

CIVIC VIRTUE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

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DigHum Lecture

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TODAY

Introduction

A Turn to Civic Virtue

- Virtue ethics of technology
- The missing political aspect
- Civic virtue and its relevance

A Pluralist Account of Civic Virtue

- Past-oriented civic virtue
- Present-oriented civic virtue
- Future-oriented civic virtue

Emerging Technologies mediating Civic Virtue

- Online Reputation Systems
- Social Credit
- Open-source political systems

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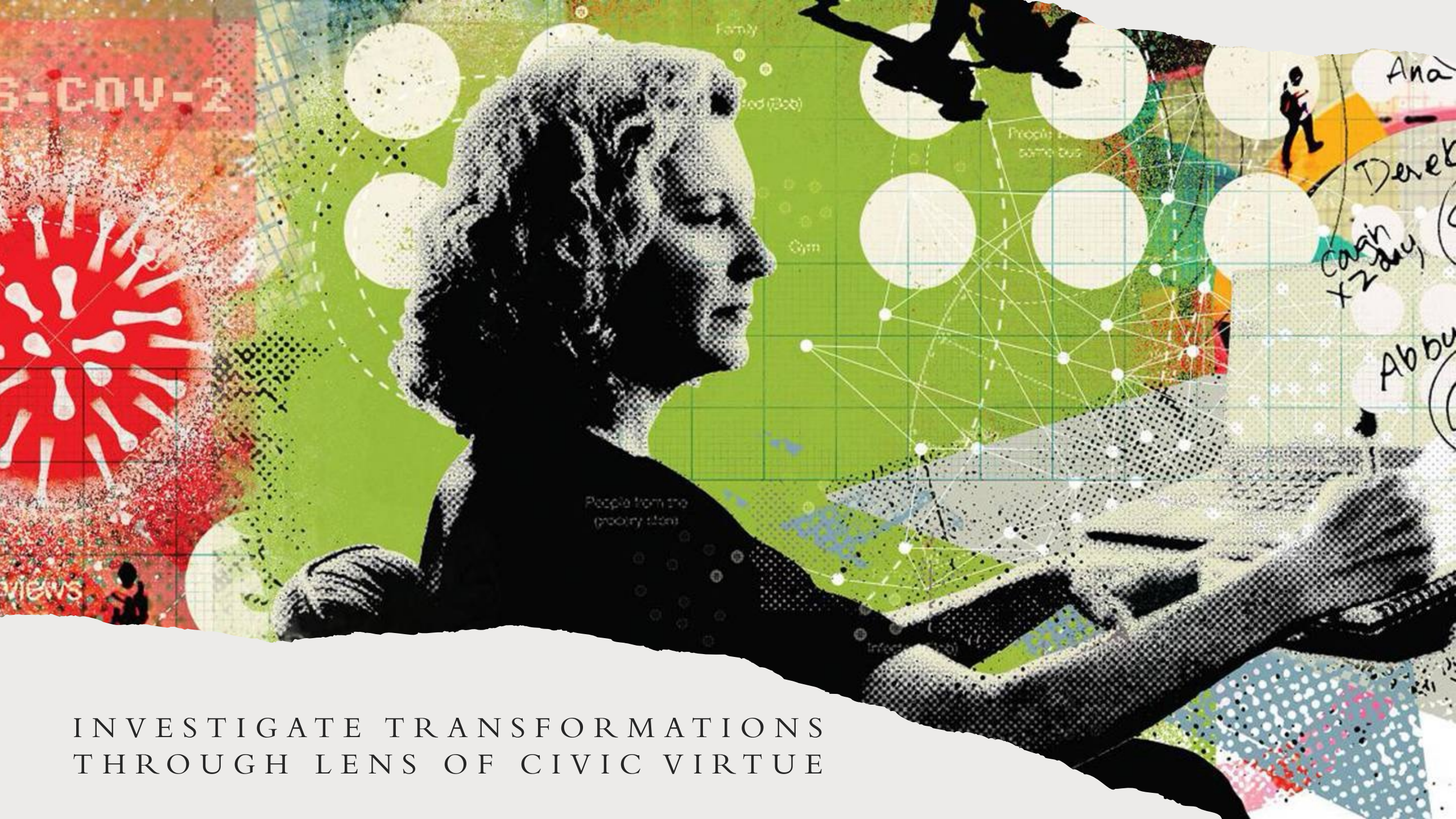
PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS OF TECHNOLOGY

- Beyond the 'empirical turn,' back to matters of an ontological/systematic importance
- Revival of virtue ethics in the field of ethics of technology
- Interest in the role of technologies in governance, configuring e.g., algorithmic governmentality, ordinal citizenship, governance by numbers



SYSTEMATISATION / PERSONALISATION

- Emergence of global sociotechnical systems, the logic of which transgresses the functioning of discrete artefacts; the Internet, world computers
- (Re)focus from the masses back to the individual; tailoring and customising systems to needs and dispositions of persons
- Combined, these enable systems to partake in governance



INVESTIGATE TRANSFORMATIONS
THROUGH LENS OF CIVIC VIRTUE

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VIRTUE ETHICS OF TECHNOLOGY

- Focus on agential dispositions rather than on impacts or deontic rules
- Offer an 'ethical strategy for cultivating the type of moral character that can aid us in coping, and even flourishing' (Vallor)
- Pluralist, potential global approach (Western and Buddhist/Confucianist perspectives)
- Conditions for the cultivation of 'technomoral' virtues
- Listing of technomoral virtues



THE MISSING POLITICAL ASPECT

- Right strategy to cultivate virtues is insensitive to changing political and organisational realities
- Political philosophy is missing in ethics of technology (Himmelreich); political view on justice required to discuss bias in machine learning
- Also in virtue ethics of technology: focus on individual ethics instead of on the civic virtues of citizens living in political communities (Howard)



WHY CIVIC VIRTUE (I)

- Virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics*): disposition aiming at the realisation of *eudaimonia* as the final end of human existence.
- Civic virtue (*Politics*): virtue of the good citizen not the same as that of the good man
Civic virtue not grounded in absolute end of the individual, but *relative* to the constitution
Two-sided: towards effectiveness in being ruled, and excellence in co-ruling the polis

WHY CIVIC VIRTUE (II)

- Civic virtue introduces political dimension: mediating ethical dispositions and political structures and institutions
- Civic virtue incorporates a concern with technological mediation: intangible hand, choice architectures, tradition, public sphere
- Civic virtue as philosophical and ethical response to investigations of technological governance in history and sociology of technology



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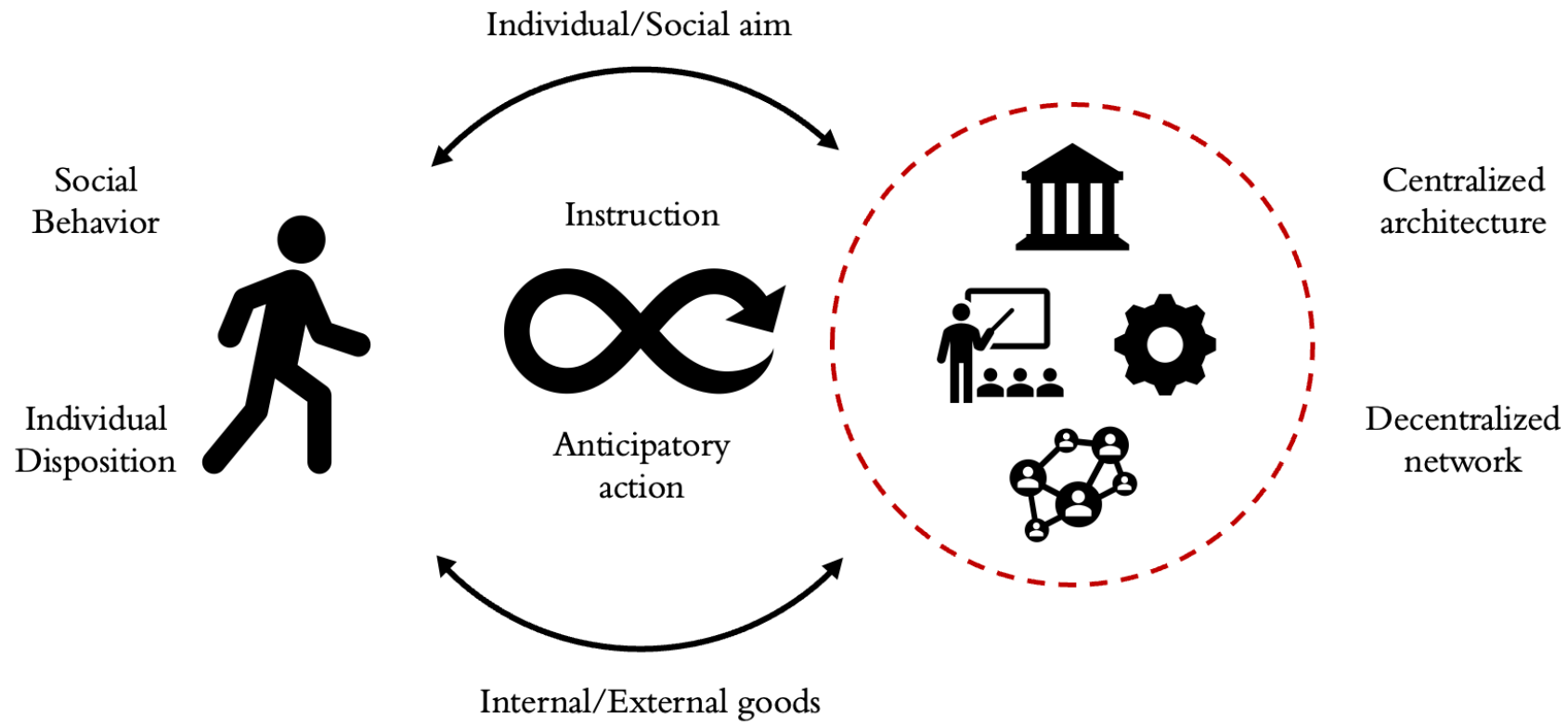
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A PLURALIST ACCOUNT (I) - TEMPORALITY

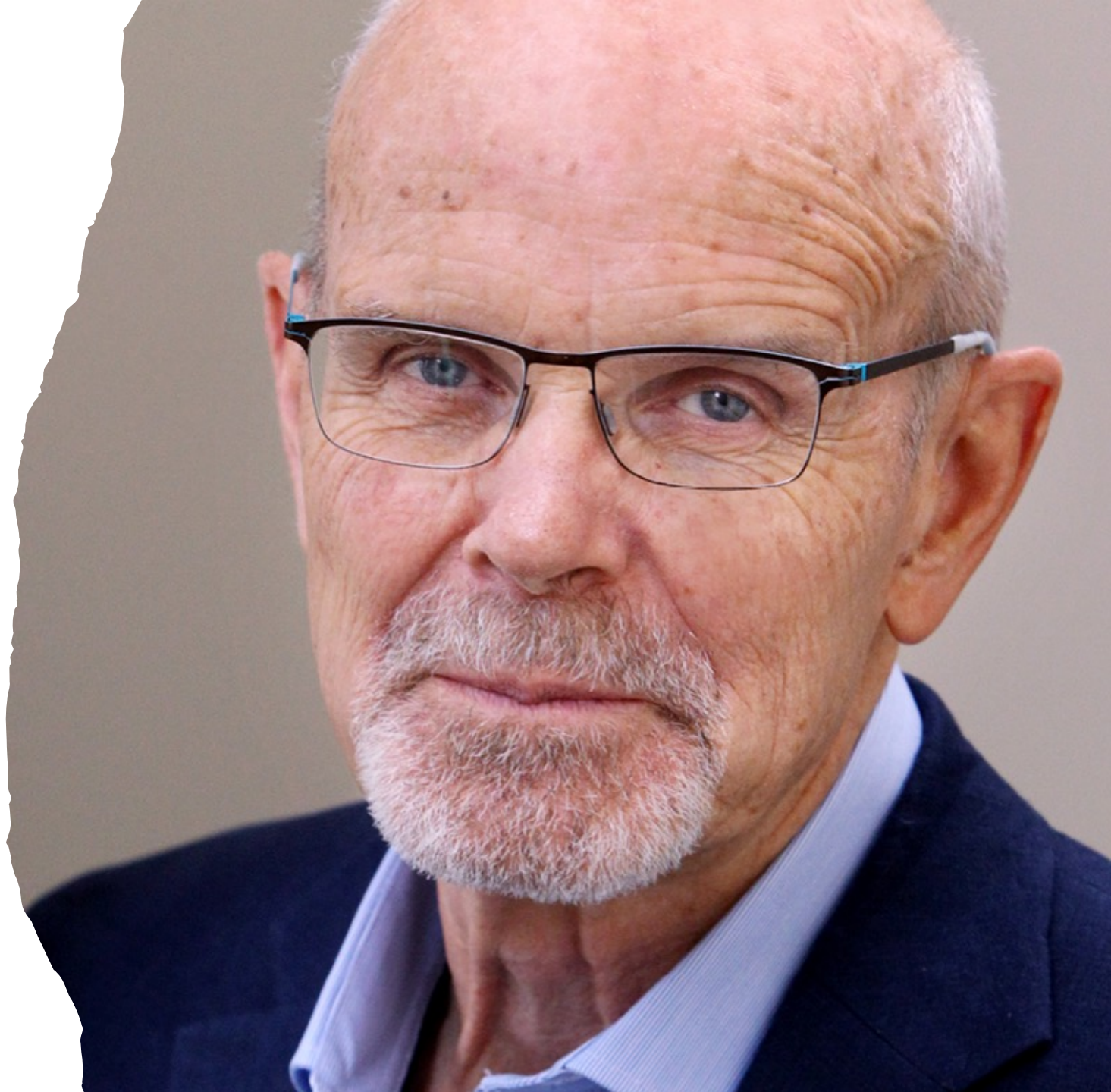
- Civic virtue as a capacity relating to the temporality of human action.
- Why not solely develop a phenomenological account of (future-oriented) civic virtue?
With Ricoeur: temporality plural and irreducible
Cannot reduce time to phenomenology or cosmic time
Hence, civic virtue is irreducible too, and plural instead

A PLURALIST ACCOUNT (II) – BASIC QUESTIONS



PAST-ORIENTED

- Civic virtue as technical skill
- Aligning agent with the aim of a political community
- Civic memory of reputational events
- Pettit: cultivated through tit-for-tat reputational activities
- Cultivated through 'intangible hand'; distributed and non-intentional



PRESENT- ORIENTED

- Civic virtue as excellence
- Ultimate aim of citizens' practices coincides with that of the community (general will)
- Cultivated through practices informed by standards of excellence
- Structured by a materialised historical narrative; embodied in e.g., civic education





FUTURE - ORIENTED

- Civic virtue as anticipatory (political) action
- Linked to a desire for political freedom, as the authentic exercise of virtue
- Cultivated solely through political action in concert
- Sustained by the 'public sphere,' including laws of the city and architecture

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REPUTATION

Pierre Omidyar in the 1990's:

“Give praise where it's due, make
complaints where appropriate”



DOMINATION

- Approximating past-oriented civic virtue through decentralised reputational history
- Yet, how 'intangible' is this hand?
- Even distributed systems are regulatory technologies, and reputation management is done intentionally, rather than non-intentionally
- Threat of domination



SOCIAL CREDIT

Jiang Zemin in the early 2000's:

“Rule the nation with virtue.”





CONFORMISM

- Approximating present-oriented civic virtue through sociotechnical system for civic education
- Yet, external instead of internal goods are pursued
- Social credit systems derive from a history of shared rules rather than standards of excellence
- Threat of conformism



OPEN-SOURCE POLITICS

Audrey Tang in the early 2020's:

“Democracy is a technology, like any social technology it gets better when more people strive to improve it.”



A-POLITICAL ACTION

- Approximating future—oriented civic virtue through decentralised systems for co-decision making
- Yet, persistence of cybernetic feedback mechanisms (e.g., ranking)
- Public sphere interfering into political action, undermining its capacity for initiative
- Threat of a-political action



CONCLUSION

THANK YOU!

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