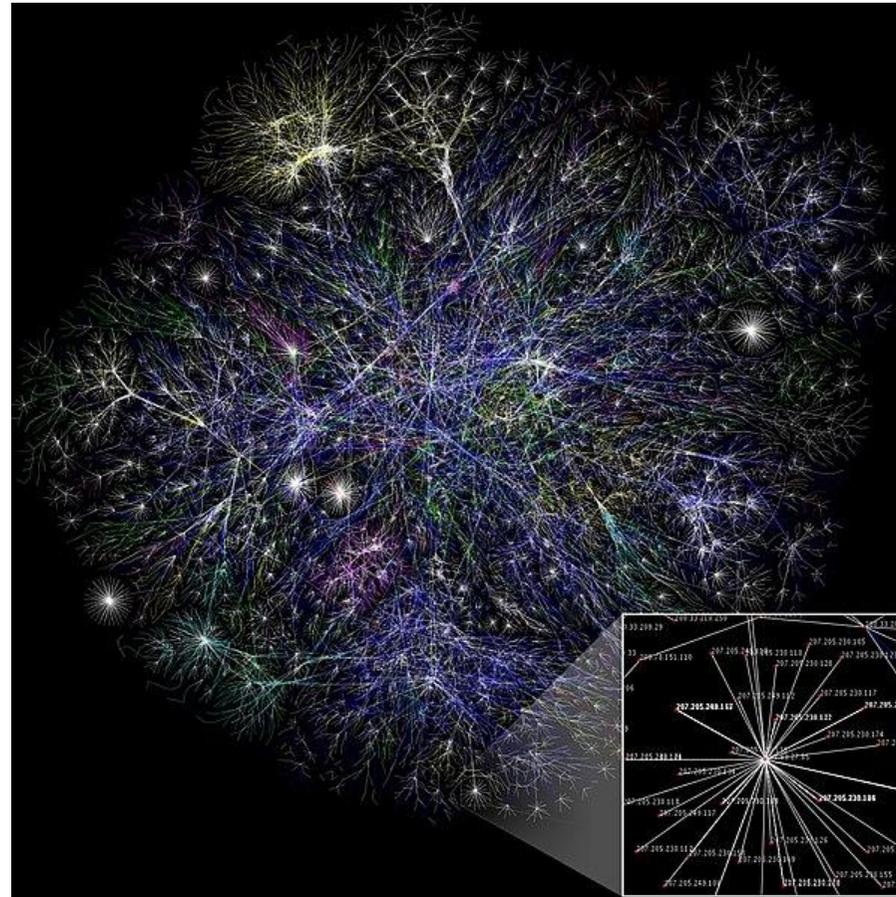# "REDISCOVERING" REAL COMMUNITY LIFE

THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALITY

Giandomenico Boffi, PhD

Retired full professor of Algebra in Italy

boffigia@gmail.com

To "rediscover" real community life, I think it may be useful to start rediscovering the actual foundations of *virtual* communities. Take the Internet for example:

[Visualization from the Opte Project, licensed under a Creative Commons license.]

Everybody sees dots (representing nodes of connection) and segments (representing connections) but few seem to think of the fact that nodes require physical equipment and connections require cables or wireless devices.
And this is big business: 90% of international Internet connections depend on hundreds of transoceanic submarine cables subject to stiff competition from Google, Facebook, Microsoft, etc.
In short, *the Internet has a physical substrate and there are people who operate that substrate*. We depend on this material and operational reality (... and we trust it).

For another example, take the algorithms dealing with digital information at higher levels, often times *intelligent algorithms*, i.e., algorithms that are independent of humans, perhaps because capable of learning from experience by means of a socalled artificial neural network:
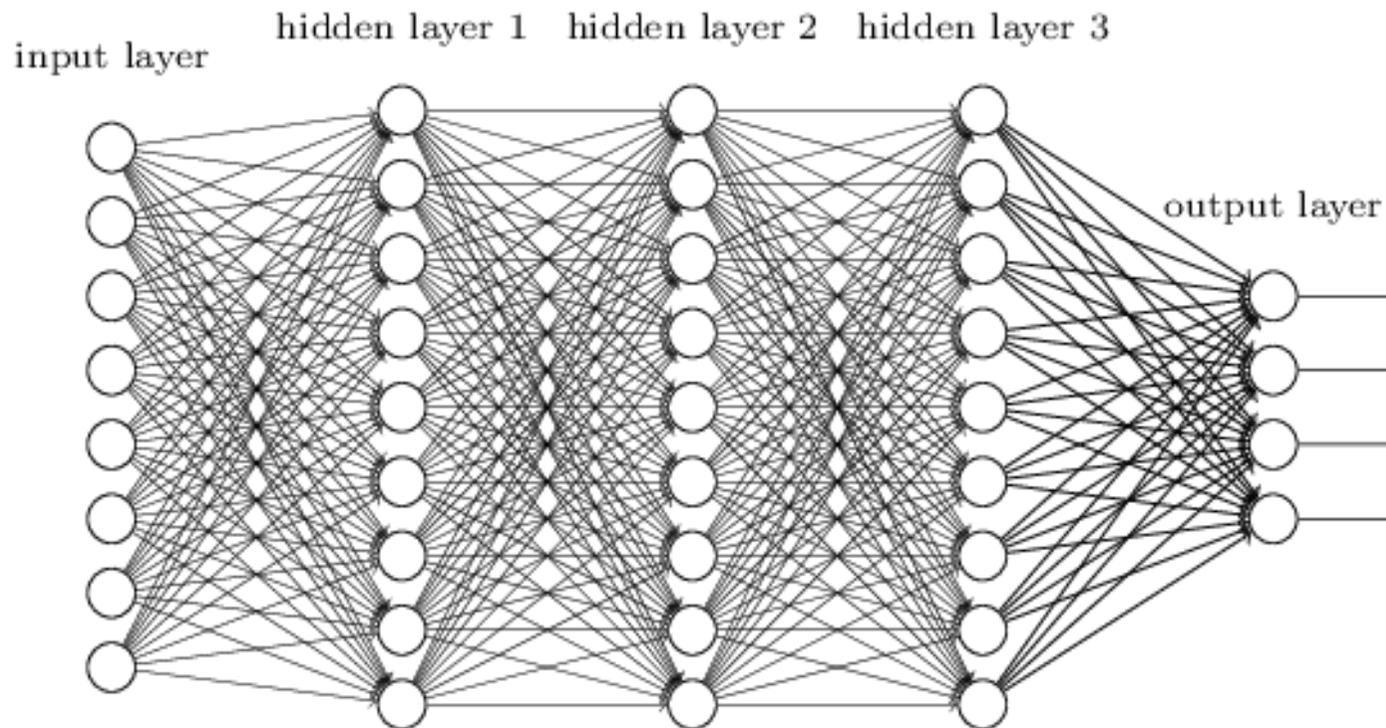
[Image taken from a book freely available online:
M. A. Nielsen, *Neural Networks and Deep Learning*,
Determination Press, San Francisco 2015.
http://neuralnetworksanddeeplearning.com/
(last accessed on September 27, 2021).]

The image is to be read left to right as follows.
Each circle in the leftmost layer carries a numerical input.
Each circle in the rightmost layer carries a numerical output. Each circle in the intermediate ("hidden") layers is an elementary computing unit (called *artificial neuron* or *perceptron*) operating on the numerical outputs of the circles back-connected to it, and outputting a value to be processed by the circles forward-connected.

Caution:

When you see multiple arrows going out of a circle, it means that the *single output* of that circle is sent to several circles of the right-following layer.

Networks of this kind are at the heart of those successful *machine learning* techniques dealing with image recognition, medical screening, financial assessment, etc. on which we depend so much nowadays.

However, sometimes such networks turn out to be unsatisfactory (even biased: racially biased, sexually biased, etc.).

This happens because the networks are designed and tested by humans and there are a number of discretional choices to be made.

Furthermore, we have here *statistical* algorithms, which cannot be easily corrected in case of malfunctioning (and are reliable only most of the times but not always).

[I ignore the conceptual problem posed by any method which bases forecasting the future entirely on the past.]

In short: even algorithms dealing with digital information at higher levels have *a material and operational dimension* (... which we consider trustworthy).

To sum up both examples: virtual communities depend in fact on real communities of humans.

Yet it seems to me that this (fairly obvious) fact is overlooked by most people, including digital natives.
(I know a computer scientist who in the first lesson used to tell his students that his PC did *not* contain a little wizard.)

Why this lack of attention?

I submit that the reason lies ultimately in an *underestimation of our bodies and matter in general* , which is the result of a widely held dualistic notion of human nature.

People admit that we happen to have a material body, but often argue that there is something else beyond it, something "superior", possibly *independent* of the body.

Hence a virtual community can somehow forget the real communities of humans on which it relies (while implicitly placing a lot of faith in them).

Ironically, in the field of artificial intelligence, which at times envisioned intelligences completely independent of any material medium, more recent trends deem it necessary to train any intelligent agent in a realistic 3D simulator (*embedded artificial intelligence*).

Corporeality brings us to a further consideration about community life: "networking".

According to our contemporary scientific understanding, to be a body means for us to qualify as an animal.
An animal is an individual instance of a species produced by a biological evolution which is taking place in a material world.
In this material biological world, if you are alone, completely alone, from birth, you do not go far: your body dies soon enough.
(At least because you are unable to feed yourself. In the worst case because you cannot defend yourself.)

So if you happen to be alive in this material biological world, it means that you are in fact inserted into a *network of connections* :

1) unintentional connections such as that established between the air and the lungs since birth, and
2) intentional connections such as that between a mother and her child (possibly technology-mediated by a baby bottle).

In my view, this network of (trustworthy) connections should be always kept in mind as a necessary precondition for the possibility of a real community life.

Beware!

A network involving *humans*, *other living beings* and *inanimate objects* , that is, all three dimensions of our material world.

Summarizing: *corporeality*
and
networking
in a material context

What about a specific way in which we Christians can address such corporeality and networking in a material context?

Here is a list of points that I think are relevant and that I would like to see taken into consideration by you.

First. I am afraid that we Christians are partially responsible for the aforementioned dualistic notion of human nature, which is so damaging.

It is well known that it is a theologically dubious notion, but it seems to be continually fueled by a certain persistent way of speaking (thinking?) about the soul.

Why is this dualism so hard to die in our communities and perhaps even in our study centers?

Second. Given the importance to be recognized to our bodies, does not the incarnation of the Son emphasize this importance?

In fact I see Jesus's body intimately connected to all other aspects of Him during His terrestrial life (as the institution of the Eucharist itself seems to testify). I also find of paramount importance that after the resurrection He stressed that He was not a ghost but a body able to eat (the *same* body of before, although somewhat different).

Actually I like to think that I myself do not simply have a body, but *am* a body, both now and in the resurrection.

Third. Given the importance to be recognized to materiality, what are the implications of the fact that after the resurrection the matter of the universe (the same matter, although somewhat different) was brought by Jesus's body into the intimate life of the Triune God?

In fact I see the seal of the Trinity imprinted on the materiality of Creation, past, present and future.
The same seal imprinted on every real community life.

My list of points ends here.
I conclude my talk with a comment on the experience of the Catholic Church in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic.

In the Spring of 2020, the Italian Government prohibited the celebration of Masses with the people for several weeks (including at Easter), hastily assimilating Masses to civil *ceremonies* (cf. DPCM 8 Marzo 2020, article 1, clause 1, i)).

Of course there were online Masses, but a Mass is not entirely meaningful if the faithful cannot be present and cannot take the Eucharist (no online meal can exist!).

It was very sad that in an emergency situation regarding the health of the body, the faithful could not access the body of Christ, which is traditionally considered beneficial for both the soul and the body.

But most of all it was very sad that the Italian bishops (including the bishop of Rome) seemed to accept everything uncritically. In particular, they seemed unaware of a wrong message being conveyed, namely that an online Mass is on par with a Mass in presence. In fact, so far many people have not returned to attend Mass (cf. AAVV, *Il gregge smarrito*, Rubettino 2021).

It should be said that somebody in the Catholic Church publicly stated that it was *good* for the faithful to be deprived of Mass attendance and the Eucharist, deeming their attendance to be often out of habit. (I find this kind of reasoning both flawed and presumptuous.)