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Soraj Hongladarom

The Online Self

Externalism, Friendship and Games

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Preface

The idea for this book grew out of the wonderful workshop on "Who Am I Online?" organized by Charlie Ess and Luciano Floridi back in May 10–11, 2010, at the beautiful Kalovig Center outside of Aarhus, Denmark. The idea behind the conference was to investigate the notion of personal identity as it applies to online self or online identity, precisely the topic of this book. Many scholars were invited to join the workshop. Apart from Charlie and Luciano, there were, as I remember, Stine Lomborg, Maria Bakardjieva, Wong Pak-Hang, Janice Richardson, Johanna Seibt, Dave Ward, Raffaele Rodogno, and many others. The idyllic atmosphere of the Kalovig Center was an ideal place for thinking together and engaging in common project of hashing out one's ideas in order to receive friendly feedback. I first conceived of the ideas presented in this book at the workshop. These ideas then developed and were further refined until they got their present shape in this book. This, however, by no means implies that the ideas are final. I don't know if there is any idea in philosophy that is final. Perhaps no philosophical idea ever is, and some philosophers do change their minds. But at least they represent what I believe to be the case and the book contains sustained arguments in their support.

The topic I presented at the Aarhus Workshop was "Who Am I Online? A View from Buddhism." In that I presented a straightforward Buddhist view on self and identity. This idea is by now quite well known so does not need to be repeated here. The argument I made then was that there is a correlation between the online and the offline worlds such that basically the same set of analytical tools can be applied in either. I still believe that this is the case. What I mean by the same set of tools is that, when we try to analyze and understand the situation of the "offline" self, that is, the self that all of us are familiar with, the tools, which also include the vocabulary and the theory that we use to describe and investigate the phenomenon, are the same no matter the self is there in the so-called "real" world or the so-called "virtual" world. Of course the self as existing in the latter world is the subject matter of this book. Here I say "so-called 'real' world" with a tongue in cheek. No one can deny that the world as we perceive it, in which we live and breathe, is not real, but I would like to point out that in today's world the real and the virtual are becoming more and more of the same substance. This does not mean that we are living in a virtual or simulated

world, but I intend to mean that the two worlds are collapsing to each other and the boundary between the two worlds is not as hard and fast as many may believe (this will be more so when what is known as "ubiquitous" or "pervasive" computing becomes more common – I also investigate this phenomenon in the book). Thus, even if Buddhism was developed more than two millennia ago in order to analyze the "offline" self, the same analytical tools in Buddhism can also be used to analyze the "online" self too. This idea also underlies many views that are presented in this book.

However, I would like to point out that even if the book found its inspiration from the Buddhist perspective on the self, this is definitely not a book on the Buddhist view on the online self. That is, my plan is not to say that the self (whether offline or online) is of such and such characteristics because it says so in Buddhism. The plan is rather that I present a series of *independent* arguments intended to support the main theses of the book without relying on the authority of Buddhism. If Buddhist philosophy can be tenable and acceptable to the community of philosophers, it has to stand or fall on its own merit, not because this is what the Buddha taught or otherwise. In fact that would be contrary to the spirit of Buddhism too. Thus you will find the discussion on Buddhism forms only a small part of the book, so readers who are not Buddhists or who are not religious in any way can still benefit from the arguments presented here.

After the Aarhus Workshop I further developed the idea, resulting in a number of journal articles some of which are included in this volume. Naturally I am indebted to a large number of people without whom this book will not have been possible. First of all I would like to thank Charlie Ess and Luciano Floridi, the two co-hosts of the Aarhus Workshop, whose idea on having a meeting on "Who am I online?" sparked my interest in the metaphysics of the online self, a field that involves not only many branches of philosophy such as metaphysics, philosophy of technology, and ethics, but also many academic disciplines outside of philosophy as well, such as communication studies, sociology, anthropology, and history. So another benefit of the topic of this book is that it is interdisciplinary and is quite likely to attract interests of scholars in fields other than philosophy. Charlie Ess has been very helpful to me in many areas. Apart from being such a wonderful host during my Aarhus visit in 2010, our friendship actually developed well before that, dating way back to 1998 when he and Fay Sudweeks organized the first international conference on Cultural Attitudes toward Technology and Communication (CATaC), which has developed into a well-known series of conferences. I had the good fortune of being able to invite Charlie to Thailand twice and hope that our friendship and collaboration do continue. Luciano has been a constant friend who supports my attempts at presenting these philosophical reflections and gives me a generous number valuable comments and suggestions. I also hope that our collaboration continues.

I am also grateful to all the participants of the Aarhus Workshop whose challenges and criticisms of my presentation resulted in the development of the ideas found in this book. I would like also to thank Karamjit Gill, editor of the journal *AI & Society*, who invited me to contribute the paper on ubiquitous computing, and John Weckert, who has also been very helpful to me in various ways, one of which

was that he invited me to contribute another of my paper to the online journal *Information*. Both papers play a large role in the development of ideas which led to this present book.

The road from the Aarhus Workshop to the book has been quite long. Along the way I am also fortunate to receive help and support from various people. Apart from the meeting in Aarhus, I also benefited from a meeting in Bangkok on "Online Studies," organized by the Thai Netizen Network in November, 2010. The informal and friendly meeting gave me a chance to present my work to people in other academic fields and for the lay public in Thai language. Arthit Suriyawongkul was as always a key person in the Thai Netizen Group who always gave me encouragement. My thanks also go to Elizabeth Buchanan and Michael Zimmer who invited me to talk in a keynote panel of the Computer Ethics/Philosophical Enquiry (CEPE) conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 2011, giving me the opportunity to further reflect on the view that eventually found its home in this book. I would like to thank Philip Brey, Wong Pak-Hang, Johnny Søraker, Axel Gelfert, and Eric Kerr, all of whom play a role in one way or another in my philosophical development.

Bangkok, Thailand Soraj Hongladarom

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Today we find social media everywhere. In Thailand where I live and work, it is becoming more difficult to walk on the streets of Bangkok and find someone who is not looking at her smart phones, using her thumbs to chat with her friends and enjoying the pictures and texts offered there. On the new electric train system that is fast becoming a familiar scene in the city, people either sit or stand with their eyes focusing on their phones, ostensibly oblivious to what is going on around them. It is as if their brains are being plugged on to a giant network so that their reality is what happens on the screen of their phones rather than outside. In restaurants it is not uncommon to find couples sitting together at a table. In the old days they might look at each other's eyes and talking to each other, but today they look more at their own smart phones rather than at each other. The world is indeed changing. If these scenes are becoming a familiar sight in Bangkok, they are indeed happening everywhere. Admittedly these scenes are not happening outside of the Bangkok metropolis much, but it is getting there as smart phones are one of the top selling electronic items all over the country. People all over Thailand who can afford them snap them up very fast.

Most of the applications these people use when they look at their phones are the social media. Names are already familiar: Facebook and Twitter, and to a lesser extent but up and coming, Google Plus. In the recent past the names might include MySpace or Hi5, but these sites are largely neglected by the social media savvy users now. A trip back to Hi5, for a typical Thai internet user, recalls nostalgic scenes from the recent, pre-Facebook past. This is rather surprising because social media are in fact a new type of websites, having come on to the scene only a few years ago. Before these social media sites there were web sites that offered text-based discussion forums. These used to be highly popular in Thailand, as people found it exhilarating to be able to discuss almost anything, using almost any kind of language, with their peer from all around the country. This was something they were not able to do before. Certainly there were limits to this freedom. The draconian lèse majesté law against insulting the king is still in place, but even that could not dampen the enthusiasm and the speed with which Thai people gobble up web discussion

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forums and later social networking sites. Here in Thailand one popular website still survives and is in face thriving in the age of sophisticated social networking sites—Pantip.com. This shows a connection between the older discussion forum and today's social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In fact many users have accounts in both Pantip.com and Facebook and they routinely share material from one to the other, thus merging the content of the two.

What is most interesting in the phenomenon of either the web discussion forum or social networking sites is how the users present their selves in the online world. In the former they did not have much leeway to do so, as the technology was not sophisticated enough. So they were limited to putting up their pseudonyms and perhaps a small picture to represent themselves. But in Facebook and Twitter these "online selves" are actually becoming more mature. Users have the ability to form their own profile page where they announce to the outside world who they are or, perhaps more accurately, who they want the world to perceive them to be. Thus this is the subject matter of this book. The main concern of the book is on the metaphysical constitution of the online self. What exactly is it? What are the relations between the online self and their "offline" counterpart, that is, the normal self with which we are already familiar? These questions are important because as people are more and more hooked up with social media, the role of the online selves is more and more visible and significant. Facebook advertises itself as a *social* media. That is, the website regards itself as a tool to connect people together. In order for that to be possible, people have to have an online presence on the website. In other words, they have to put up their online counterparts there. It is as if parts of their own selves are put there on the website. And when the social media play more prominent roles in people's lives, it appears as if the selves that are there play more roles, and seem to take on a more or less independent status by themselves. It is not uncommon nowadays to find people whose reputation depends more on their online selves than on their usual selves in the outside world. It is then an emerging phenomenon made possible by the social media, and since the latter is a product of information technology, another dimension of the problem to be investigated in the book is on how technology affects the sense of self and the relation between the self and the world. Social networking sites are made possible by technology; at one level of description the online self is nothing but a collection of ones and zeroes, as are all things digital. However, this collection of ones and zeroes can have very strong impact on the world, especially when people depend more on the social media and present themselves through these media. As the online self is becoming more real and as it plays more roles in lives, they have to be analyzed in terms of more than just ones and zeroes. And here is where the difficulty is. How could we best characterize the online self? What kind of language should be the one most suitable to describe it for our purposes? And as technology plays a constitutive role, what are the relations between the technologies of the internet and the online self?

Furthermore, as the online self plays more roles in society, it is bound to generate another sort of questions, one that concern ethical values. The idea behind social networking sites is that people represent who they really are in the online arena. That is, the offline and the online selves should match. But what happens if someone

invents a new identity and presents it online in such a way that does not bear any resemblance to who he or she actually is? This is a big problem because the whole idea of social networking appears to depend on the authenticity of the two kinds of selves. What actually gets connected together on the social networking sites are, exactly speaking, online selves. I put my profile and my digital self online so that my digital self could connect with yours on the networking platform. But if there are discrepancies between the self I put online and my own real self, then how can my friends know that the one they are interacting with is indeed me? How can they find me on the Internet if I don't use my real name, for example, or don't advertise my pseudonym so widely that they can come to know?

We can see that there are a whole host of problems surrounding the online self, so much, I think, that this book could not cover all of them and can actually provide only a sketch of the possible problems. In any case, the main methodological concern of the book is philosophical. That is, I intend to use mainly philosophical tools and vocabulary to analyze and investigate the problems. This is not to say that empirical studies are not important. They are indeed very important, and I rely on them in cases where such studies help us understand more of the situation that is under discussion. Nonetheless, they are not the main concern. The main concern, on the contrary, is to look at the online self as a phenomenon for philosophical analysis. This importance of relying philosophical analysis can be seen most clearly, I think, when we analyze the role of technology in society. Here we can put the phenomenon of the online self and the social media in general as a topic under technology in society. Hence the book can also be regarded as a contribution in philosophy of technology. Philosophy of technology has been mostly concerned with how technology is related to human beings. Not in the sense of the humans as users or manipulators, but as beings who, phenomenologically, stand in relation to technology as the self stands to the other, or perhaps as one phenomenological being having a relation with another phenomenological being. In other words philosophy of technology is not concerned with humans merely interfacing with technology, but with the question of value that inevitably arises when humans stand face to face with technology.

1.1 Main Argument of the Book

The main argument I present in the book concerns implications of the view that the self is a composite entity and does not exist on its own. Many findings from neuroscience concur that the source of the sense of the self in an individual cannot be pinpointed in any particular region of the brain. In contrast to specific functions such as vision and hearing, self-consciousness is distributed globally throughout the brain and there is no one specific region that is responsible for it. Instead the sense of the self arises out of the awareness that one is a unified entity that is set against the world—the origin of the primordial sense of the subject and the object. In *The Ego Tunnel,* Thomas Metzinger argues in no uncertain terms that the self does not

exist (Metzinger 2009). Instead the brain constructs a model of the self, what Metzinger calls the Phenomenal Self Model (Metzinger 2009, p. 2). In other words, the self is as much an illusion created by the brain, something those who watch the National Geographic series *Brain Games* will be immediately familiar. Metzinger refers to an experiment where the subject puts her right hand down under the table, leaving the other hand on. On the place of where the right hand should have been is a rubber hand instead. Metzinger shows that the subject somehow has an illusion that the rubber hand is her hand and feels something on the rubber hand as the hand is stroked by a feather. Of course she cannot actually feel anything because that hand is a rubber one and has no nervous connection to herself. Nonetheless her brain assumes that the rubber hand belongs to her self and starts to trigger the tickly feeling of being stroked by a feather (Metzinger 2009, p. 3–4). Here, then, is where a lot of confusion occurs when the issue of the existence of the self is discussed. On the one hand, scholars such as Metzinger argue that the self does not exist. This also goes along with the Buddhist tenet of the Non-Self. Basically the tenet is the same—the self does not, strictly speaking, exist. But the confusion starts when one tries to explicate what actually constitutes "strictly speaking." According to Buddhism, in normal, everyday conversation it would be absurd to maintain that the self does not exist. Even Buddhist philosophers have to refer to themselves from time to time. That is just a part of everyday language use. However, when analysis is applied, it is found, so Buddhist philosophy argues, that the self as normally understood is found to be nothing but a group of elements taken to relate to one another in one particular way. In other words, the self is in fact an illusion. But illusions do indeed exist, and in the rubber hand experiment the subject does indeed feel something when the rubber hand is stroked. So on the one hand the rubber hand does not belong to the subject's body—that much is obvious, but on the other hand the subject does feel something when the rubber hand is stroked, showing that her brain takes on the hand as a part of her body. According to the third-person objective model, the rubber hand is only a rubber hand, but according to the phenomenological, first-person viewpoint model, the rubber hand is part of the body. In the same vein, from one perspective the self does not exist (what exists are only blips inside the brain, for example), but from another the self clearly exist, as for example when one feels that *one* is having a headache. The dependence of the self's "existence" on perspectives also go along with what Buddhist philosophy has to say.

Antonio Damasio puts this point very well. Answering the question whether there is a self and if there is one, whether the self is present whenever we are conscious, he says:

> The answers are unequivocal. There is indeed a self, but it is a process, not a thing, and the process is present at all times when we are presumed to be conscious. We can consider the self process from two vantage points. One is the vantage point of an observer appreciating a *dynamic* object—the dynamic object constituted by certain workings of minds, certain traits of behavior, and a certain history of life. The other vantage point is that of the self as *knower*, the process that gives a focus to our experiences and eventually lets us reflect on those experiences (Damasio 2012, p. 8–9).