

# *Me, Myself and I(T): Considering identity in the age of technology*

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## **Introduction**

The question raised by this conference: ‘How might the Internet be said to be promoting or inhibiting the development of European identity or identities?’ is, as such, a thoroughly modern question – modern in what it asks for: empirical findings regarding efficient causal relations between ‘a’ and ‘b’. It is modern in what it asks about: technological effects, human identity (‘however defined’ as the call for papers puts it). It is also modern in why it asks: the European Commission needs to know what factors ‘facilitate the co-existence of multiple identities’, an obvious modern yoking of knowledge, action and power. In 2004, these observations are, of course, commonplace. We raise them here to note, if only momentarily at the outset, our arguably post-modern situation. We all claim to know better than to take our ‘modern’ situation at face value and yet here we sit, bought and paid for, asking and answering modern and post-modern questions in this oh-so-modern context. There *is* something wrong with this picture. But within that vague feeling of unease lies, perhaps, a glimpse of a way forward.<sup>1</sup>

This situation, writ philosophical, was that expressed by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger when, in his essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ he quoted the poet Holderlin’s words:

Where the danger is, grows the saving power also. (Heidegger, 1977: 34)

For Heidegger, the danger lies not in the technology *per se*. (Contrary to popular belief Heidegger was not anti-technology.) Rather, the danger lies in the unique way in which the world and all it contains, including ourselves, avails itself to us in the present age: literally how things are for us, how they show up for us as *being* there at all and as *being* this or that: in other words, how beings reveal themselves to us *as* or *as for* something. In order for this premise to be clear, a word about Heidegger’s larger philosophical project is required – the author begs your indulgence.

For Heidegger, the critical question for thought is: what is it that gives being, from whence comes being at all? This question has two sides, the question of how being is sent or sends itself to us and what it is about human beings that identifies being at all. Taking the second question first, we can think about it this way: if you are an omniscient and all-powerful god, the universe and all it contains exist and are infinitely accessible/knowable and useable for you and so they simply are what they are in all their multifarious multiplicity and you have direct access to them; conversely, if you are an animal (say an ant, bird, or squirrel, etc.) things are ‘known’ and used instinctively, food is food (eat it, store it), shelter is shelter (use it, don’t use it), danger is danger (flee it, fight it); only for humans (and perhaps also for some of our simian cousins) are things understood and available not simply for what they are, but what they are *is* their being or being taken *as* this or that (such and so) or *as being* or *as being for* this or that (a stone can exist both practically *as* a hammer for a tent peg and assertorically *as* the product of a process of earthbound geo-formation). Our access to all that exists is thus mediated by being in a way that it would not be if we were all-seeing all-knowing gods precisely because we are spatially and temporally finite beings and so our access to things is always only partial, perspectival and often purposeful, and it is mediated by ‘being’ in a way that it is not for most animals because we have access to the world through language. Language requires that we separate/distinguish/individuate/pick things out from all that is and then combine those things into assertions (the stone is a hammer) or judgements (the stone is made of silica). Thus as finite, temporal, practical and linguistic human beings find their access to the world – including themselves and others – (as recognizable, knowable, useable) through being.

But, Heidegger notes, being is not simply there. A look at the history of being (of how the being of things has been variously understood and acted upon) demonstrates that being (as fundamental principles about the being of beings and as origin of or highest being of beings) shows up differently at different times in our Western (European) history and that these instances are articulated by the great thinkers of their times. The history of the West since the Greeks has unfolded as a series of dispensations of being – how the being of that which is is available to us. We can distinguish two distinct eras in the understanding of being. First, at the dawn of philosophy, thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus contended that the being of all things was some single element to which all beings could be reduced –

variously air or water or atoms or the struggle of opposites. The second such period Heidegger terms the epoch of metaphysics – literally the period in which being is thought in binary terms of the physical and the meta (more than, other than) physical. In this way we can see how Plato articulated being as form and matter (in later Platonism, essence and existence); Aristotle possibility and actuality; medieval scholasticism (Augustine and Aquinas) the creator and the created, and in our more modern period Descartes articulated the understanding of being which has permitted the growth of science (including our view of modern identity), dividing being into the knowing, self-certain subject (*res cogitans*: mind, soul, spirit) and the universe of calculable physical objects (*res extensa*: objects extended in space). And finally, according to Heidegger, the age of metaphysics comes to its close (or better runs its course) through the complete reversal of Platonism in Nietzsche, wherein God (all things meta) is dead and all that remains is brute physical reality there only to serve human will-to-power.

For Heidegger, this last phase of the metaphysical era is understood as the technological. By this Heidegger means that the dispensation under which beings reveal themselves challenges them to unlock their energies, their potentials for human storage, stockpiling, ordering, and use. Quoting Heidegger,

The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth. That challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing.... Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve. (Heidegger, 1977: 16–17)

Heidegger's well known example of this is the difference between the pre-technological sawmill on the river that must – even as it is a technology – restrain itself to function within the context of 'the flow and force of the river, its bends, its banks, depths, recent meteorological history' (Babich, 1999: 114) and the hydroelectric power plant which must dam the river in order to unlock its energy and in so doing deprive the river of its capacity to reveal itself as anything but a

hydroelectric power source. And so it is as the husbandry and shepherding of the peasant farmer becomes mechanized agribusiness, the beauty of nature in its flora and fauna, as well as historical cultural sites and architecture stand by as available for tourist viewing, the earth itself becomes a repository of nitrogen, mineral ores, and fossil fuels (man's filling station), that human skill, craft and effort gives way to generic 'human resources' to be 'managed', and that human being itself is fast becoming available most centrally in terms of its genetically engineerable possibilities.

The danger that Heidegger recognizes in this is the danger that this modern, technological version of the truth of being has the tendency to foreclose visibility of other possible modes of being and, especially, of the fact that there is a truth of being – the open horizon which sends or dispenses being – that lies behind the scientific, calculable version of truth-as-correspondence that accords with the modern dispensation of being, namely, that being sends itself historically to us. Ours is not the only version of being and we did not choose it or discover it through our rationality, our science, or our modern subjectivity; rather, it is only through this historical sending of being that we came to discover our modern sense of rationality, science, and subjectivity (not to mention identity). The saving power that Heidegger alludes to is the possibility that there is something in the very totalizing character of this way of being that will foster awareness beyond the tools, technologies, products and processes of this endless stockpiling and ordering that, if we can catch sight of it, may bring with it a new dispensation of being, an overcoming of the metaphysical era altogether and the dawn of a new relation to being.

What this 'technological' way of being harbours according to Heidegger is a *poetic* quality that it shares with the *techne* of ancient Greek art. The technological as a way of bringing-forth into presence (such that things can *be* for us even if only in their utilitarian technological guise) is akin to the bringing-forth of the sculptured form from the stone. The Greeks, however, showed an awareness of the co-creative quality of their art, of their relation to all that is as, in part, the responsibility of being itself. The job of the true artist, after all, was to release the form hidden in the stone. For Aristotle, recognition of this came in apportioning causality among the formal, the material, and the final cause, jointly attended to by our role as efficient cause. In Neitzschean terms, we, by contrast, look around and see only ourselves. We use our tools and technologies to create and see only the efficient causality of the maker. Sure,

we may admit to the need to accommodate ourselves to the contours of our tools, but we would not in the course of our existence go so far as to suggest that it is our tools that make us – this is the stuff of Luddites and Frankenstein films. But might there be, for those ensconced in their simulated cyber-worlds, a chance to glimpse just that co-createdness, sufficient, perhaps, to grant to being its creative power and concomitantly reduce our own to the status, as Heidegger termed it, of the ‘shepherd of being.’ It is to such a possibility that may lie in the connection between identity and the Internet that we now turn our attention.

### **Identity and the Internet**

In the wake of the pioneering work of Sherry Turkel in the 1990s, we have come to understand and to speak of the potential of the Internet, the Web, as a powerful tool for the modification and development of individual and even group identity.<sup>2</sup> For Turkel cyberspace is giving rise to a ‘culture of simulation’ wherein we are free to construct various identities, ‘morphed through a series of virtual personae’ (Turkel, 1995: 10) in ways that are generating ‘fundamental shifts in the way we create and experience human identity.’ (Turkel, 1995: 10) I take this to be an accurate and representative understanding of the way in which we have come to see and discuss the impact of the Internet in our lives. This conference itself is, of course, a prescient exemplar of this view.

There is vigorous debate about the power of the Internet to truly affect our lives and our selves in the way proponents of these powers suggest. Hubert Dreyfus for one makes a strong case for the ultimate embodiedness of human identity, arguing that real life and real identity formation requires commitment, risk, effective engagement and action, and that these are lacking in Multi-user Domains (MUDs), Internet Relay Chats (IRCs), and old-fashioned chat rooms. But even this objection, Kierkegaardian in origin as it is, remains within the modern sense of identity.

The modern sense of identity is, of course, Cartesian in origin. I think, therefore, as the thinker of these thoughts I am me (I am I: classic modern identity). This notion of the self was first explicitly formulated by John Locke. For it is Locke who, in fine Cartesian spirit brought to our lexicon the term ‘personal identity’ with the claim that ‘since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls *self*, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking

things: in this alone consists *personal identity*, i.e., the sameness of a rational being.’<sup>3</sup> (Locke, 1996: 180) The modern self is individuated, fixed, stable, and enduring, as opposed, Locke notes, to the ever-changing particles of matter that compose one’s body or the contingencies of one’s birthright (i.e., who I am is no longer derived from my being my father’s son, I am me of my own accord).

Our Western tradition notes two important developments of this Cartesian-Lockean line of thought that continue to play out in discussions of identity. The first is Hegel, who extricates this line from its implied solipsism by noting that our consciousness of ourselves always develops in the context of our relation to others and the communal practices that structure our lives and those relations.<sup>4</sup> For Hegel, our sense of identity ‘requires that we be recognized by others in that we receive names, that our affects are identified and responded to...(I)n short, we have to identify ourselves with the roles, affects, sense of worthiness, and so forth that we are recognized as having.’ (Flores, 1998: 360) The answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ even in terms of my own conscious assessment of myself derives, at least in part, from the reflection of myself that I glean from others and in my ability to operate within the roles and understandings that are publicly available to me. (This goes some way in explaining why novices in cyberspace sometimes have difficulty establishing identities until they are able to grasp the communal practices well enough to be recognized by the others who function there). In opposition to Hegel, as Dreyfus has shown us, Kierkegaard argued that what gives us personal identity is our commitments to things, causes, or other persons. It is only when we commit ourselves to things that we open a personal world for ourselves in and through which the things of the world, the roles we take up, and the persons to whom we relate take on a personal meaning. Only through such commitment can we answer the question, ‘Who am I?’

Taken together it can be said that most present-day discussions of identity, whether modern or post-modern, come to rest on this modern (Cartesian, Lockean, Hegelian, Kierkegaardian, we could add Freudian) understanding of personal identity. Even for so called post-modern writers, this centered, unified, and singular, self remains the unstated jumping off point for claims of de-centered, fragmented, and multiple identities.<sup>5</sup> And apparently it is technology, most notably those technologies that foster simulation, which are the tools that give us the ability to transcend our singular selves

And so it is, when I enter a MUD or a chat room, a wholly human technological creation, that I am invited to ‘identify’ myself, that is, I am literally prompted to offer up an identity – something singular and centered in itself, recognizable by others in the Hegelian sense, and committed, in the Kierkegaardian sense, to this or that interest or outcome or issue. This identity may be my best, most honest understanding of me or it may be a fragmented, decentred, radically experimental alter ego, but in either case there is ample room to see the extent to which this is not me, but rather, what technology makes of me. When I am playing out a scenario in a MUD, there are always two worlds at play, the one where my imagination projects itself to the simulated cyber-scene and the other, which is wholly beholden to the technology that makes this scene possible. I am, for example, limited in my imaginings by the fact that I am a slow typist, that this world can be lost to me every time my system crashes, that my fantasy world has no smells or tastes or textures that are not ultimately sensed as words, sounds, or pictures. It is, in the end, the machine, the program, my bandwidth, my screen options, my typing skills and so on that dictate to me how this world that I so desire to inhabit can be accessed and how, as asynchronous, linear, devoid of taste and touch, it can be experienced. But, confronted with this realization I might counter that this is not so different that my ‘real life’. In real life my hopes, dreams, desires, actions and interests are similarly mediated by my phone, my car, my iPod, my laptop, traffic patterns, road networks, rail lines, speed limits, flight schedules, wi-fi hotspots; in all these ways, I might say, my real life is structured, even dictated by the technologies that are so much a part of my life, so much a part of who I am, so much a part of what makes me me, to single out my MUD-ing as somehow qualitatively different would be wrong.

But is this not the point? Who I am, what I can do and do do, even in the ‘real world’ is co-constituted by the dictates and constraints of the technologies that surround me. The world as it reveals itself to me in this technological age suggests that I am in control, but if I attend to the ‘how’ of my existence I see that I am not my own efficient cause (and so neither would a social constructionist efficient causality suffice either): my existence, my identity, who I am is indebted (a better translation of the Greek *aitia* than ‘cause’ anyway) to material (existing things and technologies), formal (pre-existing ways of sense-making) and final (roles and goals and meanings) causes that all exist for me *a priori* and with which, at best, I only participate in bring-forth into both the real world and my cyber-spaces. It would be just this kind of

awareness of the limits of technological enframing that might allow us to look behind it to the clearing held open by our finitude and our being-historical that grants being (our access to beings) in the first place. In which case, we would find ourselves uniquely indebted to European identity and the Internet.

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<sup>1</sup> For another form of this unease, see, for example, Drefyus, 2002: p. 3; Slater, 1998: pp. 106–8; and Turkel, 1996; Uslaner, 2004: pp. 223–42; and Weiser, 2001: pp. 723–43.

<sup>2</sup> See, among her many other works, Turkel, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Those with an interest in etymology might profitably explore the history of the Latin roots of the word identity.

<sup>4</sup> Here, my explication of the works of Hegel and Kierkegaard follows Flores, 1998: pp. 351–72.

<sup>5</sup> On Jameson, see Turkel, 1995: p. 49.