

Technologies of the Self

Luciano Floridi

Received: 12 July 2012 / Accepted: 12 July 2012 / Published online: 22 July 2012
© Springer-Verlag 2012

Some time ago, I met a very bright and lively graduate, who registered with Facebook during the academic year 2003–2004, when she was a student at Harvard. Her Facebook ID number was 246. Impressive. A bit like being the 246th person to land on a new continent. Such Facebook ID numbers no longer exist. In a few years, that continent has become rather crowded, as she has been joined by several hundreds of million users worldwide. Half a billion was reached in July 2010. It is a good reminder of how more and more people spend an increasing amount of time ‘onlife’, interacting with and within an infosphere that is neither entirely virtual nor only physical. It is also a good reminder of how influential information and communication technologies are becoming in shaping our personal identities, as technologies of the self.

In the philosophy of mind, there is a well-honed distinction between *personal identity* and *self-conception* or more simply between who we are (call it our ontological self) and who we think we are (call it our epistemological self). Like many other handy distinctions, this too seems to work at its best once you drop it. Like a Wittgensteinian ladder, it helps you to reach a better perspective, as long as you do not get stuck on it. Of course, there is a difference between being and believing to be. However, it is equally obvious that, in healthy individuals, the ontological and the epistemological selves flourish only if they support each other in a symbiotic relationship. Not only our self-conceptions should be close to who we really are. Our ontological selves are also sufficiently malleable to be significantly influenced by who we think we are or would like to be. And such epistemological selves in turn are sufficiently ductile to be shaped by who we are told to be. Enter the social self:

[...] even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for everyone, and need only be turned up like a page in an account-book or the record of a will; our social personality is created by the thoughts of other people. [...] (Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past—Swann’s Way*).

L. Floridi (✉)

Department of Philosophy, University of Hertfordshire, de Havilland Campus, Hatfield, Hertfordshire
AL10 9AB, UK
e-mail: l.floridi@herts.ac.uk

The social self is the channel through which interactive social media, such as Facebook, have their deepest impact on our identities. Change the social conditions in which you live, modify the network of relations and the flows of information you enjoy, reshape the nature and scope of the constraints and affordances that regulate your presentation of yourself to the world and indirectly to yourself, and your social self may be radically updated, backfeeding into your self-conception, which ends up shaping your personal identity.

To someone used to ruminate about personal identity puzzles in terms of continuity through time or possible worlds, the whole phenomenon of the construction of personal identities online (Facebook, Second Life, MySpace, webpages, blogs, YouTube and Flickr accounts, Twitters and so forth) might seem something frivolous and distracting, unworthy of serious reflection. Yet to many people who have never heard of Theseus' ship but have lived all their adult life with 'online awareness', the former appears like a mere conundrum, whereas the latter is the real pressing issue. To them, it seems most natural to treat their personal identities as a very serious work-in-progress and to toil daily to shape and update them online. It is the hyperconscious generation, which facebooks, twitters and SMSs its views and tastes, its experiences and its personal details. Nothing is too small, irrelevant or indeed private to be left unsaid; anything can contribute to the construction of one's own personal identity, and everything may leave a trace somewhere, including the embarrassing pictures posted by a schoolmate years ago, which will disappear of course, but just more slowly than our former selves do.

Some Jeremiahs lament that the hyperconscious, Facebook generation, which is constantly asking and answering 'where are you?' on the map of life, has lost touch with reality; that it lives in virtual bubbles where the shallowest babbles are the only currency; that it cannot engage with the genuine and the authentic; that it is mesmerised by the artificial and the synthetic; and that it cannot bear anything that is slow-paced or lasts longer than a TED. I am not convinced partly because the genuine and the authentic tend to be highly manufactured cultural artefacts. The naturalization of epistemology or philosophy of mind or indeed of any philosophical approach to fundamental issues is as artificial as a well-kept garden. Partly because social media like Facebook represent an unprecedented opportunity to be in charge of our social selves, to choose who the other people are whose thoughts create our social personality, to paraphrase Proust, and hence, indirectly, to determine our personal identities. Recall how the construction of the social self feeds into the development of the epistemological self, which then feeds into the moulding of the ontological self. More freedom on the social side means more freedom to shape oneself. This is no longer the freedom of anonymity advertised by Peter Steiner's famous cartoon ('On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog'). Those were the 1990s (the cartoon was published in *The New Yorker*, 5 July 1993). Today, if one is or behaves like a dog, Facebook or at least Google probably knows it. Rather, it is the freedom associated with self-determination and autonomy. One may no longer lie so easily about who one is, when hundreds of millions of people are watching. But one may certainly try one's best to show them who one might reasonably be, or wish to become, and that will tell a different story about oneself that, in the long run, will affect who one is. The onlife experience is a bit like Proust's account-book, but with us as the writers. The Jeremiahs might be right in complaining that we are wasting a great opportunity, that,

still relying on Proust's metaphor, what we are writing is not worth reading. But then, couch potatoes have been watching pictures and small-talking about their cats and the last holidays in front of the wall of Plato's cave well before Facebook made it embarrassingly clear that this is how most of humanity would like to spend its hard-earned free time anyway. Aristotle knew that philosophy requires leisure. Unfortunately, leisure usually leads only to entertainment:

Giocammo da Flora.

E giocando quell'ore volar.

[We played at Flora's,

And by playing, time flew.]

Giuseppe Verdi, *La Traviata*, Atto Primo, Preludio, Scena I, Coro I