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Online Self (also) as a Construct

*Soraj Hongladarom
Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University*

Back in 1999, Albert Borgmann published a book on *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*. Its main message was that we are losing touch with the basic, bedrock reality that has always been there. With the advent of information and communication technologies, we humans are facing a situation where information is about to replace reality and to become reality itself. Borgmann calls this information as reality, a chief aspect of information at the turn of the Millennium. Information no longer functions as only a sign pointing toward reality, nor as a recipe telling us how to fashion a part of reality; information is about to become reality in itself. Borgmann sees the prospect to be threatening and the book could be seen as a plea for a return to the bedrock reality with which we used to be familiar.

Borgmann presumably would regard our own selves as ineluctably parts of the basic reality he is championing. After all, we would not be able to appreciate the Montana landscape so loved by him if we did not possess a self who acts as the onlooker and the experiencer of the landscape. Borgmann's bedrock reality, in other words, would not be possible if we did not possess a self. Nonetheless, the onset of information and communication technologies,

especially what has happened during these last few years with social networking phenomena seen as sites such as Facebook or Twitter, seems to throw much of the traditional thinking about the self and the object into confusion. A main characteristic of social networking is to form webs of links among “persons” whose identities are there on the social networking websites. It is typical for a member of Facebook to have hundreds of “friends.” It does not matter how many of these “friends” are those whom the member actually meet and interact in real life; what does matter is that the interaction is taking place more and more online. The lines between the real person and her projection onto social networking sites are becoming blurred. There are situations where a real person who has multiple accounts on Facebook, each having a unique personality. Hence the person might appear as a serious professional in one account, and a completely different personality in another. These accounts, or to put it better these personae, seem to be on a par with the real person herself when it comes to the question of identity. Who is the real person behind all these personae and façades? For Borgmann the question appears to be a relatively simple one, for he maintains that there must be a real person behind all these.

But things are not as simple as Borgmann would have it any longer. With the growing strength and number of users of social networking sites, Borgmann’s vision of information becoming reality has not only materialized, but it seems that we can no longer separate reality and information from each other.

The real thing and the ersatz are fusing toward each other, so the real becomes more informational and the other way round.

It is the contention of this paper that the fusion between the real and the ersatz is also taking place in the area of the self. This threatens the very foundation of much thinking in traditional philosophy, which is founded on the distinction between the self and reality, the subject and the object. This fusion between the self and the object can be seen clearly in the online world, where the self and subjectivity seem to be more and more pervasive, and where the objects talked about are also increasingly informational in nature (Floridi). This leads to a conclusion that the online self is ultimately speaking nothing but a construction and does not have any essence of its own. Furthermore, since the line between the online and offline worlds are increasingly fuzzy, these characteristics increasingly apply to the offline self too.

When we look at the popular social networking websites today, we are struck by the sheer number of the people who are connected to one another through them. Facebook has around 400 million users at the last count, and the number far exceed the entire population of many countries. Twitter is not far behind. These users put up their “profile pages” on the websites, which are essentially a projection of their own identities in the online world for their peers, colleagues and friends. In most cases the profiles actually represent the persons behind them; in other words, the profiles are mostly intended to refer to the persons themselves. This can be useful when, for example, I would like to

find out whether my long lost high school friend is on Facebook or not and can get reconnected with her again after I have seen her profile. In this case there is a clear link between the profile and the person. However, in some areas, especially in Thailand, the profiles on Facebook serve another function. Many Thai Facebook users opt not to show their faces or their real names on their profile pages. Instead they are very creative in inventing new names for themselves which effectively prevents anybody from knowing who the real person behind the Facebook persona is. So unless the person herself tells her friends who she really is, her friends would find no way to know. Instead of putting up her own portrait on the profile, many in Thailand are putting up all kinds of pictures: Some put up pictures of their favorite pets; some put up a political banner complete with the Thai national flag; some use pictures of well known comic personalities such as Winnie the Pooh, and so on. Furthermore, they are not using their real names in the profiles. Some call themselves “Laughing out Loud throughout the Field,” “Red Linguist”, “Dragon from the Plateau”, and so on. A recent practice has a result of the ongoing political conflicts in Thailand is that many put up the phrase “love the King” following their names to show their support for the King. Someone else who stand on the other side of the political divide then say something like “Love Everybody” or “Love my Parents” or “Love Humanity,” to mimic those who declare their love for the King. They cannot say outright that they do not love the King because according to the draconian law against criticizing the King in Thailand this might

be interpreted as insulting to the King himself.

So what do these behaviors tell us about the philosophical problem of self and identity in the online phenomenon? Perhaps the link between the profile and the person behind it is not as it appears. Instead of using social networking profile to show who they really are, many Thai users are using it in a creative way, essentially to create a totally new persona which exists only in the online world. A reason behind this move may be due to the fact that Thailand still have very limited freedom of speech; hence the newly created persona allows the person behind to say things in such a way that is not possible if the person reveals who she is to the world. Furthermore, another situation is that more and more users are connected with those whom they do not know before. This is understandable given the situation where many are putting up fictional profiles.

In order to understand the effect of this new phenomenon on the conception of the self, one needs to know that what the self is made of. For one thing, the self is not the same as the body. I, obviously, am not my body, because my body does change—I might become thinner as a result of an exercise program, but that does not necessarily mean that I become another person. Another thing is that the self is not entirely continuous with my mental events or episodes either. My mental episodes change very rapidly during the course of a day, but that does not mean that I become different persons each time my thinking changes. This is the well known philosophical problem of

personal identity. There is not enough space in this paper to discuss the problem in detail. Suffice it to say that the problem is how to account for the identity of the self or the person throughout all these physical and mental changes. Is there something that remains the same in one person amidst all these changes?

We do not have to tackle this difficult problem here. We need only to look at the online self or online identity situation. We have seen that the self is not made up of the body, and that it is difficult to maintain that the self is made up of mental episodes either. Thorny problems in personal identity aside, it appears that the self cannot be other than these physical and mental episodes, even though we may not be able to find one particular physical substance or one mental episode that is absolutely identical with the self. For if the self were other than the physical or mental episodes belonging to a person, it would be entirely baffling how that is possible. That would mean that our person or our selves belong to some kind of a soul that comes to us from somewhere and animates us, making us a human being we are. This theory, however, has been discredited long time ago and runs counter to the modern scientific mindset. So unless we find a compelling reason to accept these souls, we had better put them aside.

Leaving out the soul leaves us only with what we have, the physical and mental events, to make up our selves. What is interesting is that these physical and mental events and episodes can and actually have made their

presence in the online world, especially on the social networking websites, as we have seen. It is true that no one particular mental episode or physical event belonging to our bodies can be one and the same as the self, but it does not mean either that the self can exist apart from these episodes. Hence a consequence is that it is perhaps all these episodes, taken somehow together, that represent the self. Since these episodes can and do exist online, then in a real sense our selves do exist online too.

This may be a bit difficult to understand. What I mean is that when we analyze the self in the offline world, what we have is a collection of physical and mental episodes. A likeness of a person can indeed exist online in the form of portrait images; her voice can be recorded and even synthesized. It is also conceivable that in the future other aspects of the physical entity belonging to a person can be brought up in the online world. Many aspects of the person are being uploaded onto the network, and one is also reminded of a prediction by Ray Kurzweil that in the future one may be able to upload the entire content of one's mental life onto a server to preserve one's own identity and personality for all of posterity. It will also be possible for the detailed instruction to create a physical body of the person to be uploaded too, making it possible to recreate the human body to work with the uploaded mental life. All these may be far fetched now, but the point is only that it is possible for the self to exist in the cyberworld. Hence the online and offline selves share significant properties together, and an analysis of one should be possible to be carried over to the

other. This, however, should not be interpreted as an assertion that the offline and online selves are absolutely one and the same, for obviously they are not. For example, the online self that may exist, say, on a Facebook profile does not have its own consciousness. Nonetheless, what interests us here is that there are a number of interesting affinities between the two that merit an investigation into the nature of the online self itself.

A key problem in analyzing the self has been the problem of searching for the “unifier,” so to speak, that combines all the physical and mental episodes together to make up a real, substantive self. That I have a self is obvious, but it is not obvious how my physical and mental episodes are combined to make up myself. This is a version of the “Binding Problem.” Basically the problem is about how the brain combines various kinds of input so that they result in a single, unified field of vision or an episode of conscious thought. However, for self-consciousness, the mind needs to be able to turn back toward itself. It not only has to be conscious, but conscious of its own workings. Self-consciousness implies that the mind is turning to look at itself. Nonetheless, in self-consciousness the binding problem has to be there too, for there is obviously the problem of how self-consciousness results in an understanding of a single, unified self. Since there is no real difference between the offline and the online self, the role of self-consciousness in creating a sense of self can be carried over to the online world too. Thus, there is an analogue of self-consciousness in the online world, where the person reflects upon herself,

her thoughts, and becomes aware of her own self.

The problem of how to combine the various episodes so that they belong to one overarching self is well known. Kant posited the “Transcendental Unity of Apperception” as a means by which these episodes are combined so that they belong to one and the same subject, which would make cognition (or in his words “judgment” and “understanding”) possible. However, a problem with the Transcendental Unity of Apperception (TUA) is that it is a purely formal concept, and does not contain any particular information that pertains to any particular individual. Thus my TUA is exactly the same as your TUA, since both function in the same way and cannot contain anything unique to either me or you. Anything unique would be empirical and cannot be part of the TUA. If this is the case, then Kant’s TUA is too general and cannot perform the work expected of the individual self.

Since any attempt at finding the overall unifier of the mental episodes would fall under the empirical side of things (because once a candidate for the unifier is identified, it then falls under the category of a mental episode which is being thought of, which then requires another subject to think about it, and so on), or under the purely formal schema such as Kant’s, which is empty. An upshot, then, is that any attempt to bind up the episodes is always provisional and cannot escape from being itself yet another mental episode. When one attempts to bind up one’s own episodes, one is then conscious of yet another episode whose content is about the binding, but then that becomes another

mental episode in need of further binding. Consequently, the offline self is a construct in the sense that it is not there objectively or ontologically. It is something “made up” in order to facilitate daily living of any human being. For example, it would be much easier for me to refer to you, using your proper name, if you stay relatively stable throughout some period of time, even though analysis shows that there is ultimately speaking to real “you” in the ontological sense. What I and others take to be “you” is a social construct not dissimilar from Searle’s example of a bank note whose value is also a social construct. In other words, the value of the bank note does not reside ontologically in the material itself, but sociologically through agreement among members of society that this particular type of a bank note has such and such monetary value. In the same vein, when I refer to you, calling you by name for example, I am abiding by certain social conventions that recognize that, relatively speaking, there is a certain person behind the persona that I am now perceiving.

But if this is the case, then it is also similar for the online self. We can look at the online self as a persona that the individual makes up as a front to present himself or herself to the world, and sometimes the person may intend it in such a way that the persona assumes identity of its own, without being able to refer back to the real person behind. The online self is also made up of physical and “mental” episodes. The physical episodes are easy enough to understand—bits of electron working together to present images, sounds, and texts on screen. But the mental episodes are also there, as we can gauge what

the persona is thinking or feeling through her use of language and other symbols (such as emoticons) through the Internet. These episodes also need to be connected together in order for us to form a more or less coherent picture of a *self* working behind. But since the offline self is ultimately speaking a construct, so is the online one.

[References to be provided later on]