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Book Review: The Digital and its Discontents by Aden Evens

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Abstract:
Book review of Aden Evens's *The Digital and its Discontents*.

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During the 2022 launch demo of LaMDA, a family of conversational large language models (LLM) developed by Google, CEO Sundar Pichai showcased two conversation scenarios entirely conducted by LaMDA. In the first conversation, LaMDA personifies the planet Pluto, explaining what Pluto is and the experience of visiting it. The conversation unfolds autonomously, with LaMDA on both ends. In the second scenario, LaMDA takes the role of a paper airplane, discussing its own design and "recounting" a flying accident. The conversation concludes with such a vignette imagined by the large language model. Through the two examples, Pichai claims that LaMDA's algorithm is able to perform informative and natural conversations.

Whether the conversations are impressive enough, the demonstration indeed offers a summation of the principles and desires associated with the world of algorithms. As Pichai emphasized, LaMDA is, first and foremost, rational. Being able to capture and convey scientific information to the public, LaMDA aims to create precise simulation aligned with scientific truths. This leads to the second point: LaMDA operates fully with the logic of representation that is both limitless and coherent. While LaMDA can easily simulate a planet and a paper airplane, its representation is in full congruity with the quality of the represented. In other words, LaMDA can never turn Pluto into a gas planet, just as it will not imagine the paper airplane to be heavy or fluffy. However, the most intriguing aspect arises at the end of the second conversation, where LaMDA introduces an enigmatic pursuit of "accident"—a simulated contingency that emerges from the structured dialogue, subtly threatening the imagined seamlessness of the digital world.

These intertwined themes are explored in depth in Aden Evens's work *The Digital and its Discontents.* Offering a comprehensive insight into the digital, Evens's book is a pioneering, albeit overdue, contribution to the philosophy of the digital. *The Digital and*

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its Discontents is both a philosophical treatise and a critique of ideology. It begins with the premise that the digital operates on universal elements and absolute invariants that cut across cultural boundaries. A wide array of scholarship including the works of Wendy Chun, Lisa Nakamura, and Manuel Castells delves into the cultural-theoretical analysis of the digital. As these thinkers study the mutual fertilization between different societies and technologies to dismantle the spectre of techno-determinism, Evens, on the other hand, flirts with techno-determinism in a nonetheless constructive manner.

Rather than excavating the forces of difference in the messy ensembles of cultures, histories, and technologies, *The Digital and its Discontents* stubbornly insists on the separation between the actual and the digital. Exploring the forms, principles, and the binary system undergirding digital operations, Evens tracks down what he calls "the digital ideology," which is not to be confused with political ideology but is by all means political. As the work progresses, it becomes clear that the separation is both a premise for the philosophical aim to unmask the formal regime of the digital and Evens's own political-ethical intervention.

The Digital and its Discontents takes its name from Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents.* Where Freud identifies lack as constitutive of the development of civilization, Evens foregrounds digital lack as the driving force behind the advancement of digital technology. Yet, signifying the unsurpassable impasse between the digital and the actual, digital lack is simultaneously a blessed promise for contingency—the unconditioned, non-necessary, and infinitely creative. That is to say, Evens, through crafting the ontology of the digital, in fact stands together with those who, for Alexander Galloway, represent the best "analog" thinkers in today's hyper-digitalized world—Gilles Deleuze, Quentin Meillassoux, and Elizabeth Grosz, to name a few.[1]

Evens starts Chapter 1 "Approaching the Digital," by outlining and defending his methodology, proposing the necessity to have a literacy grounded in the abstract logic of the digital. Central to this discussion is the philosophical focus on the binary code—0 and 1. Evens describes the binary code as both the symbol and the substance of the digital paradigm: "a purely formal code rendered materially effective, that empowers and delimits the digital."[2] These two digits constitute the foundation of digital technology, exemplifying its unambiguously universal formalism.

Chapter 2, "What Does the Digital Do?" presents a conceptual weaving of the digital ideology with philosophical threads extending back to pre-Enlightenment era. Evens

1 Alexander R. Galloway, "Golden Age of Analog," *Critical Inquiry* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2022).

2 Aden Evans, *The Digital and its Discontents* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 19.

argues that there are three major ideologies that nurture and ground the digital: positivism, rationalism, and instrumentalism. Defined as "a commitment to the idea that knowledge must be grounded in facts or posits," positivism provides the conceptual framework for understanding discreteness in the digital paradigm.[3] For Evens, since atomist philosophy, positivism has prepared the intellectual groundwork for digital operations. Moreover, the logic of the digital echoes the belief in the ontological priority of "thingness" that is detachable from the surrounding milieu. Fully individuated, the bits in the digital sequence is not only discrete but twice-discrete. This means that: each bit is distinct in value represented by 0 and 1; and each bit occupies a distinct position in a sequence. The twice-discrete nature ensures the logical flow and precision in all digital operations. Rationalism, tied to a modernist paradigm of control, is apparent in the fact that every digital operation connects a cause and an effect. No input goes without a response. Efficacy is always promised. The means-end reasoning also justifies the third ideology, Instrumentalism, in accordance with Heidegger's conceptualization of technology, which emphasizes the goal-driven nature of digital systems. Designed for specific ends, digital technology remains inert without deliberate commands. Alongside positivism and rationalism, instrumentalism shapes the ontology of the digital—a domain that materializes in the actual world yet remains fundamentally distinct from it. For Evens, the digital is always perfect. While its design may occasionally falter, once the machine is operational, its calculations proceed with mechanical consistency. "Of course, there can be error in the digital, but there is no digital error."[4]

Chapter 3, "Ontology and Contingency" is a rumination on contingency. Evens discusses various anti-positivist philosophies in defiance of digital ideologies in contemporary as well as primordial forms. Tracing the ideas of Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Meillassoux, Deleuze, and Derrida, Evens illustrates the conceptual possibilities embedded in the history of philosophy that challenge and delimit the stable systems of fixture—systems upon which the digital technologies both rely and amplify. It is contingency that disrupts the digital ideologies. "It undoes *positivism* by refuting the strict identity of a thing with itself; it denies *rationalism* by asserting a spontaneous sense that pierces the limits of reason; and it foils *instrumentalism* by destabilizing the relationship between cause and effect."[5] Instead of concluding with the abundant possibilities of the actual, Evens ends the chapter with a nuanced exploration of the contamination between binary logic and contingency. Just as contingency's non-necessity and creativity instigate abstraction and positivism, by subscribing to the necessity of a preexisting *thing*, the binary calls for a potential reversal that glimpses the infinite.

3 Evans, 28.

4 Evans, 52.

5 Evens, 58.

Contingency is the meshwork that pulls everything together with everything else; the ontology of the digital, on the other hand, also has its own system of randomness and creativity, though in a "muted" form.[6] Chapter 4, "Ontology of the Digital," examines the digital ontology. One thing is certain: by warding off the messiness of the actual, the digital works only with given forms. Evens does not go deeper into the debates of creativity that are especially relevant to artificial intelligence but puts the sole focus on bits—the fundamental unit of the digital. Bits function simultaneously as symbols and electrical currents on chips that organize computational processes. In the dual role, bits combine *doing* and *saying* and form a unique synthesis that characterize its ontology. The electrical current is particularly intriguing, as it represents a point where the strictly separated realms of the digital and the actual seem on the verge of collapsing. Yet, without lingering on this potentiality, Evens attunes the readers to another defining feature of the digital: the logic of representation. Every quality, feature, and object in reality is abstracted and encoded into sequences of bits. This process gives rise to a logic of representation, enabling the emergence of an iconic value closely associated with digital culture. The metaphysics of the digital, therefore, lies in the transcendental essence of "icons" that looms behind the algorithmic sequences composed of homogenous units.

Chapter 5, "From Bits to the Interface," explores the process of digital creation. Rather than analysing the human-machine interface, Evens looks into the process of assembling representation. In the digital paradigm, the process of putting together, for example, colours, textures, and sizes, is a process devoid of any "touchy" relation typical of the physical world. By demonstrating that digital machines rarely represent "purple spotted elephants or building-size mosquitoes or software that executes random commands," Evens resolutely points out that the plenitude of choices in the digital world does not give rise to true deviation; paradoxically, like LaMDA's perfect simulation, the parts which co-constitute digital representations "tend to remain in perfect congruity with their qualities."[7] The difference between plenitude and contingency is a difference between epistemology and ontology. This is further demonstrated by the unknown number omega in the mathematical realm. For Evens, given its unknowability, omega is still nothing but a necessary truth. Contingency, however, is always ontologically infinite and unconditioned.

Yet, does this difference between epistemology and ontology truly defines how we experience the digital? Are we not inclined, as Chapter 5 briefly discusses, to treat a surprising "randomness" offered by the digital as a shadow of real contingency? Chapter 6, "What Does the Digital Do to Us," tackles the experience, the particular (dis) satisfactions, and the cruel optimism, to borrow Lauren Berlant's words, wrought by

6 Evens, 93.

7 Evens, 147.

the penetrating digital technologies and ideologies. In this light, Evens discusses the importance of games. Through games, we are able to renegotiate with the possibilities and certain autonomy that are available in the expansive web of information, choices, and commodities. Examining simulated embodiment, the field of Digital Humanities, the chapter ends with a certain generosity. Much of the world needs a logic, Evens concedes. Logic and algorithm not only capture and manipulate reality but also foster diverse possibilities for critical interpretation.

The concluding chapter, "But…" continues to think about the digital and how it attempts to overcome the discontents. One of the overdue themes is Generative AI. Evens opens the chapter with a discussion of GPT-3 and how it generates text based on tokens—the sequence of letters and their relations—rather than meanings. The statistical relationship gives birth to a digital semiotics that works to simulate human intelligence. However impressive, the neural network is still formalistic. The simulated contingency is based on statistically measurable relations among letters. Evens extends this critique to Cyberpunk 2077, a game celebrated for its intricate details and narrative depth. According to Evens, the game inserts a large amount of ambiguity into the core of gameplay, connecting unassuming dialog choices with different endings. "This game thus represents a world that we might understand as *contingent*, a world in which even distant events are subtly interdependent and in which complexity overwhelms instrumentality"[8]—but still, it is within the realm of representation, no matter how far representation becomes. In this context, Evens reiterates the central argument: digital representation is constrained by finite prescriptions, while in the actual world, the relationship between representation and the represented remains boundless and open.

The core concerns in *The Digital and its Discontents* resonate across various disciplines. Discussions about digital intention, goals, and creativity are central to debates surrounding artificial intelligence. Similarly, the ontology and evolution of the digital, along with its parallel or symbiotic existence with the actual, raise broader questions about how we conceptualize technical being and its relationship with organisms and nature. How will the digital evolve? Evens sketches a portrait of a digital "will to power" as a history of evolution without self-overcoming. Although the book struggles to maintain a non-symbiotic, non-dialectical relationship between the digital and the actual, Evens ultimately suggests that the digital's evolution can only occur by persistently encroaching the plenitude of the actual. Time becomes the digital's primary point of contact with the actual, which in turn offers new affordances that will result in the changing of forms. Above all, the digital is formal. New configurations within the digital paradigm will inevitably emerge, driven by the relentless accumulation of data and the expanding scope of its applications.

8 Ibid, 203.

"Employ the digital as a challenge, take it where it does not fit, and never take its procedures for granted," Evens offers some of the last suggestions.[9] As we witness emerging forms of technological simulations each day and the remnant ghosts of sentience that have haunted the machines for over a century, Even's patient analysis of bits and firm resistance to the digital's aspiration to become real offer a humble yet deeply profound invitation, as well as a needed comfort, to collectively build our understanding of a world that is (but…) yet to be digital.

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9 Evens, 211.