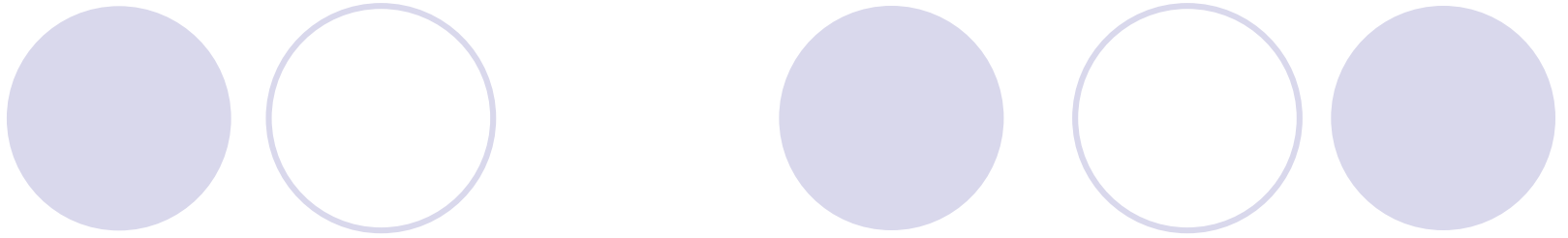
- The *question* about who we are is about the *being* of the *who*.
- Asking this question means avoiding the confusion about *as* who we play with the belief that this possibility is, in fact, the only and true one, making a fixation out of an interpretation.



- When it comes to human beings, their *being* is a matter of interpretation who one is *as* a player with other players in the drama of life.



- An ethics of algorithms deals with making this difference theoretically and practically between who and what we are by resisting the tendency to confuse or even to identify ourselves (our selves) with masks that we give to ourselves or others give to us.



- This confusion comes to a head when we believe we can attribute moral responsibility to algorithms that are supposed to be a kind of who whatsoever.

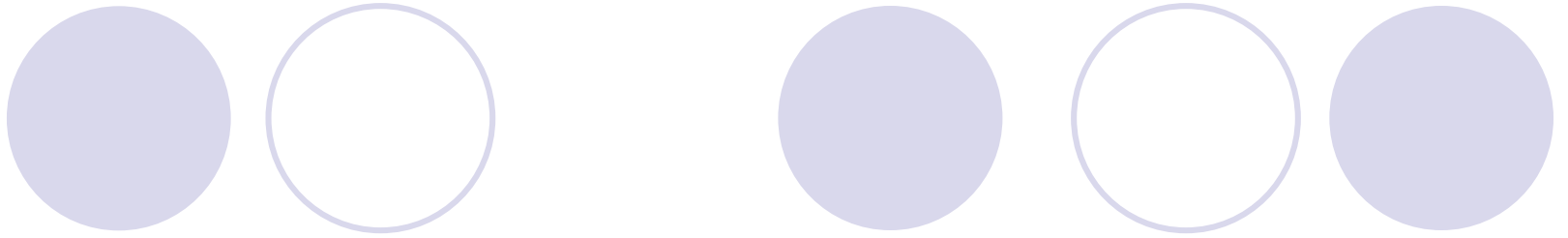


- *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* represents on stage this interplay of masking and unmasking ourselves. It is a key theatre play when it comes to unmasking the *ethos* of a society driven by algorithms.





- Algorithms implement digital reifications of who we are and what roles we play in the drama of life.
- Ethics of algorithms faces the challenge of the extent to which and under what rules we (who?) want algorithms to play a role in the human interplay on the stage that is the world.



Source:

Rafael Capurro: Enculturating Algorithms

<http://www.capurro.de/algorithms.html>