BEYOND MEDIATION: THINKING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY EXISTENTIALLY, OR, THE ALGORITHM THAT I ALSO AM

A Dissertation

by

CHRISTOPHER BLACK

Submitted to the Graduate and Professional School of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Chair of Committee,	Theodore George
Committee Members,	Martin Peterson
	Kristi Sweet
	Shawna Ross
Head of Department,	Theodore George

August 2021

Major Subject: Philosophy

Copyright 2021 Christopher Black

ABSTRACT

The history of philosophy has been characterized by a suspicion of technology. Discourses surrounding technology—from the pre-Socratics to the present—often position technology as an external other and as something that interferes with the Delphic injunction to "Know Thyself." This dissertation traces the history of this philosophical skepticism (which is herein defined as "Socratic Socratic) before calling it into question. By reading Socrates and Kierkegaard (as well as other figures associated with the existential tradition) against themselves, technologies—and especially contemporary communicative technologies—are theorized as existentially rich sites in which one may authentically pursue self-knowledge and develop their subjectivity. Numerous examples of possibilities for technological maieutics, especially ones that are present in the "algorithmized" online world, are presented. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to go beyond philosophical discourses of technological mediation, which are argued to often prematurely distance the individual from their technological doings, and instead advocates for a more existentially responsible attitude towards technological being. This existentially responsible attitude considers technologies to be the culminations of one's actions, and advocates for a responsibility to recognize and pursue the avenues for self-knowledge that are present in our contemporary technological landscape.

DEDICATION

To the single individual, if the single individual is still out there. I believe that they are.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. George, for his enduring support during my time at Texas A&M. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Peterson, Dr. Sweet, and Dr. Ross, for their guidance and help throughout the course of this project.

I would also not have been able to complete my work without the positive energy and momentum given to me by the many friends I've made at Texas A&M, so I owe each one of them a great deal of gratitude.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unceasing support of my ambitions, and my wife, Amberly, for her unwavering love and patience.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professor George (chair), Professor Sweet, and Professor Peterson, each of the Department of Philosophy, as well as Dr. Ross of the Department of English.

All other work conducted for the thesis (or) dissertation was completed by the student, with assistance and support provided by members of the committee.

Funding Sources

Travel funding provided by the Department of Philosophy helped me attend conferences which were crucial to the development of ideas contained in this dissertation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT……. ii

DEDICATION……. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS…….. iv

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES……. v

TABLE OF CONTENTS……... vi

1. INTRODUCTION: SUSPICIONS OF TECHNOLOGY IN PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY……. 1

1.2 Ancient Views of Technology and the Origin of Socratic Suspicion……... 6
1.3 Monastic and Medieval Thought: Technology as Hubris and an Intrusion of Carnality…….....……. 13
1.4 The Existentialists' Suspicion of Technology…….. 23
1.4.2 What is Meant by "Existentialism" in This Dissertation: A Kierkegaardian View 27
1.5 Contemporary Philosophy of Technology and Technology as External Mediation..... 31
1.6 A Clarification About What is Meant by "Technology"……... 43
1.7 Conclusion: The Structure of the Argument…….. 45

2. IMPLICIT CHALLENGES TO TECHNOLOGY-AS-EXTERNAL MEDIATION…… 46

2.2 Stiegler's Critique of Technology as Only Accidentally Corrupting……..... 46
2.3 Foucault and Technological Particularism……..... 50
2.4 Gilbert Simondon and Being *Among* and *With* Technology……..... 56
2.5 Chapter Conclusion……..... 62

3. TURNING TOWARDS THE ALGORITHM: AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM AND A CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIAL-MEDIA ALGORITHM AS A SITE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE…… 63

3.2 General Description of the Online Algorithm……..……..... 65
3.3 A Kierkegaardian Argument Against Social Media Algorithms …….……..... 69
3.4 Social Media Algorithms: Intrusively Invisible, Intentional, and Insidious ……. 72
3.5 The Fundamental Significance of Existential Choice in Kierkegaard's Ethics ……..... 75
3.6 How Should We Live Online?..... 86

4. THE ALGORITHM THAT I ALSO AM: THREE ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF DIGITAL MAIEUTICS…… 92

4.2 The First Argument. Digital Duplicity and Self-Knowledge: Using Online Pseudonyms as a Form of Technological Maieutics……..… 94
4.2.2 Being Your Own Midwife Online, or, Virtual Maieutics…….….... 96
4.2.3 Self-Knowledge in Plato's *Theaetetus*…….……. 97
4.2.4 Kierkegaardian Pseudonyms as Online Pseudonyms……... 99
4.2.5 Challenging Philosophical Attitudes Regarding Technology and Authenticity…... 101
4.2.6 Final Kierkegaard-Inspired Thoughts on How to Enact Virtual Maieutics…….. 104
4.2.7 Conclusion of the First Argument……..... 106
4.3 The Second Argument: The Online Algorithm as Practical Recollection…….. 107
4.3.2 A Reminder About Recollection……... 108
4.3.3 Online Algorithms as Recollection: Prompting us to Remember Who We Are….. 114
4.3.4 Encountering Uncanny Targeted Advertisements as Generating Digital Recollection…….. 115
4.3.4.2 Targeted Ads May Remind us of Our Past and of Our Character…….. 121
4.3.4.3 Targeted Ads as Revealing One's Perceived Demographic……... 123
4.3.4.4 Targeted Advertisements as a Reminder About the Reality of Government and Corporate Oversite and, Therefore, of One's Relative Powerlessness in Society…… 131
4.3.4.5 Targeted Advertisements as Revealing Intimate, Unknown Truths……... 124
4.3.5 Recommendation Systems…… 125
4.3.6 Autofills as Digital Traces…… 128
4.3.6.2 Autofills and Recommendations as *Memento mori*: Digital Preservation and Digital Traces…… 130
4.4 The Third Argument: Some Final Possibilities for Thinking About Digital Maieutics.. 135
4.4.2 Virtual World-Building as Self-Creation and Existential Landscaping…… 136
4.4.3 Modes of Thinking Beyond Mediation: Confession and Intimation, Self-Interpretation, Embodied Expression…… 138
4.4.4 Technology as Confession and Intimation…… 138
4.4.5 Technology as Self-Interpretation……. 139
4.4.6 Technology as Embodiment or Embodied Expression……. 140
4.5 Chapter Summary…… 142

5. THE FUTURE OF BAD FAITH, OR, THE FUTURE OF THINKING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY…… 144

5.2 Bad Faith Then……. 145
5.3 The Future of Bad Faith……... 153
5.3.2 General Technological Bad Faith: Technology Viewed Always as an Alienating Other…….. 153
5.3.3 Specific Online Bad Faith: Online Life Viewed as Completely "Outside of My Control"……. 157
5.3.3.2 Specific Online Bad Faith: Argument Continued…… 159
5.4 Conscious Online Life as Character Development?..... 163
5.5 Conclusion…...……. 164

REFERENCES……. 165

1. INTRODUCTION: SUSPICIONS OF TECHNOLOGY IN PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY

1.1 Introduction

Philosophical inquiries into technology have occurred throughout the history of the discipline, often backlighting fundamental attitudes towards existence. They have appeared in scattered writings of the pre-Socratics and are continually re-emerging and being rearticulated. So, a philosophical project that engages with technology is nothing new or distinctive. This project will find its distinctiveness not in its topical matter, however, but rather in its angle of approaching the age-old philosophical question: How should we think about technology? To speak in the broadest possible terms, philosophical attitudes towards technology have tended to treat technology with suspicion and as something "other" than ourselves. They often blame technology, rather than ourselves, for moral failings, and draw a hard—and hardly tenable—distinction between the purity of "authentic" self-consciousness and "corrupting" or "distracting" externalities. Moreover, and in a more existential register, technology has often been regarded as a force of alienation that interferes with our ability to know ourselves. This latter attitude is an increasingly tenuous position to hold, especially if we think specifically about contemporary digital communicative technologies—which is precisely what this dissertation will do. If philosophers agree that the world is becoming increasingly technological, which they almost unanimously do, and if they associate technologization with existential alienation, which they very often do, then the majority of philosophers must believe we are in an increasingly perilous state. However, we must ask: is the blame and concern being directed in the right direction? Is

the seemingly reflexive tendency to blame an "external" force[1] for our self-alienation only further evidence of our pre-existing inauthenticity? I answer yes to this second question, and suggest that much can be learned about bad faith and self-deception by examining how people speak about technology.

Contrary to the popular and ongoing discourse of technological mediation—which is still the dominant philosophical mode of thinking about technology, and one that I will outline in more detail further along—I argue that thinking of technology as self-interpretive praxis and project, rather than as external mediation, more accurately captures living with(in/as) technology. The current way of living with technology—especially in its digital modalities—is better understood as navigating various pathways and possibilities for self-understanding. Thus, in a broad-ranging argument that ultimately takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, it will be shown that reductive discourses of technological mediation are inept when it comes to describing the phenomena of contemporary digital communicative technology, and instead a better alternative is thinking about contemporary technology as techno-maieutic self-revealing or as digital recollection.

While technology will not be theorized in this dissertation as *always* necessarily promoting self-knowledge (this view would be ridiculous and lacking in nuance), it will advocate the view that there are possible avenues to self-knowledge that are available in the contemporary technological landscape, and that these avenues have generally been philosophically underexplored or prematurely dismissed.

[1] I reject the clean distinction between external/internal vis-à-vis technology, however this distinction is often assumed in the literal. In fact, I think that the general ease with which one can identify something like technology as "external" and then treat it as the source of blame for one's own failings point towards an existential laziness.

The structure of this dissertation will come in five chapters, starting with a history of the idea of technology as mediation, and arcing incrementally towards the claim that it is time for a reappraisal of the existential stakes and structure of human-technology relations, especially in view of the characteristics of contemporary digital and algorithmic technologies.

The first chapter will consider early Greek attitudes towards technology, contending that they culminate in Socrates' discussion of writing in *Phaedrus* and that this a crucial moment in shaping philosophical attitudes towards technology. This is the point of origin for what I will repeatedly refer to as the "Socratic Suspicion" of technology, which is broadly the view that technology tends to interfere with the Delphic task of *Knowing Thyself.* This attitude will be traced from this early genesis point and be shown to remain an important of inheritance throughout the history of philosophy, even being a commonly held view up to the present day.

Chapter two will provide an analysis of some philosophical accounts that have defied the Socratic Suspicion, and that serve as accounts that anticipate this current project. While none of the figures to be referenced in this chapter will be purely aligned with the idea of technological maieutics that I will discuss, they will be shown to be valuable thinkers engaged in a similar project of expanding existential attitudes towards technology.

The third chapter will begin turning towards the specific topic of this dissertation: the possibility of self-knowledge in the age of the online social-media algorithm. In order to provide a holistic and circumspect account of the existential stakes of the social-media algorithm, this chapter will—perhaps surprisingly—present an argument criticizing the social-media algorithm specifically on the grounds that it could *potentially* undermine the individual user's ability to make authentic choices (and therefore to pursue self-knowledge) while online. However, this

critique is conditional: it only applies if the user is unaware of the active presence of the "echo-chambering" algorithms that operate behind the scenes of online life.

The penultimate chapter will include this project's attempt to actually go beyond mediation in thinking about technology. While the prior chapters will have only posited the inadequacy of the alienation/mediation model, here some alternative theoretical concepts for thinking about technology will be presented as well as some specific examples of how self-knowledge may be acquired in algorithmized online life. In order to attempt the task of *thinking technology* outside of discourses of mediation and encroachment, it will be helpful to introduce a tentative new vocabulary for thinking technology in an existential register. While not exhaustive or final, I think it will be useful—and it will be a task of my larger project—to attempt to access modes of thinking about technology that do not revert to mediation discourse. In a sense this may be a way of attempting to think towards the "saving power" that Heidegger cryptically refers to in *The Question Concerning Technology.* The three ways of thinking beyond technology described herein will be to think of technology as: confession and intimation, as self-interpretive praxis, and as embodied expression. While each of these three alternatives may be subject to some level of critique—just as the mediation model is—the mere act of thinking out alternatives to the mediation model will serve as a starting point for how to think of technology existentially. This chapter will also spend considerable time making specific arguments about how algorithmic online functions (specifically targeted advertisements, recommendations, and autofilling functions) each work to promote self-knowledge. These arguments will occupy considerable space, and will constitute a large part of this project.

The final chapter will address and expand upon the ethical stakes of re-thinking how we conceive of technology. In thinking about technology in a way that does not rely exclusively on

discourses of mediation we open ourselves toward new possibilities of self-understanding, and free ourselves toward treating technology as an opportunity that may enable us to follow the Delphic injunction to "know thyself." This freeing may also stimulate a new existential attitude that sees technology as a mode of being that is ever-teeming with possibilities for authentic ethical life. Specifically, this chapter will rely heavily on the Sartrean concept of "bad faith," and will claim that in interacting with our technologies in a non-bad-faith way, we can come closer to a more authentic and existentially responsible experience of technology; one that suggests an approach to what Heidegger, in his *The Question Concerning Technology*, refers to as a "saving power." What one once dismissed as an escapist or alienating activity one may now see as existential and ethical praxis; rather than leaning away from it (and in so doing denying oneself), one may now lean into it, and learn to know themselves anew. Discourses of mediation may not be open to these possibilities insofar as mediation discourses tend to view technological intrusions as encroachments, escapist avenues, and ethical dead-ends. This need not be so, especially as I will demonstrate that the question of living the good life and of knowing thyself is—to the extent it is a human question—also always a technological question.

Moreover, this project challenges one to question whatever guilt that they may experience due to a heavy reliance on technology in everyday life. This is especially relevant during the era of COVID-19, social distancing, and the consequent mass turn towards everyday technology usage. It has now been over a year since many people have interacted in person, and the overwhelming majority of this dissertation has been written during times of lockdowns and social distancing orders. Social life has increasingly taken the form of digital life. So, I must ask of the social lives of others (as well as myself) during this time: Have their interactions during this time been illegitimatized by the virtual mode of communication? What truths have been

disclosed by this turn towards "safe" mediation? Instead of being a mere "closing off," has this online turn also "opened up" or exposed new pathways for self-knowledge? In the view developed herein one's philosophical techno-guilt may be assuaged given that technology will be thought as an originary mode of self-constitution and self-understanding, not an extraneous contaminant that only works to obscure us from ourselves. However, the limits and features of the technological mode of experience will be acknowledged as *distinctive but not other*.

In philosophy—and especially in the existential tradition, as I have outlined—there is a strong streak of neo-Luddism, one that treats technology as an external contaminant to the pure pursuit of self-knowledge, and one that I argue is neither necessary nor ethically generative. Existence is complicated, as the existentialists all so readily point out, and there is no merit in oversimplifying life by dismissing the philosophical promise of an entire aspect of life—that is, technological being—out of hand. Going beyond discourses of external mediation encourages the individual to behave responsibly and self-consciously towards all areas of life, including in their technological being, and to attune themselves to the fundamental and unavoidable ethical and existential character of being technological. To blame technology is oftentimes merely a bad faith way of blaming ourselves, and is a philosophical custom that should be treated with wariness and suspicion. In other words, Socratic Suspicion should be reversed.

1.2 Ancient Views of Technology and the Origin of Socratic Suspicion

Philosophical examinations of technology can be traced back almost to the origin of philosophy. The earliest recognized philosophers often speculated about fundamental questions concerning the material constitution of reality. Indeed, Thales—the figure that many, including Aristotle, consider to be the first philosophical thinker—is most remembered for his claim that water is the *arche* of all things. In a helpful passage from *Metaphysics* 983b Aristotle first

confirms the claim that the earliest philosophers concerned themselves with speculating about the fundamental material composition of existence, as well as confirming the claim that Thales was the first to apply this mode of thinking, therefore identifying him as the first "recognized" Western philosopher.

> Most of the earliest philosophers conceived only of material principles as underlying all things. That of which all things consist, from which they first come and into which on their destruction they are ultimately resolved, of which the essence persists although modified by its affections—this, they say, is an element and principle of existing things. Hence they believe that nothing is either generated or destroyed, since this kind of primary entity always persists. Similarly we do not say that Socrates comes into being absolutely when he becomes handsome or cultured, nor that he is destroyed when he loses these qualities; because the substrate, Socrates himself, persists. In the same way nothing else is generated or destroyed; for there is some one entity (or more than one) which always persists and from which all other things are generated. All are not agreed, however, as to the number and character of these principles. Thales, the founder of this school of philosophy, says the permanent entity is water (which is why he also propounded that the earth floats on water).[2]

While this inquiry by Thales is not specifically technological in that he simply seeks to identity what fundamentally *is*—that is, what material "underlies all things" —Thales' inquiry does foreground an early mode of inquiry that will profoundly shape future understandings of "what technology is." This early mode of inquiry seeks to elucidate fundamental distinctions in reality:

---

[2] *Metaphysics* 983b. Aristotle. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vols.17, 18, translated by Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1933, 1989.

what is natural versus unnatural, what is true versus what is false, what is essential versus what is inessential, and what is technology and what is not? Its method is to construct hard distinctions in reality, separating the true from the false, the real from the fake—a dichotomous model of thinking which later attitudes towards technology will slip into.

The earliest account of the "origin" of technological development in the philosophical literature[3] can be found in the pre-Socratic figure of Democritus, oft-heralded for his atomic theory of the universe, but who also provided an elusive account of how things that we might think of as paradigmatic examples of technologies—such as looms and buildings—find their way into existence. His 154th fragment states: "We are pupils of the animals in the most important things: the spider for spinning and mending, the swallow for building, and the songsters, swan and nightingale, for singing, by way of imitation."[4] The claim here is rather simple: technologies originate through the imitation of nature, through mimesis, through imitating *that which we are not*.[5] Even in this early passage, technologies are figured as—at least to some extent—not being a part of ourselves but rather an imitation of something *other* than what we are. While Democritus in other ways distinguished (at times paradoxically[6]) between that which humans

---

[3] Heraclitus, especially in fragment 112, also got close to addressing the distinction between nature and technology, but never explicitly in the way that we find with Democritus. Heraclitus 112th fragment reads: "To think prudently is the greatest virtue and wisdom, to speak truly and to act, understanding the nature of each thing." Found in *Ancient Greek Philosophy* v.2, ed. Vijay Tankha.

[4] Found at: http://demonax.info/doku.php?id=text:democritus_fragments

[5] It should be noted that Plato and Aristotle occasionally referred to this Democritean idea. See, for example: Plato, *Laws* X 899a as well as *Physics* II.8, 199a15.

[6] As C.C.W. Taylor demonstrates, for Democritus this sharp distinction between natural (expressed through his account of *phusis)* and unnatural (expressed through his account of *nomoi*) is specific to his atomic theory, but is not present in his ethical writing: "We thus have the apparently paradoxical situation that Democritus asserts the radical opposition of nomos and reality in the context of his physical theory, while a central thesis of his ethics is the continuity between nomos and nature." (8) See pgs. 5-9 for a more general justification for this claim.

create and that which is of nature—such as in his distinction between *nomoi* (roughly "law," "usage," or "custom") and *phusis* (roughly "nature"[7])—the above mentioned 154th fragment sufficiently moves forward the claim that early pre-Socratic accounts already distinguished between "technologies" (broadly construed) and human being.

Other figures active before and during the time of Socrates offer similar musings, however one particularly interesting statement on the relationship between *techne* and *phusis* may be found in the first of the ten Attic Orators: Antiphon. He writes that "We conquer by *techne* things that defeat us by *physis*."[8] *Techne,* which in the pre-Socratic usage in commonly translated as "craft," "skill," "art," or "form of expertise,"[9] is that human activity which uses principles of knowledge to attain desired ends. Antiphon reveals to us the unique idea that we use what nature gives us *against itself.* While Democritus merely states that nature in the source of the inspiration for various *technai,* Antiphon takes this idea a step further in revealing that while nature may be the source and inspiration for *technai,* it is also simultaneously the source of its own subjugation insofar as it is "conquered" through technology. Thus Antiphon still relies on the Democritean idea that in one sphere is nature and in the other is it's imitation in the form of technology, but also discloses that it is precisely technology that prevents us from suffering under the unbearable wildness and brutality of nature. The inspirational fecundity of nature is also the source of its own defeat beneath the force of its counterfeit: technology. Even though

---

"*Nomos* and *Phusis* in Democritus and Plato," C.C.W. Taylor. PDF here: http://faculty.umb.edu/adam_beresford/courses/phil_310_08/reading_taylor_democritus.pdf

[7] See "*Nomos* and *Phusis* in Democritus and Plato" by C.C.W. Taylor for more on this.

[8] See Gagarin and Woodruff 1995, 74. Quote found in *Techne in Aristotle's Ethics* pg. 4

[9] See the introductory chapter "Techne in Pre-Platonic Greek Thought" in the book *Techne in Aristotle's Ethics: Crafting the Moral Life* by Tom Angier for more on the meaning of *techne* in pre-Socratic thought.

they come from the same source they are fundamentally different, and, most importantly, they are at odds with one another.

In general, the view that *technai* are other than nature—even though they may find their inspirational origin within it—is the view which, in perhaps an oversimplified form, represents Ancient Greek thinking on the question of the "naturalness" of nature. For them *technai* are clever and purposive contrivances mediated out of nature by the ingenuity of humans; they may possibly represent and aid various human virtues, but they are distorted derivations of that which is given in unmediated nature. Andrew Feenberg makes this point concisely and clearly when he writes that "According to the Greeks, things exist either by *physis* or by *technê*. The things of *physis* have their *arche* in themselves. They are self-originating. The things of *technê* have their *arche* in another. They are made or at least helped into being through the mediation of an agent."[10] Feenberg, in keeping with contemporary philosophy of technology's excessively heavy reliance on the concept of "mediation," is sure to use this recent philosophy of technology concept[11] to help us understand the ancient view, but the core point remains: technologies are always already outside of nature.

To this point, this dissertation has only demonstrated that ancient Greek thinkers theorized a crucial qualitative and ontological distinction between the things of nature and the things of technology. This is a crucial point, to be sure, but it does not go far enough in motivating my claim that philosophy in general, and existential narratives in philosophy specifically, is afflicted by an undue and unreasonable existential aversion to technologies. If we

---

[10]See the section on *techne* in Feenberg's short write-up titled *The Question Concerning Technê: Heidegger's Aristotle.* This may be found on Feenberg's website at: http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/tech2a.html

[11] This concept does, of course, have philosophical precedents outside of philosophy of technology.

turn to the figure of Socrates, we can start to see origin of the idea that motivates this claim. Indeed, Socrates' indictment of the technology of writing may be viewed as the culmination of the pre-Socratic view of technology and exemplary of the Greek suspicion of technology in general. Moreover, Socrates will be demonstrated to be a figure that significantly shaped later philosophical suspicions about technology[12], especially in existential contexts. To access this genesis point we need to turn to the Socratic dialogue *Phaedrus.*

In the *Phaedrus* Plato's Socrates offers a retort against an early technology: writing. Socrates' critique against writing is largely based in the idea that it is alien or foreign, and that the *practice of* and *reliance upon* writing distracts us from what we essentially are as humans. Indeed, Socrates in his indictment of writing states that it is an "invention" that is "produced by external characters which are no part of themselves," and that this technology facilitates the "appearance" of wisdom (*sophias doxas)* as opposed to the cultivation of "true" wisdom. [275b] Throughout this Socratic argument is embedded the idea that there is a true or authentic experience of self-understanding that occurs exclusively in unmediated and artifact-less or artifact-minimal experience. Rather than being an *expression of* or a *practice in* self-understanding, for Socrates the technology of writing is an alien force that encroaches on our capacity to know ourselves and to exercise certain developmental virtues.

Included in Socrates' critique is the idea that the technology of writing encourages forgetfulness (*lêthê*) as well as existential lethargy. According to the Socratic critique it encourages forgetfulness in that it makes people think that the written word will preserve

[12] See "Technophilia, Neo-Luddism, eDependency and the Judgement of Thamus" by Darryl Coulthard and Susan Keller as a contemporary example of philosophers using Socrates' arguments in the *Phaedrus* as a basis for how we ought to assess the ethical dimensions of information technology.

memories on their behalf, and consequently the writing-reliant individual no longer takes the time or expends the effort to truly memorize events, stories, and experiences for themselves. The existential lethargy is produced by the notion that an over-reliance on writing (which could be extrapolated to an overreliance on technologies in general) necessarily leads to an under-reliance on oneself. As Øyvind Rabbås writes, the reason for this is that "writing encourages a kind of trust in its powers that it cannot live up to. For the written word is 'external and depends on signs that belong to others.'"[13] Writing remains an externally-originating technology for Plato's Socrates, and for this reason it leads one away from memorizing and examining details of one's own life. It interrupts the process of satisfying the Delphic injunction to "Know Thyself" (*gnothi sauton*) that grounded the Socratic project, and that has served as a philosophical motto ever since.

If the condition for something to be an impediment to acquiring self-knowledge be that it is externally-originating, as it is for Socrates, then Socrates' critique of writing can easily be expanded to encapsulate all types of technology, as (at least in the common view) technologies are conceived of as being other than human and external to the self. This viewpoint was demonstrated to be held by pre-Socratic figures, Socrates himself, and, as will be shown, this schismatic attitude towards technology remains prominent today. Many figures throughout the history of philosophy have adopted this Socratic Suspicion of technology, and performed the aforementioned extrapolation that includes a suspicion of technologies in general, not just of a

[13] Quote from Øyvind Rabbås, "Writing, Memory, and Wisdom: The Critique of Writing in the *Phaedrus"* from *Symbolae Osloenses* 84, 2010, p26.

particular one. We will now proceed chronologically to later figures who advocated this suspicion, with an especial focus on medieval and monastic figures.

1.3 Monastic and Medieval Thought: Technology as Hubris and an Intrusion of Carnality

In the book of *Genesis* is found an ancient story of what I will call "technological hubris": the tower of Babel. This origin myth—which according to Jewish and Christian tradition was written by Moses, but which many modern scholars think was written around the time of Socrates in the 5th century BCE[14]—foregrounds many later Western religious suspicions of technology as alienating and interruptive. In turn, this—in tandem with pre-Socratic and Socratic Suspicion—certainly played a role in shaping current received suspicions of technology.

According to the story, which takes place after the Great Flood, humanity (at this time) was united in language and location. As they were traveling eastward they decided to stop in the land of Shinar (Mesopotamia) so that they could build a tower reaching heaven: "And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven."[15] In so doing they attempted to blur the distinction between humanity and divinity, and through engineering build their way into heaven using "brick for stone" and "slime for mortar."[16] Predictably, though, God did not look favorably upon this, and regarded it is as a display of human pride and vanity. They made a mistake in thinking that proficiency in building was adequate to achieve divine status, and failed to recognize that brick and mortar, or any other human tools for that matter, can never overcome the barriers of transcendence. The immanent and the transcendent may not be built across. Bricks, mortar, and other technologies are mere human contrivances and cannot approach

---

[14] For more on this see Van Seters, John (1998). "The Pentateuch". In Steven L. McKenzie, Matt Patrick Graham (ed.). *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues*, page 5.
[15] Genesis 11:5, KJV.
[16] Genesis 11:4, Ibid.

the Real. Thus God punished them for their pride and "scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth"[17] speaking languages now indecipherable to one another, whereas beforehand they spoke a common tongue. This explains why we use the word "babble" to describe foolish or unclear speech, or so the story goes. While there are many elements to this origin story that are not specifically technological, it is certainly the case that it carries with it a notion of what I herein call "technological hubris." This early story that has monumentally (no pun intended) shaped humankind addresses a question concerning the scope and limits of our collective power to build and design, and implicitly suggests that we ought to be suspicious of technologies and not overestimate their ability to save us.

This warning about technological hubris influenced Christian religious thinkers, and even motivated some monastic and eremitic movements—which will be addressed in due course—but while on the topic of the Tower of Babel it will also be beneficial to understand this tale of technological hubris as its told in the holy book of the current second largest religion on earth: Islam. The Quran has a story similar to the Biblical Tower of Babel account, however there are some differences. The Quranic version holds that Pharaoh, in the time of Moses, ordered the construction of a tower that would allow him to view the God of Moses. There is still an element of technological hubris here in that the Pharaoh attempts to have a tower constructed so that he can "see" God. The obvious problem here—apart from the Islamic doctrine of the invisibility of Allah—is similar to the problem in the other rendition: one may not use human technologies to engineer or build their way to God. To think that one could build a structure that would allow them to view God would be the height of human arrogance and misunderstanding, for

[17] Genesis 11:8, Ibid.

technologies are ephemeral and finite while God remains transcendent and infinite. See Surah 28:38-39 from the Sahih International translation:

> "And Pharaoh said, 'O eminent ones, I have not known you to have a god other than me. Then ignite for me, O Haman, [a fire] upon the clay and make for me a tower that I may look at the God of Moses. And indeed, I do think he is among the liars.' And he was arrogant, he and his soldiers, in the land, without right, and they thought that they would not be returned to Us."

Predictably, Pharaoh was not successful in his efforts, and his failure is meant to promote a message concerning humility before God. Human contrivances, once again, do not have the capacity to approach the Real. In addition to the interesting differences in the versions of these tales of technological hubris, there is also an important chronological distinction that will help us understand the genesis of religious techno-skepticism: tradition holds that the Quran was written in the 7th century AD by Muhammad's companions—much later than the Bible, but still certainly influenced by it, and certainly influencing the thinking of the followers of this major, enduring, and growing religion. This gap in time shows that this attitude of warning against technological hubris held across time, space, and tradition.

We will divert from Islam now and return again to a consideration of early Christian attitudes towards technology. The earliest Christian monastic communities considered it an evil practice to surround themselves with material possessions. Saint Benedict, in his *Rules of Saint Benedict* composed in 516 A.D., specifically bans monks from possessing and devices that could be used for writing, as well as any other artifacts in general. The 33rd of the *Rules* states in no uncertain terms that:

> Let no one presume to give or receive anything… or to have anything as his own—anything whatever whether book or tablets or pen or whatever it may be—since they are not permitted to have even their bodies or wills at their own disposal… But if anyone is caught indulging in this most wicked vice, let him be admonished once and a second time. If he fails to amend, let him undergo punishment.[18]

This is unique not only because he specifically singled out tablets and stylus' as devices that ascetic monks were forbidden from possessing, but also because this hearkens back to Socrates who specifically targeted writing technologies in *Phaedrus*. Writing is a vice for Socrates; it takes us from the rawness of his peripatetic minimalism. A line can be drawn connecting the technophobia of classical antiquity (represented by Socrates) with the technophobia of late antiquity (as represented by Benedict of Nursia). Both were *specifically* averse to the technologies that enable written expression. This deviated but little from contemporary existential technophobia in which social media and other digitized platforms of expression are those which are treated with disproportionate amounts of skepticism and trepidation. It is clear that there is something unique about these types of technologies—the type that I refer to as "self-disclosive"—that especially invites existential fear and spiritual worry. These are the types of technologies in which we most obviously give ourselves back to ourselves self-referentially, and in which we externalize that which may metaphorically understood as "internal" (thoughts, feelings, attitudes, etc) in a visible form. Therefore, if you want to eliminate the self, you eliminate that which helps the self disclose itself to itself. The items that helped this task were papyrus, sheepskin, pen and paper; now they are online blogs, Facebook rants, and algorithmic

[18] This translation may be found in the archives of the Order of St. Benedict, which they have very helpfully—and somewhat ironically—made available online at archive.osb.org.

feedback loops—all treated as corrupting and distracting, but perhaps they are treated this way because they are uncomfortably disclosive and self-focusing. Notice how Saint Benedict writes that the monks are "not permitted to have even their bodies or wills at their own disposal," so therefore it would be ludicrous to imagine that they could have something as frivolous, external, and distracting as a tablet and a pen. However, perhaps there is an implicit acknowledgement of the self-disclosiveness of these types of technologies: if they do not have books, pens, or tablets, *then* they are less likely to have (worldly) selves, which is the monastic goal all along.

Many medieval thinkers—starting with the oft-regarded first medieval philosopher, St. Augustine of Hippo, and moving through late medieval figures like German mystic Meister Eckhart—regard technology with disdain, as well; as an evil of the world that distracted from spiritual life, intellectual life, and the life of contemplation. Whitney writes that many of the philosophical attitudes towards technology in the Middle Ages are "considered to be inimical to an appreciation of technology, including an emphasis on theoretical over practical knowledge, intellectual over manual labor, and a concern with inner spiritual and moral needs rather than material progress."[19] This certainly seems to be true if we consider a range of medieval thinkers from the beginning to end of this historical period, and it will be shown that this tendency to consider technologies in general, and self-disclosive technologies in particular, as "inimical" to the Delphic injuction to "Know Thyself" extends—albeit irrationally—into the modern day.

As Birgit van den Hoven writes in her highly informational book on medieval conceptions of technology, "one must to a certain extent see medieval authors' concept of the mechanical arts (*mēchanikē technē* in Greek and *ars mechanica* in Latin sources) as part of a

[19] Whitney, E. (1990) *Paradise restored. The mechanical arts from Antiquity through the thirteenth century.* Philadelphia. [Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 80.1] page 5.

continuing tradition of thought on the nature and purpose of knowledge, going back to antiquity at least as far as the time of Plato…"[20] This certainly bears true if we look at the Platonic influence on St. Augustine's withdrawal from the material world, as well as Eckhart's mystical *Gelassenheit,* or "releasement." But this general medieval attitude of disdaining, or at least suspiciously regarding the spiritual and existential dangers of technology, permeates the thinking from the 4th to 15th centuries. We will take an accelerated track and merely glance at two figures that bookend the Middle Ages before leaping ahead in our attempts to analyze current (albeit remaining deeply traditional) skepticisms of technology.

St. Augustine, like his philosophical inspiration Plato, subordinated the material world to the spiritual world. In *De Trinitate* Augustine reflects on the incomprehensibility of God, and makes reference to Psalms 39:3: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it."[21] The point of the chapter in which this verse is referenced—the chapter of which is tellingly titled "God is Above the Mind"—is to warn of the dangers of overestimating our capacities to directly comprehend God through his creations (as the creators of the tower of Babel tried to do), while also suggesting that reflecting on the nature of our being can point us towards God: "The Traces of the Trinity are not vainly sought in the creature."[22] There is danger in believing that we can reason or engineer our way to an understanding of God; bare reason may help us ascend slightly higher towards an understanding of the divine, but revelation always descends to pull us up from the limitations of reason. God reveals himself in nature, but is always self-concealing in nature too. Our task, in order to know (to the extent that we can) the

---

[20] van den Hoven, Birgit. (1996) *Work in Ancient and Medieval Thought: Ancient Philosophers, Medieval Monks and Theologians and their Concept of Work, Occupations, and Technology.* J.C. Gieben, Publisher. Amsterdam. Page 75.
[21] KJV translation; the reference to this verse is made in Augustine, *The Trinity*, XV.2.13.
[22] Ibid. XV.2.2

nature of God, is to reflect on our place in the order of nature. Since he believes the human mind is formed *Imago Dei*, possessing a similar triadic structure to the Trinity, Augustine claims that we can come to understand that image of God through self-reflection. Implicit in all of this, then, is the notion that if we separate our wills from the order of nature, then we will be imperiled in our ability to (partially) know ourselves and, therefore, to (partially) know God. Some scholars have convincingly interpreted this as Augustine warning against the developing and relying upon a nature-independent technological will. Glenn McCullough, for example, argues that Augustine is combating what he calls "technological knowing," which is characterized by the separation of faith and reason, and which leads to the acts and creations of reason being ones that pull us out of the order or nature, rather than attuned to the participatory and unified understanding of God and nature. McCullough writes that

> technological knowing came about when the participatory order of creation and the participatory being of creation fell into the void, and in their place was erected an omnipotent will. This, in effect, was the first instance in western theology of the ascendancy of a pure faith. This pure faith erected a wall between our understanding of God and our understanding of nature, and in effect desacralized the natural world. With no hope of discerning our place in the natural order, humans were free to assert their will over nature and construct an order of their own.[23]

In other words, such independent rational and technological pursuits create a *false order of nature*, and therefore impair our ability to know ourselves or God.

[23] McCullough, Glenn. "Heidegger, Augustine, and Poiēsis: Renewing the Technological Mind." *Theology Today*, vol. 59, no. 1, Apr. 2002, pp. 21–38, Quote from p. 34.

On the other end of medieval philosophy we find another figure whose thoughts display the characteristic medieval suspicion of the technologies of the world, but with a unique medieval twist: the 13th and 14th century German theologian and philosopher Meister Eckhart. Eckhart, who was predictably influenced by Augustine, went beyond Augustine insofar as he advocated the position that humans share a common ground (*Grunt*) with God, and that we engage with God on this common ground by enacting a releasement (*Gelassenheit*) from the things of the world. Eckhart's thinking is not only important as being representative of the medieval monastic attitude of turning away from the world and towards God, but also extremely important as his concept of *Gelassenheit* was supremely influential on one of the 20th centuries most impactful critics of technology: Martin Heidegger. Heidegger famously posited *Gelassenheit* as the opposite of—and the antidote to—*Gestell*, which is the term Heidegger uses to describe the attitude of "enframing" that subtends modern technology and captures modern humans within its snares. Heidegger's monumental critique of modern technology will be dealt in due time, but for now it will be important to get a sense for the way in which his intellectual predecessor Eckhart used the word. According the Bernard McGinn, often regarded as the foremost authority on Eckhart, *Gelassenheit* refers to a "detaching" from those things in the world that seek to capture our attention. Refusal to release from these attachments is "the enemy of the possibility of returning" to an indistinct oneness with God.[24] Eckhart's religious mysticism requires that the pursuer of God must release from particular things in order to create space for the birth of divine awareness in the soul. The 14th century German poem titled "Granum

[24] This quote is taken from a lecture Bernard McGinn gave for the Lumen Cristi Institute. Link to video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znrrH87dm34&t=3739s The quote occurs around the 34 minute mark.

Sinapis"—which is officially anonymous but almost certainly composed by Eckhart[25]—provides guidance on how to detach from the false or artificial constructs of reason and open oneself towards true union with the divine. Stanzas four and five in particular, which are included below, stand out:

Leave your doings
and climb, insight,
the mountain of this point!
The way leads you
into a wondrous desert
which extends wide
and immeasurably far.
The desert knows
neither time nor space.
Its nature is unique.

Never has a foot
crossed the domain of the desert,
created reason
has never attained it.
It is, and yet no one knows what.
It is here, there,
far, near,
deep, high,
so that
it is neither the one nor the other.

The de-particularizing detaching represented by Eckhart's *Gelassenheit* is monumentally impactful even in the contemporary philosophy of technology, and a number of recent scholars have devoted themselves to the task of exploring Eckhart's thought as a cure for the travails and dangers of the technological will. Usually this is done in the context of Heidegger studies. Recently, for example, I co-authored a review for *Sophia* of Routledge's 2019 collected volume *Heidegger on Technology*. In this volume on Heidegger and technology there were many chapters that connected Eckhart to Heidegger, and they often treated Eckhart as a predecessor to

[25] Ibid. 46 minute mark for this discussion.

other recent techno-skeptical existential philosophers (with Heidegger being foremost among them). For example, regarding Bret W. Davis seventh chapter titled "Heidegger's Releasement from the Technological Will" the review states:

> Davis explains how Heidegger, starting from Nietzsche's will-to-power and medieval theologian Meister Eckhart's understanding of Gelassenheit as a release from selfish concerns to the will of God, comes to understand the technological will-to-will as the tyrannical will fully unleashed.[26]

Indeed, it seems that new writings in the philosophy of technology that are seeking ways to escape or overcome the purported existential perils of technology are only increasing in rate of production. These writings that seek an antidote to the "problem" of technology often try to find it in the work of the ancients and medievals. Thus it has been important to understand the ancient and medieval attitudes towards technology in order to understand the more recent techno-skeptical writing, especially if we wish to critique the latter attitude.

In all of this recently mentioned material we see the characteristic medieval suspicion of attaching oneself to and investing oneself in inauthentic cares and concerns. A laundry list of medieval figures, from Augustine to Eckhart, identified with this view which segmented off the material and artificial from the immaterial good, and this segmentation led to a broader suspicion of the technological. We did not even examine the Stoics, from Aurelius to the early Christian Stoic Boethius, who all classified the things built by human hands as "indifferent" and of no real worth. It is easy to see how this all streamlines into an inherited pathological aversion to the technological; one that is still seemingly possessed as if a reflex by philosophers even today,

[26] Miller, G., Black, C. Review of Aaron James Wendland, Christopher Merwin, and Christos Hadjioannou, Eds., *Heidegger on Technology*. *SOPHIA* 58, 763-766 (2019).

although the tone of it now is typically less motivated by a craving for spiritual purity and more motivated by a yearning for existential and ethical clarity.

1.4 The Existentialists' Suspicion of Technology

As has been shown in the preceding sections, contemporary suspicions of technology as self-alienating have a long background in the history of philosophy, being traceable to some of the earliest points in the history of the discipline. The watermark of Socratic suspicion remains imprinted on philosophical thought, and even has a ubiquity in the recent philosophical tradition most keen on addressing questions of self-examination: existentialism. Socrates' shadow looms large over Kierkegaard, the figure often identified as the first existentialist, and Kierkegaard's influence, both in philosophical themes and dispositions, directly shaped the thought of those who came later down the line.

To reiterate, we see this Socratic suspicion taken up in highly influential existential figures, such as Kierkegaard (the so-called "father of Existentialism"), Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger. Their influence on current philosophical attitudes about technology cannot be overstated, and their concerns about the dangerous power of technology to alienate us from ourselves helps to lay out the existential stakes of any inquiry into the meaning of technology.

Philosophy of technology has only very recently started to take the work of Kierkegaard seriously, and only in a very limited sense.[27] Yet Kierkegaard's impact on existential attitudes

[27] Christopher B. Barnett's 2019 monograph *Kierkegaard and the Question Concerning Technology* fits into this category as well as several of Hubert Dreyfus' papers from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. My recently published book chapter "Choosing for Yourself in the Age of the Social Media Echo-Chamber: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections on Online Algorithms" and my forthcoming article "Digital Duplicity and Self-Knowledge: Online Pseudonyms as a Form of Technological Maieutics" are both attempts at furthering the Kierkegaard-influenced philosophy of technology.

towards technology is significant, as well as is his influence on later figures' thinking concerning this question, such as Heidegger. Kierkegaard considered himself to be an acolyte of Socrates, noting that Socrates was "that man with whom I have maintained an inextricable report with from a very young age."[28] Kierkegaard's critiques of technology often follow the form of the Socratic argument outlined above, attacking technology on the basis that it alienates individuals from themselves as a consequence of its mediation.[29] He critiques modernity as "the age that travels by railroad,"[30] and associates the comfort of the railroad with an existential laziness that distracts us from the primordial "fear and trembling" that motivates us to focus on our own subjectivity. (This is similar to how Socrates argued that writing makes us lazy and self-forgetful.) What was once an arduous physical journey that required self-focus and willful motivation is now "sitting and smoking a cigar in the cozy dining car" idly speculating about nothing of worth.[31] For Kierkegaard railroad technology is but one example of how technology mediates us away from the raw experience of being anxiety-ridden humans. In Kierkegaard's 1846 *The Present Age* he introduces a vocabulary of technological critique when polemically attacking mass media technologies, and specifically the press.[32] He argues that the capacity for rapidly printed and mass-disseminated newspapers promoted yet another form of existential laziness. It encourages idle talk, everydayness (what Heidegger later calls averageness), and

---

[28] Sarf 1983, 257

[29] Kierkegaard's 46th aphorism from the Diapsalmata of *Either/Or* I provides a humorous—if not typically woebegone—description of technology mediating and distorting one's sense of reality, and of themselves: "My observation of life makes no sense at all. I suppose that an evil spirit has put a pair of glasses on my nose, one lens of which magnifies on an immense scale and the other reduces on the same scale."

[30] SKS 7, 69/CUPI, 67-68. Barnett 126.

[31] SKS 13, 165/M, 123. Barnett 126.

[32] It's interesting to note that around the same Henry David Thoreau was making similar arguments during his famed "experiment in self-sufficiency."

ultimately "leveling"—a condition in which society is no longer comprised of passionate individuals, but instead is a conglomeration of identical, spiritually dead people who lack an inner life. Here, in both examples, the Socratic formula remains: technology operates as a disruptive force that alienates individuals from themselves, and thereby it ought to be eschewed—or at least tempered—in order to allow us a purer experience of *raw* subjectivity.

Kierkegaard, as I have demonstrated, remained a devoted acolyte of Socrates through his brief but prolific life, and maintained Socrates' dogged focus on existence and self-knowledge, while also promoting a skepticism of technology's ability to illuminate knowledge of the self or of existence. Unsurprisingly, later readers of Kierkegaard adopted his attitudes on these topics, while devoting themselves to being students of his writing in a way similar to how Kierkegaard devoted himself to Socrates. We shall now discuss briefly the work of highly influential German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers. As Jean Wahl (an esteemed philosopher and student of Kierkegaard in his own right) states, "We may consider the philosophy of Jaspers as a sort of reflection on the case of Kierkegaard."[33] Indeed, Jaspers states as much directly when he states that Kierkegaard was the first philosophical figure to robustly engage with *Existenz,* which is the term that Jaspers uses to refer to the realm of authentic being. In Jaspers *Philosophie,* 13 note 1 Jaspers states:

> The being of *Existenz* cannot be expressed by a definable concept; for that would presuppose an object-being of some sort. The *word* is, to begin with, only one of those which designate being. From obscure beginnings this reality has emerged into history;

[33] Paul Arthur Schillp, ed. *The Library of Living Philosophers IX: The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers.* Open Court Publishing Company, 1957. Jean Wahl "Notes on Some Relations of Jaspers to Kierkegaard and Heidegger," p. 594.

> but in philosophical thought it was no more than an adumbration until Kierkegaard gave it an historically compelling expression." [34]

Thus the record shows us demonstrably that Jaspers thought of Kierkegaard as the definitive source for examinations of authentic being, and this is cleverly reinforced in the title of Jaspers' text in which extensively describes how technology stands as a threat to the pursuit of authenticity: *Man in the Modern Age.* This nicely parallels *The Present Age*, the text in which Kierkegaard pursued a similar line of critique to the one Jaspers pursued 105 years later.

Karl Jaspers, often considered to be something of an heir to Kierkegaard, and an early proponent of the existential tradition, then, advocated a similar critique of technology to the one made by Kierkegaard. In his 1931 *Man in the Modern Age* (notice the similarity to Kierkegaard's title) Jaspers outlines a pessimistic view of technology which considers technology to be an alien, homogenizing force.[35] For Jaspers technology is initially summoned into existence by humans, but eventually becomes a force independent (alien) to humans—and a force which works to suppress vital human features such as freedom and individuality. His two primary arguments for this are first that individuals cannot form meaningful attachments to mass produced objects, and secondly that the technological mechanization of labor—and of the lifeworld more generally—makes individuals fungible and de-particularized. He thought of technology that was contemporary to him as being the "apparatus" and insisted that it alienates humans not only from themselves, but even from their historical self-understanding. For

[34] *Philosophie*, 13 note 1 (see intro to above book for reference)
[35] It should be noted that Jaspers' view on technology changed with time, and eventually he developed a view of technology which considered it in its mere instrumentality and less as an independent force. However, both still relied on a similar meditation discourse.

example, in the section "Dominion of Apparatus" contained in *Man in the Modern Age* Jaspers writes:

> Inasmuch as the titanic apparatus for the provision of the elementary necessaries of human life reduces the individual to a mere function, it releases him from the obligation to conform to the traditional standards which of old formed the cement of society. It has been said that in modern times men have been shuffled together like grains of sand. They are elements of an apparatus in which they occupy now one location, now another; not parts of a historical substance which they imbue with their selfhood. The number of those who lead this uprooted sort of life is continually on the increase.[36]

Once again, as with the others, in this prominent existentialist's view technology is considered to be a fundamentally disruptive force which drives a wedge between the individual and the individual's capacity to experience their raw subjectivity.

1.4.2 What is Meant by "Existentialism" in This Dissertation: A Kierkegaardian View

Given that I have just alleged that existentialism is historically characterized by a Socratic Suspicion of technology, and given that the title of this dissertation suggests that it is high time that existential thinkers recast their thinking about technology, it will be important to spend some time articulating how I think about existentialism as well as approximately what is meant when the term "existentialism" is used in the following chapters.

My thinking about existentialism is principally influenced by the thought of proto-existentialist Søren Kierkegaard[37], whom I have just discussed in the prior discussion and whom

---

[36] Jaspers, Karl. Trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (1957). *Man in the Modern Age.* Anchor Books. Garden City, New York. p. 49-50.

[37] I say "proto-existentialist" because Kierkegaard never used this term to describe himself, and the term was not identified as a philosophical tradition until after his death.

I will continue to make constant reference to. While Kierkegaard's existentialism retained traces of the techno-skepticism that I push against, I also think that his kinetic way of thinking about how the self comes to know itself offers several keys for unlocking new pathways for thinking about technological maieutics. Kierkegaard addressed a majority of his philosophical texts to "the single individual," and I intend for this text to also be addressed to the single individual in their solitary pursuit of self-understanding. This way of thinking about existentialism is admittedly a more "subjectivist" way of thinking about existentialism than that represented by later figures such as Heidegger or Levinas, and the one that will be decisive and orienting throughout the following pages. In addition to taking Kierkegaard as the primary existential figure, this dissertation will also rely heavily on some elements of Sartre's existential subjectivism, and most critically upon his notion of "bad faith." While meaningful questions may be asked of whether self-knowledge must always require a social component, the scope of this dissertation's consideration will primarily (although not exclusively[38]) be with how the individual experiences themselves in their singularity.

Since I use the term "self" extensively throughout this dissertation it will also be crucial that I spend some time articulating what I mean when I say "self." I, predictably, follow Kierkegaard's definition of self. For Kierkegaard the self is a dynamic, kinetic *process* of attempting to root out its despair. Despair is a fundamental condition of human being that is a consequence of the self being out of "balance" with itself. Essentially, it is when the self fails to adequately know itself and therefore fails to align itself with that which is best for it.

[38] I say not exclusively because much of this "self-knowledge" that I discuss comes about indirectly through the experience of digital "others." Example are when I discuss knowledge of mortality through the experience of digital traces of a deceased friend (section 4.3.6.2), or when I discuss the slippage between one's assumed demographic and one's singular actuality (section 4.3.4.3).

Kierkegaard defined humanity generally as the tension (or synthesis) between finitude and infinitude, the temporal and the eternal, and between possibility and necessity. The self specifically is the task of trying to maintain the proper equilibrium of these syntheses. If they misrelate, then one will find themselves in a form of despair. In his famously difficult introductory passage to his "philosophical anthropology" *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard defines the self thusly:

> Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self.[39]

If one is not yet a self they must come to know who they are; in coming to know what one is one becomes what they are. The "inner movements" of singular existence strive towards illuminating a vision—either through recollection or elimination—of achieve this coherent, balanced self.

Here I will identify four specific forms of despair that are all possible consequences of the kinetic of self that Kierkegaard promotes. Each of these possibilities are at play in life—be it digital or otherwise—and the striving to find equilibrium in the tension is what gives life its

---

[39] Kierkegaard, S., Hong, H. V., & Hong, E. H. (1983). *The sickness unto death: a christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*. Princeton University Press. P. 43.

generative meaning. The self in its volatility is always motivated to overcome its current status; to maintain an active spirit, lest it stay penned in to its present despair.

The first form is excessive infinitude: "So when feeling becomes fantastic, the self is simply volatilized more and more, at last becoming a sort of abstract sentimentality which is so inhuman that it does not apply to any person, but inhumanly participates feelingly, so to speak, in the fate of one or another abstraction, e.g. that of mankind in abstracto."[40] For the individual in this form of despair the world in its immediacy falls away and loses value; everything is abstract and eternal, and no close attachments are formed.

Second is excessive finitude: "But while one sort of despair plunges wildly into the infinite and loses itself, a second sort permits itself as it were to be defrauded by 'the others.' By seeing the multitude of men about it, by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself, forgets what his name is (in the divine understanding of it), does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd."[41] This individual is lost in the crowd and the demands of everydayness. They are so consumed by immediate everyday tasks that they forget what their ultimate purpose was to begin with.

The third form is excessive possibility: "Now if possibility outruns necessity, the self runs away from itself, so that it has no necessity whereto it is bound to return -- then this is the despair of possibility. The self becomes an abstract possibility which tries itself out with floundering in the possible, but does not budge from the spot, nor get to any spot, for precisely

[40] Ibid. 46
[41] Ibid. 47

the necessary is the spot; to become oneself is precisely a movement at the spot."[42] This person is so caught up in speculation that they never go about doing anything. Overwhelmed and paralyzed by possibility, this person stays put and remains underdeveloped/unactualized. It is a form of abiding melancholy.

The final form is excessive necessity: "The loss of possibility signifies: either that everything has become necessary to a man/or that everything has become trivial. The determinist or the fatalist is in despair, and in despair he has lost his self, because for him everything is necessary." This correlates essentially to a loss of hope or a loss of the belief in the possibility of change. This person does not believe that they have any control over their inner or outer life, and thus feels no need to actively engage with the task of living.

While I do not make continual reference to these categories and terms developed by Kierkegaard throughout this dissertation, this dissertation does operate within this same task-oriented, individualized, and dynamic way of thinking about the self and about self-knowledge. The task if for the self to continue in the process of adapting and finding new ways to come ever closer to totality and coherence.

1.5 Contemporary Philosophy of Technology and Technology as External Mediation

While several other existential figures participated in propagating this discourse of mediation—including, notably, Gabriel Marcel, Nicolas Berdyaev, Martin Buber, and Henri Bergson—I will now turn away from existentialism and towards to two prominent figures who are perhaps most influential in shaping contemporary attitudes towards philosophy of technology: Don Ihde (1934-present) and Peter-Paul Verbeek (1970-present). While both figures align themselves with the post-phenomenological approach—an approach which they both also

[42] Ibid. 49

helped to formulate—their views are still germane to fundamental existential questions of technology as they consider questions about what and how it is to *be* with technology. In these two prominent figures we still see technology theorized as external mediation. My basic claim in this dissertation is that external mediation is inadequate to the basic task of philosophy—namely self-knowledge—because external mediation based attitudes assume that technology is an externality that works against the end of self-knowledge, whereas I argue that technology is a fundamental mode of human being, and that technology demonstrably facilitates self-knowledge in multiple ways.

Ihde, as early as in his influential 1979 book *Technics and Praxis*, outlined an elaborate system of mediations meant to clarify his project of what he called understanding "human-world relations." Ihde is perhaps best known for his list of the four types of relations—which he outlined in his early books—that constitute his theory of technological mediation. The four ways in which Ihde theorizes technology as mediating experience is through: embodiment relations, hermeneutic relations, alterity relations, and background relations. While much could be said about each one of these forms of relation, the most important element is that in this view—and in each form—technology provides an altered, augmented, or distorted impression of reality. Reality is *filtered through* the technology. Therefore, in being with technologically, what we experience is a contaminated[43] or less "real" techno-mediated reality. An army of technological relations stands between us and raw subjective experience, just as it did with Socrates.

To further expound on how Ihde thinks of technology as a wedge because humans and raw experience, some more notes will be made on *Technics and Praxis.* In addition to upholding

[43] I say this with no normative connotation, but simply to denote something like "less real."

the view that technologies operate in four types of relations, each of which rely upon an idea of technological distortion, *Technics and Praxis* also promulgates two major theses. The first "is that technology is nonneutral. That is, technology transforms human experience."[44] In other words, anytime technology is encountered (which is almost always), reality is transformed in such a way as to be distinctive from what may be thought of as its natural state. Indeed, Ihde sets out the project of the book as attempting to understand what happens "between humans and their machines."[45] The use of the word "between" at the very outset sets the tone for the remainder of the volume, which will carry a notion of mediation—"relation"/"between"ness—throughout. However, this reliance upon the notion of "between" and "mediation" is not to say that Ihde thinks that technology determines human experience in a "strong" sense. Rather, he thinks that technologies have "inclinations" which actively push us in one way or another.[46] For example, he thinks that writing with a fountain pen pushes one to be more amorous in their language than they otherwise would be. On this point he writes a passage which conceptualizes technologies as exerting a strong influence between us and our experience of the world while not claiming that the influence is totalizing:

> Now it is equally obvious that such a telic inclination which is made possible by the different capacities of the instruments is not a hard determinism. The user of the pen can produce a colloquial, journalistic style just as the user of the typewriter can produce the deliberate effect of *belles lettres*. But, the kind of effort which is demanded for these results is noticeably different and often obtained differently. The telic inclination made

---

[44] Restivo, Sal. *Technology and Culture*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1981, pp. 672.
[45] Ihde, Don. *Technics and Praxis.* Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, v. XXIV. Eds. Robert S. Cohen and Mark W. Wartovsky. p. 3
[46] Ibid.

> possible by the instrument does not cut off any human aim through itself, although it does call for varying degrees of effort on the part of the user to counter whatever may be the implicit rhythm of the instrument in its normative and functionally optimal use.[47]

The moderating tone Ihde assumes in this passage is particularly appreciated, especially as he acknowledges the possibility that one can produce a piece of fine writing on an inelegant typewriter. Nevertheless, he conceptualizes a vision of the typewriter actively interfering between the desire of a person and the achievement of the beautiful. If the resulting letter written is not beautiful, according to this view, it is as much the fault of the typewriter (if not more) as it is of the writer. This is just one of the scores of examples of mediating technologies that Ihde refers to throughout the text, and I selected this example given that is fair in representing his moderating tone. Yet, he still does absolutely rely heavily on mediation/relation, which is an attitude which I argue 1) often prematurely forecloses possible avenues for pursuing self-knowledge while also 2) assuming an attitude of irresponsibility that blames things rather than the people using those things.

The second thesis that Ihde upholds throughout this text is the idea that technologies exist along what he calls the "embodiment-hermeneutic continuum." That is, while technologies are always mediating our experience, it occurs through more and less subtle methods. For example, something that exists on the "hermeneutic" side of the spectrum exists as a clearly discernible "other." It is outside of the sphere of human being altogether. Those that are closer to "embodiment" relations operate in a much more discreet, subtle way. On the end of the spectrum which he calls the "embodiment" side technologies shape our behavior in a much less obvious way; they operate as the background "through" which we come to see and to know the

[47] Ihde, Don. *Technics and Praxis*, p. 43.

world. These types of relations are harder to recognize, but are also multiplying as technology continues its march forward. What follows is a fairly extended passage from Ihde which shows the character of his thinking and how he attempts to place things on the "embodiment-hermeneutic continuum." While this passage is fairly randomly chosen, as in this passage Ihde is writing specifically about technologies that allow for high-resolution images of Mars to be made, it does disclose Ihde's thinking about the human > instrument > world relation and the complex manner by which technology "reveals" reality:

> One must not, however, be mystified by technical complexity. All that is being illustrated here is the gradual change of what happens to the intentional arc, Human-instrument-World, in the instance of such complexity. I shall call this transformation the emergence of the hermeneutic relation. Hermenutic means 'to interpret' and its primary model historically is related to interpretation of texts. I shall use this metaphorically to elucidate what I believe to be a *qualitative change in the type of mediational position* occupied by the instrument at this stage of the continuum. What the complexity of the investigative process reveals, although only different in degree from the previous example, is the obviousness and necessity of the instrumentation to be taken thematically as 'other' in the process. In order to gain a telic result, along the way relations with instruments become necessary if a relation through the complex is to be attained. Instrumentation as means thereby attains a certain phenomenological positivity which cannot be ignored. The instrumentation achieves 'a life of its own' and is a separate and distinct positive factor in the investigation.[48]

[48] Ibid. 32. Italics mine.

Here in this representational passage we see Ihde taking pains to track the change in the "type of mediational position occupied by the instrument at this stage in the continuum." No matter what the instrument is, even (the suggestion is) if it is among the most advanced technologies of our age, the technologies must, by definition, occupy some position within this pre-determined mediation-based continuum. Here a question reveals itself: must every*thing* exist somewhere within this continuum, or is there a possibility for some technological process or entity to exist outside of it? For example, what if the "technology" that one is interpreting is much closer to being co-identical with the self doing the interpreting rather than being something opaque and other? The self-experiencing character of algorithmic online life does not seem to find a place within Ihde's continuum of thought, and therefore we must go beyond Ihde's thought in order to think more richly about the experience of being online in 2021. Thus, while Ihde's embodiment-hermeneutic continuum is useful in thinking about certain types of earlier technologies, it has its limits. While this dissertation is indebted to Ihde for the breakthroughs that he made, it is also apparent that it is time to also be willing to try to think outside of his framework in certain situations.

Peter-Paul Verbeek takes Ihde's project of mapping the modalities of technological mediation and expands upon it, adding three more relations to Ihde's original list of four. While Verbeek's theory attempts to better account for sophisticated hybridizing technologies (such as brain implants) it is still built upon the same foundational bedrock of mediation-based thinking. The three new modes of relation that Verbeek proposes are: cyborg relations, immersion relations, and augmentation relations.[49] In his "Short Introduction to Mediation Theory"

[49]Verbeek, Peter-Paul. "Beyond Interaction: A Short Introduction to Mediation Theory." Ron Wakkery and Erik Stolterman (eds.) 2015. Interactions 22, 3 (May-June 2015). p. 28

Verbeek identifies the philosophy of technology as being best understood through the mediations of technology. That is, how technologies shape human life. His avowed task is to extend and expand upon Ihde's thought, rather than providing a possibility for going "outside" or "beyond" Ihde's continuum. In describing his mediation-based theory of technology Verbeek writes:

> In order to investigate the mediating role of technologies, it is helpful to study the relations between humans and technologies along several lines. First of all, building upon and expanding the work of Don Ihde, we can categorize various types of relations between humans, technologies, and the world. Second, we can identify various points of application from where technologies exert their influence on human beings. And third, several types of influence that technologies exert on human actions and decisions can be distinguished.[50]

In this quote Verbeek indicates at least three interesting things. Firstly, he states that his interest is in investing technologies in terms of their "mediating roles." Once enclosed within that interpretative framework it is impossible to get out, and thus certain possibilities for interpretation will inevitably be foreclosed—unless, of course, the mediation theory is *completely correct and adequate,* which I argue it is not. Secondly, he identifies that he is only interested in "building upon" and "expanding the work" of Don Ihde. But at what point do new systems and processes appear that require going beyond rather than building upon? Thirdly, Verbeek relies upon the idea of technologies "exerting" force or pressure upon their passive, agency-minimized users. This idea of "exertion" is certainly applicable for some technologies, like guillotines, but what about when the users and the technology are essentially

[50] Ibid. 29.

indistinguishable? Or, to borrow a phrase from Gabriel Marcel, what happens when the "problem encroaches upon its own data"? I argue that the contemporary online experience cannot be encapsulated by these priors of Verbeek's thought, and that while Verbeek builds upon Ihde, we should (very selectively!) "go beyond" Ihde and Verbeek.

So, in sum and as it stands, mainstream contemporary philosophy of technology currently considers the task of understanding being-with-technology to consist in knowing a list of types of technological mediation and appropriately applying them. This seems like an impoverished approach, and one that fails to appropriately attune itself to the existential and self-disclosive elements of technological being. As mentioned earlier, I take it as my task to dispute this mediation-based method of approaching the question of being with technology, and I will devote time to making my argument that runs counter to this discourse of mediation.

In order to address why my view of "technological maieutics" should not just be added to the pre-existing list of the seven types of mediation relations, I will now go through each of the seven types one by one and show why they are inadequate. It is my claim that my way of thinking does not concern or require a notion of mediation whatsoever, but is rather characterized by direct self-experience. In this way, then, my way of thinking about technology existentially is fundamentally different than these forms of mediation and is both qualitatively and substantially incommensurable with them. I will start with Ihde's four types and then move to Verbeek's additional three.

The first form of relation that Ihde discusses in his breakthrough text *Technology and the Lifeworld* is the embodiment relation. Of the embodiment relation Ihde writes "I see—through

the optical artifact—the world."[51] In this most basic form of mediation the technological object stands between the individual and the world, and transforms their experience of visual perception in such a way that they come to see the transformed experience as *actual or real.* Ihde writes:

> The technology is actually between the seer and the seen, in a position of mediation. But the referent of the seeing, that towards which sight is directed, is 'on the other side' of the optics. One sees through the optics… My glasses become part of the way I ordinarily experience my surroundings; they 'withdraw' and are barely noticed, if at all. I have then actively embodied the technics of vision. Technics is the symbiosis of artifact and user within a human action. Embodiment relations, however, are not at all restricted to visual relations."[52]

This relation is inadequate to my way of thinking existentially about technology insofar as it relies upon a notion of the active transformation of reality by an external artifact. In my thinking about algorithmized digital life the technological perception is only of the self, and does not rely on the external being symbiotically incorporated into the individual's lifeworld.

The second relation that Ihde discusses is the "hermeneutic relation." Hermeneutic relations are those which allow reality to be "read" through a mediating artifact. Ihde attributes—among other things—the success of modern medicine to this type of relation, and discusses how technologies such as thermometers allow us to read the reality of "fever" in someone's body. Likewise, other medical technologies turn patient bodies into a "text" that can be medically read for all manner of health-giving purposes. Ihde says:

---

[51] Ihde, D. (1990). *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*. Indiana University Press. p. 72
[52] Ibid. 72-73.

> "It is the difference between what is shown and how something is shown which is informative. In a hermeneutic relation, the world is first transformed into a text, which in turn is read. There is potentially as much flexibility within hermeneutic relations as there are in the various uses of language."[53]

While this idea of hermeneutic relations is fascinating and important, it does not go far enough in terms of recognizing the intimate self-perceptual and midwife-like nature of technological maieutics. Instead of hermeneutic mediation being a method of interpreting the outside world, I propose the possibility of a technological experience that is a pure and direct experience of the self. The hermeneutic relation is—I think—the most groundbreaking of his four mediations, and my only critique is simply that it is not quite immersive enough and that it does not go far enough in assessing what can be known technologically.

The third mediation is the "alterity relation." The alterity relation is a relationship with a technological artifact in which the technological artifact appears as a "quasi-other." In his description of the alterity relation Ihde takes Levinas' notion of "alterity" and the "other" and applies it to the built world of technology. He describes situations—such as with highly advanced humanoid robots[54]—in which an artifact could awaken a sense of the human "other." I do not dispute the claim that there are times in which technological artifact may appear *as if* they are humans. The history of automata being constructed by inventors and magicians is extensive and historically rich, and AI technologies of the modern day are extremely compelling. Indeed, we live in the age of the "deep fake." However, this notion of alterity relations does not bear on

[53] Ibid. 92
[54] Ibid. 103.

my notion of unmediated technological self-revealing, and therefore may be passed by with a nod of respect.

The final relation that Ihde discusses is the "background relation." Background relations are those which "texture" human experience and are incorporated into the praxis of everyday life, but which exist also in a conspicuous state of absence. Ihde refers to them as akin to "white noise."[55] They include things like dwellings (houses, tents, etc), appliances, or other non-natural elements of everyday life that we constantly use but rarely pay conscious attention to. They, simply put, fade into the "background" of our lifeworld. Ihde describes them in the language of that which is literally visible but also always withdrawing from our attention:

> Note two things about this human/technology relation: First, the machine activity in the role of background presence is not displaying either what I have termed a transparency or an opacity. The "withdrawal" of this technological function is phenomenologically distinct as a kind of "absence." The technology is, as it were, "to the side." Yet as a present absence, it nevertheless becomes part of the experienced field of the inhabitant, a piece of the immediate environment.[56]

Again, certainly this is an accurate phenomenological account of how certain types of technologies are (not?) experienced. It is similar to my notion of the "insidious" algorithm which I describe later in chapter three in that it is unrecognized, however it is dissimilar to the technological maieutics with I describe in chapter four, which, to be existentially efficacious, rely upon conscious attentiveness to their presence. Additionally, Ihde does not describe the

[55] Ibid. 109.
[56] Ibid. 111.

phenomenon of this relation as occurring vis-à-vis self-knowledge, and therefore the parameters of this type of relation do not describe the experience of the self that I am concerned with.

Now we will switch to a brief description of Verbeek's three "additional" forms of mediating relations that he added to Ihde's original four. The first of the three new forms of relations that he describes is the "cyborg relation." He thinks of cyborg relations as intensified embodiment relations in which technologies ostensibly "merge" with humans. An example of a cyborg relation that Verbeek proposes is that of a brain implant for someone with Parkinson's.[57] Verbeek proposes this as a new type of relation due to this "intimacy" and "hybridization" between person and object that allegedly occurs during this relation. This type of relation is interesting insofar as it helps the individual retain capacities that they were at risk of losing, and even in some cases to gain new or enhanced ones. However, this does not involve the active "prompting" to learn about oneself that I argue occurs with technological maieutics, but rather involves the preservation of the organic being's capacity to maintain its somatic function. Hybridity is a relevant concept in thinking about going beyond mediation, but insofar as Verbeek cyborg relation is grounded in the language of relationality it cannot radically go beyond mediation.

Verbeek also adds what he calls "immersion relations." These are exemplified by so-called smart technologies (such as Siri) that allow the user an interactive experience within a lived context.[58] The user is "immersed" within their interactive technological framework. Nevertheless, this still heavily hinges on mediation insofar as the interactive behavior is with a quasi-other (i.e. Siri) rather than with oneself.

---

[57] Verbeek, Peter-Paul. "Beyond Interaction: A Short Introduction to Mediation Theory." Ron Wakkery and Erik Stolterman (eds.) 2015. Interactions 22, 3 (May-June 2015). p. 29
[58] Ibid. 30.

The final type of relation that Verbeek develops is the "augmentation relation." Verbeek claims that these relations create a "bifurcation of the human-world relation," and gives the example of smart glasses.[59] In an augmentation relation "reality" is augmented or added to by some external technology. "Reality" and "virtually" come to supplement one another in a parallel manner. This is very distinctly different than the way of think about digital algorithmized technologies that I propose, as my suggested existential orientation towards technology explicitly denies the language of "bifurcation."

I have now outlined each of the seven primary forms of mediation used in mediation discourse today, as well as explained how my approach towards thinking about technology is fundamentally different and incommensurable with these seven ways of thinking about technology. Now I will briefly mention the structure of this dissertation's overall argument, before identifying some philosophical figures who anticipated my argument by implicitly challenging the mediation-based model of thinking about technology which has prevailed for so very long.

1.6 A Clarification About What is Meant by "Technology" in This Dissertation

In order to avoid future confusion, as well as to motivate the existential concerns that are raised throughout this dissertation, it will be worthwhile to clarify what is meant when the word "technology" is used in this project. I use the word technology in both a "general" and a "specific" sense during the course of this dissertation. The general sense of technology is one that I especially use during the earlier quarter of the project, whereas the more specific sense is the one that occupies the major focus of this dissertation.

[59] Ibid.

The general sense of technology—which I use especially when I refer to pre-Socratic technological engagements, such as the Tower of Babel or the mimesis of Democritus—means "anything that would not come about without human intervention and which is used to support human needs." I talk about technology in this sense in order to highlight how early suspicions of technology in general lay the groundwork for contemporary suspicions of specifically self-disclosive communicative technologies. I believe that the generalized religious-philosophical skepticisms of technology (in the general sense) throughout intellectual laid the groundwork for the heightened disbelief that technologies that ostensibly bring the self into play are actually capable of doing so.

The primary, specific way that I use technology throughout this dissertation is to refer to *technologies with communicative potential*. Specifically, I focus on digital communicative technologies. I draw a connection between the original Socratic Suspicion of writing, to the Benedictine refusal to allow their acolytes to own any communicative technologies, to contemporary philosophy's tendency to think of communicative technologies in terms of self-alienation and mediation. The reason that I focus on this specific meaning of technology throughout this dissertation is because this type of technology has the greatest existential potential; it involves the self presenting itself. Because I believe that this type of technology has the greatest existential self-disclosive potential, I therefore also conclude that it is the type of technology most susceptible to existential-philosophical abuses such as being used as an excuse for irresponsible behavior and bad-faith self-deception. If these technologies are especially capable of helping the self reveal itself to itself, they are also especially capable of serving as loci where the self can also conceal itself from itself. Therefore, they demand special attention—

especially in light of the problem of Socratic Suspicion that I have identified as permeating the history of Western Philosophy.

1.7 Conclusion: The Structure of the Argument

In the simplest terms, this dissertation will demonstrate that we can no longer assume that technology is always a mediator, but must recognize that certain contemporary technologies work to intensify self-knowledge and self-encounter. While not all technologies always work towards this end, some certainly do. By opening ourselves to the recognition that technology is not pre-disposed towards alienation, new ethical and existential possibilities are liberated. Additionally, a more authentic encounter with technology will be made possible.

2. IMPLICIT CHALLENGES TO TECHNOLOGY-AS-EXTERNAL MEDIATION

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will seek to moderate the claims made in the prior chapter. While it is certainly the case that treating technology with Socratic Suspicion has been the prevailing mode throughout the history of philosophy, some important figures have appeared that have offered implicit challenges to mediation-centered philosophy of technology. Specifically, I argue that certain figures, such as Stiegler, Foucault, Derrida, Simondon, LaTour, and Gualeni offer philosophical tools that are potentially helpful in thinking about technology in a way that goes beyond mediation. Throughout this chapter I will outline in more detail how I perceive these thinkers as laying some of the philosophical groundwork for going beyond mediation and towards a more open understanding of self-knowledge vis-à-vis technology.

2.2 Stiegler's Critique of Technology as Only Accidentally Corrupting

Bernard Stiegler was a French philosopher.[60] During his life he wrote expansively—especially in his three-volume tome *Technics and Time*—about digital technologies and their existential ramifications. While he adopts a generally critical tone towards technology, and is often thought of as a critic of such technologies, he only critiques these technologies on the basis of who controls them and not because of what they are. His work articulates a latent belief in the liberatory potential of these technologies, but insists that these liberatory possibilities are foreclosed by the profiteering that the developers of these technologies relentlessly engage in. The user of these technologies—according to Stiegler—even has their very consciousness remolded insofar as they are unaware that the codes and algorithms (he doesn't use this word, but it is implicit) "behind" the technology are developed specifically to capture their attention by

[60] Who, incidentally (and unfortunately), died during the writing of this dissertation.

any means necessary. Leonid Bilmes, a well-regarded interpreter of Stiegler, clearly summarizes this concern of Stiegler's when he writes:

> The catastrophe of the digital age is that the global economy, powered by computational 'reason' and driven by profit, is foreclosing the horizon of independent reflection for the majority of our species, in so far as we remain unaware that our thinking is so often being constricted by lines of code intended to anticipate, and actively shape, consciousness itself.[61]

Nevertheless, Stiegler holds on to the belief that there are liberatory possibilities concealed beneath and within digital technology; they are just dormant and unlikely to be revealed *en masse* given the current character of sociopolitical existence. However, he retains the general idea: technology is often crucial to the formation of subjectivity, and its modern digital modes also offer possibilities for disclosing horizons of self-knowledge. In the preface to the monumental work *Technics and Time* he even states in strong terms: "The object of this work is technics, apprehended as the horizon of all possibility to come and of all possibility of a future."[62] Technics and the possibilities of existence are fundamentally entwined, even if the realized possibility is no more than a bleak and oppressive technocracy.

He also advocates a different idea which challenges the notion of technology-as-external-mediation. By making reference to the work of paleoanthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan and

---

[61] This may be found in Bilmes excellent book review "Daring to Hope for the Improbable: On Bernard Stiegler's 'The Age of Disruption,'" which may be found here: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/daring-to-hope-for-the-improbable-on-bernard-stieglers-the-age-of-disruption/

[62] Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus.* Stanford University Press, 1998. p. IX.

the historian of technology Bertrand Gille, Stiegler argues that technology is co-originary with *Homo Sapiens.* Technology is not *other* than us, it—in a sense—is us. In *Technics and Time* Stiegler writes various passages to this effect, especially in discussing texts such as Leroi-Gourhan's *Gesture and Speech,* which Stiegler claims is ultimately about "the technological origin of humanity."[63] In his typically elliptical, self-conscious, Derridean style of writing, Stiegler at once wants to demonstrate that technicity and humanity are co-originary, but also worries that using backwards-facing rational/technological categorizations to prove that humanity is originally technological could cause the investigation to founder under a paradox of self-affirmation. The worry being that we cannot use what we have now (technicity) to prove that we have always had it. He writes:

> The question of origin is that of principles, of the most ancient, of that which, ever since and forever, establishes what is in its being. The question of origin is the question of being. If the stakes are the being of the human, the origin of the human defining what it is, its "nature," its *phusis,* one will have to know how to distinguish, in the human, between what it essentially is, what establishes it from the beginning and for all time as the human, and what it is accidentally; that is, one will have to sort out the essential predicates from the accidental. We will also have to know what the stakes of humanity's becoming are. We can already sense that these distinctions, which are necessary on the subject of any being and for the discourse authorizing them (ontology), risk breaking

[63] Ibid. p. 91

> down on "the being that we ourselves are," should we succeed in establishing that technicity is essential to humanity.[64]

While he is of the view that "technicity is essential to humanity," it's also the case that some modes and expressions of technicity are "accidental." They could be otherwise; they are not necessary. For example, while we do fundamentally rely on *techne* to order and interpret the world (otherwise being could not know itself[65]) technology need not be a force of commodification and oppression. It could—albeit improbably—just as well be liberatory. These current modalities are accidental, but the structure of technological being is necessary.

He also affirms my claim (which he obviously made before me) that philosophy has been reluctant to think about technology in a generous way. He writes: "Here I would like to warn the reader of this difficulty and of its necessity: at its very origin and up until now, philosophy has repressed technics as an object of thought. It is the unthought."[66] In an ironic gesture of resistance and refusal that belies its foundational assumptions, because philosophy always already thinks of technology as repressive and alienating, philosophy therefore instinctively represses any serious and charitable discussion of technology.

In sum, Steigler's work represents a countercurrent in the history of philosophy. He treats technology as not necessarily corrupting and alienating, but only as circumstantially and

---

[64] Ibid. p. 95-96

[65] He compares this notion to Kant's idea about mathematical structures being fundamental to human knowledge later on he says: "There is, then, an originary knowledge, without which no knowledge of any kind would be possible, as Kant would repeat…" Ibid. p. 99. In this section he also asserts that Plato ascribed to a similar theory of co-originary knowledge based off of his theory of recollection, specifically as it is described in *Meno.* This discussion may be found on pages 98-100.

[66] Ibid. p. IX

accidentally alienating. However, he is not the only contemporary philosophy figure to think against the current.

2.3 Foucault and Technological Particularism

In the work of the famed 20th century philosopher and historian of ideas Michel Foucault we may also perceive hints of a heterodox and existentially-inflected philosophy of technology. A unique aspect of Foucault's use of the word technology—and an observation that has been made by some philosophers of technology[67]—is that Foucault seems to use the word in different ways throughout the course of his intellectual career. These "different ways" correspond roughly with differing phases of Foucault's intellectual development.[68] The task of this section will not be to categorize the phases of Foucault's thought, or even to create a taxonomy of all of the ways in which Foucault thinks about technology, but rather to identify the way (or ways) in which Foucault's use of technology cuts against the grain of Socratic Suspicion.

The first relevant aspect to consider is that *in general* Foucault does not attempt to articulate a general account of the essence of technology that treats it *a priori* with dismissiveness. While Foucault's earlier work displays a residual Heideggerian humanistic

---

[67] See, for example, Sawicki, Jana. 'Heidegger and Foucault: Escaping technological nihilism.' In *Foucault and Heidegger: Critical Encounters*, ed. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, 55–73. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. In this chapter Jana Sawicki argues convincingly that Foucault's use of the concept of technology is usually "particularistic" and concerned with individual instances rather than making sweeping generalizations about the nature of technology.

[68] This is the major claim of Michael C. Behrent's article "Foucault and Technology." This article is extremely illuminating, and will be referred to continuously throughout this section. Michael C. Behrent (2013) 'Foucault and Technology,' *History and Technology*, 29:1, 54-104

techno-skepticism, his later work—especially post-1973[69]—eschews this way of thinking and supplants it with an "ambivalent," Nietzsche-informed attitude towards technology. However, for the sake of being thorough and methodical, some remarks will be made on Foucault's early skeptical and crypto-Heideggerian thoughts on technology.

Foucault's early work displays this less developed and nuanced way of thinking through and about technology, and often reverts to the Marxist or Heideggerian language of discussing how technology and technique "alienate" humans from themselves and not much else. A smattering of these types of remarks may be found in his early writings about psychology. For example, in his 1957 *La recherche scientifique et la psychologie* (translated as *Mental Illness and Psychology* in the "California Edition") Foucault frequently writes passages such as "techniques of psychology are, like man himself, alienable."[70] He is concerned here with how technological thinking is often a form of social control that alienates humans from themselves, but also is often alien from its own stated purpose. He explicitly addresses Frederick Taylor's development of "scientific management" as an example *par excellence* of the dysfunctionality and alienating tendencies of technoscientific thought: "The psychology of the adaption of man to work is born of forms of non-adaption that followed the development of Taylorism in America and Europe."[71] However, these are not the most explicit claims that the early Foucault makes about technique and alienation. In his 1954 version of *Maladie mentale et personnalité* Foucault writes: "The contemporary world makes schizophrenia possible… because man makes such use of his techniques that he can no longer see himself in them."[72] As Behrent makes extremely

[69] See Ibid. 57
[70] Ibid. 72
[71] Ibid.
[72] Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 89. 1954.

clear throughout his work, this dismissive attitude expressed by Foucault during this time is hardly unique, and Behrent even goes so far as to suggest that it was "garden variety" thinking for his time and intellectual context:

> The negative perspective on technology that one finds in Foucault's writing is, I argue, hardly an original one, at least in terms of its core sentiments. Rather, it is symptomatic of a widespread intellectual skepticism about the emergence of a 'technological society' in the decades following World War II. This debate addressed not only the new machines and consumer products that were flooding the market, but also technological approaches to the organization of human groups, particularly the industrial workplace. Concerns about these developments constitute, I argue, the backdrop to Foucault's understanding of technology. In other words, for all the brilliance and fine theoretical grain of his arguments, Foucault's basic attitude belonged to the garden variety of postwar intellectual anxiety about technology.[73]

Over time, however, Foucault distanced himself from this discourse of technological alienation that had prevailed in Post-World War Two intellectual circles, and even moved towards the "ambivalent" attitude towards technology which will now be examined.

In a lecture given in 1976 Foucault clearly articulated his intent to decouple thinking about technology and the latent moral assumptions that are so often attached to it. He states in this lecture that his task is "to show in what directions one can develop an analysis of power that is not simply a juridical, negative conception of power, but a *technological* conception of

[73] Behrent 58

power."[74] He then describes this "technological conception of power" as one that is emancipated from "the primacy of the rule and the prohibition." In these comments Foucault is clearly thinking about "technology" as that which is antithetical to the "juridical" and the "negative." In other words, technology is conceived as value-neutral, and possibly even liberatory. Technology is not simply that which restricts and constrains, but potentially that which opens up and releases—or at least he strove to articulate this dynamic new conceptualization of thinking about technology; a way of thinking that deviates from associating technologies simply with "subjection." While technologies may be used to incarcerate and subject, they are multifunctional in nature, and may just as easily be that which allows one to explore the boundaries and limits of human experience. Foucault's biography certainly attests to an intense willingness to use a wide range of devices to experiment with the human experience and to understand the "technologies of the self."

Another relevant aspect to consider when thinking about Foucault and technology is his so-called "non-humanism." This non-humanism is one feature of his thought that allows his thinking to expand beyond the earlier mentioned "garden variety" techno-skepticism that he exemplified earlier in his life. By attempting to be being broadly non-humanistic in his writings, he is less susceptible to falling into the language of "dehumanization" that existential thinkers are so often prone to use. In eluding humanistic discourse, he is able to effectively evade the humanizing/dehumanizing dichotomy that so often snares and oversimplifies thought. Foucault's work is subtle enough to recognize that meaning and expression is more complex and

[74] Foucault, "Les Mailles du Pouvoir," 183 and 184.

irreducible to such a dichotomy, but rather advocates a de-centered approach, one which recognizes the slippages, interstices, and elusiveness of knowledge and being.

While recognizing the complexities of power, he also recognizes that technology may often be a generative way of thinking about power, expression, and creation. What are some examples of ways in which Foucault thinks that technologies may be generative? Throughout his life it is extremely well-documented that Foucault explored the possibilities that technologies afforded for human life, often in ways that many would consider to be transgressive or countercultural. Nevertheless, Foucault tried to reclaim technologies of power and re-experience them as opportunities for pleasure. In his own words, Foucault explicitly looked forward to and sought to promote "a culture which invents ways of relating, types of existence, types of exchanges between individuals that are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms."[75] In order to escape "existing cultural forms" (such as the Socratic Suspicion that I have written about) and to experience "new types of existence" Foucault kept abreast of technological advancements, be they automotive or biopharmaceutical.[76] Indeed, Foucault famously traveled away from what he viewed to be the "repressive" culture of 1960s France to explore the more "liberated" culture that was then burgeoning in California. It was there that he enthusiastically engaged with several newly developed technology-reliant "techniques of the self," including his experience on the newly created biopharmaceutical product lysergic acid (LSD), which he described as a "great experience, one of the most

[75] This quote may be found in: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4284-the-use-of-pleasures-foucault-on-sexual-practice

[76] At the beginning of Behrent's article, for example, Behrent describes Foucault's love for the Jaguar car that he drove and the possibilities for travel that it opened up.

important of my life."[77] Clearly Foucault believed that technological advancements and scientific "breakthroughs" opened up new pathways for self-discovery and explorative self-understanding, even if the methods through which he pursued this belief might now be dismissed as naïve hippie idealism. Notwithstanding, his development of the ideas of "techniques" and "technologies of the self," and his refusal to attach himself to a general account of technology as inherently alienating, make him a very interesting figure to consider in the context of this dissertation. Rather than falling back on the garden variety Socratic Suspicion that he relied on in his younger days, Foucault's technological particularism made him a figure who went beyond mediation and recognized that certain technologies may very well abet the process of self-discovery and self-knowledge. While he did not comment exclusively on the internet or the algorithm, it is likely that he would find in it at least some small opportunity to go "beyond existing cultural forms" and to generate novel modalities of self and world experience.

The ability to interpret the technological world in its particularity and situationality rather than in its generality is Foucault's second most important breakthrough in the context of thinking about technological maieutics, and therefore will be refered back to later. His foremost notion is the idea of technologies as potentially liberating rather than alienating, and this notion will permeate the entirety of this project. With that in mind, we will now turn to the work of another French thinker who also made several salient points on the topic of technology: Gilbert Simondon.

[77] Found in "The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution" by Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, Verso Books. p. 47

2.4 Gilbert Simondon and Being *Among* and *With* Technology

The work of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989) has often been overlooked in philosophical circles, with only his major works having yet been translated into English. However, even within the limited amount of writing that is accessible to an individual who does not read French well, much may still be found for those interested in a nuanced philosophy of technology that goes beyond mere mediation. Simondon's work on technology and individuation profoundly influenced figures important to this dissertation—most prominently Stiegler and LaTour[78]—and therefore his ideas must be mentioned. This section will articulate how Simondon's theory of the préindividuel and his ontology of individuation challenge conventional dualistic and suspicion-based philosophies of technology.

First we must understand Simondon's ontology of individuation, and then it will become clear how this complicates the mediation-based model of thinking. The title of this section is taken from a passage in Simondon's 1958 *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (*On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*) in which he writes that man "is *among* the machines that operate with him."[79] While this short quote does not seem to have much content at first glance, it provides an entry-point for understanding what is unique about Simondon's theory. He

---

[78] Lindberg, Susanna."Being with Technique—Technique as Being-with: The Technological Communities of Gilbert Simondon" in Continental Philosophy Review (2019) 52:299–310. P. 299.

[79]Simondon, Gilbert. 2017. *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Translation by Cecile Malaspina and John Rogrove. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing. P. 18. Simondon's book *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* was first published in 1958 and reprinted in 2012. Its English translation by Cecile Malaspina and John Rogrove, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, only appeared in 2017.

says that the individual exists "among the machines" because "the machines" (or any technological artifacts or processes for that matter) provide the condition for the possibility of the emergence of the individual in the first place. This is the realm of the "préindividuel." Préindividuel fields are the reservoirs of resources and techniques which allow the individual to emerge as a particular individual; they provide the structures and possibilities that allow one to define who they are. However, the individual is never completely individuated, so to speak, because the process of individuation is always incomplete. There are always traces of former selves—préindividuels or préindividuel fields—left behind.

In thinking about technology as the possibility of individuation Simondon challenges the dualistic and mediation-based thinking about technology that falsely alienates *us* from *it.* Simondon speaks of being *with* technology. His thinking about being-with technology, about having an authentic technical life, is made most clear in his discussion of the craftsmen, the engineer, and the technician in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. In this discussion he develops a sort of hierarchy which traces the modes technical life from one that is "infantile" to one that is "understanding" and "at the same level" of technologies. He wants to challenge the way of thinking that "looks down" at technologies in order to develop an account that more accurately traces how our being and becoming is ultimately technological.

Controversially—and certainly in contravention to the attitudes of the ancient Greeks—Simondon thinks of the craftsman's relationship to technology as "infantile" because it has simply been learned by rote—unconsciously and unreflectively—in the same way that an infant learns basic developmental skills such as crawling or speaking. This leads to a lack of adaptable

and original thinking about being with technology.[80] While he thinks of the craftsman as having a greater relation to technology than, say, a factory floor worker, he still thinks that there is a lack of any serious and authentic understanding of technical life.

Secondly, Simondon discusses the figure that he describes as "the engineer." While the engineer is closer to the craftsman in terms of an authentic being-with technology, their mode of thinking technology is still impoverished. Simondon—using language similar to that which may be found in the earlier writing of French existentialist Gabriel Marcel[81]—argues that the engineer's mode is impoverished because the engineer still ultimately reduces the meaning of technology to a bare notion of functionality. As Lindberg writes:

> The *engineer* is not the perfect technician either, since in the modern industrial world s/he is often just as alienated as the factory worker and the capitalist, who figure alienation from work in the first place. None of them relates to the technical object as such, but only in function of its economical value. Simondon criticizes alienation in the industrial world in another way than Heidegger and Marx: Against their claim that technique alienates man, Simondon claims that modern alienation is man's alienation from the machine and the machine's own alienation of what it can really do and how it can evolve towards new uses.[82]

---

[80] Ibid. 106–109

[81] Here I think specifically about Marcel's essay "Concrete Approaches to Investigating the Ontological Mystery" in which Marcel critiques how the contemporary world evaluates all meaning in terms of "function."

[82] Lindberg 301

Lindberg's wonderfully crafted phrase that "modern alienation is man's alienation from the machine" perfectly gets at what makes Simondon a relevant figure in this discussion. His writing does not rely on the starting assumption that technology is alien or other, or even that it is susceptible to causing humans to become alienated from themselves. Rather, he thinks the optimal (and perhaps even originary) human-technology relationship is one that is radically de-alienated. The problem of alienation is not a problem with technology as such, but rather is a human issue. We misdirect and deceive ourselves when we try to place the blame for the existential problems of human life on "external" objects. The optimal mode of being-with technology is one that thinks of technology as a site of truth-disclosure and self-understanding. Thus, he introduces a category beyond that of the engineer: "the technician."

The technician is the "pure individual"[83] who operates *with* and *as* the machines. Rather than thinking of the machines (a catch-all term for technological artifacts) as "black boxes" that produce and rely upon a mysterious sundry of inputs and outputs, the technician is with the machines as if he is among others. The technician "liberates" the machine from the "enslavement" of being thought of as pure utility.[84] In an interesting and philosophically heterodox move, Simondon reverses the direction of technological subjugation: instead of being enslaved by the machines, it is we that enslave the machines. Simondon—in language previously unfamiliar—even introduces the idea of "salvation" for technological artifacts in an interview with Anne Kéhickian in which he describes the ability to "Sauver l'objet technique."[85]

---

[83] Simondon, Gilbert. 2013. *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. Paris: Jérôme Millon. p. 340-341
[84] Phrasing inspired by Lindberg 302
[85] Simondon, Gilbert. 2014. Sur la technique. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. p. 447-454

(That is, roughly, "to save the technical object.") If we extend this line of thought that Simondon introduces the existential consequences promise to be monumental. If we expand our thinking and go beyond the standard philosophical-technological phrasing of technology as "alienation" and "mediation" this (presumably) opens new avenues of being-with-others and being-with ourselves. In saving the technical we may very well save ourselves.

But how—assuming we wanted to—could we become "technicians" in the Simondonian sense? He does provide some clues for how this may be accomplished, and they come in the form of suggesting what we might call an "attitude adjustment." Similar to Foucault, these bits of advice rely on a certain brand of non-humanism that I do not necessarily agree with, but certainly think is relevant in to considering ways to go beyond mediation in thinking about technology. Simondon's suggestions towards becoming a technician involve 1) a move of humility and 2) a newfound attitude of respect.

First will be addressed what seems to be a move of humility that Simondon advocates. Specifically, Simondon thinks that the pure individual—the technician—does not think of themselves as an "overseer" of technology, but rather as "being-with" at the same level as technology. Upon opening ourselves to being willing to be with technologies on a non-hierarchical level, then new possibilities for interpretation and meaning will arise, as we will become enfolded in a more complete matrix of meaning in the world; one that does not exile everything that is non-human (or, perhaps, non-living) into the realm of deficiency, inauthenticity, and even non-meaningfulness. The technician does not direct the machines "from above." When describing the "technical life" that he imagines the technician as living, Simondon writes: "Technical life, however, does not consist in overseeing machines, but in existing at the

same level as a being that takes charge of the relation between them, capable of being coupled, simultaneously or successively, with several machines."[86] Several aspects of this quote stand out. Firstly, and most obviously, is the perspectival shift from overseer to equal. What this brings about is a *receptiveness* to new modes of being, or, as he writes, a willingness to "being coupled, simultaneously or successively, with several machines." While we in the contemporary world are already coupled simultaneously with all manner of visible and invisible technologies—algorithms and avatars and such—the philosopher tends to still resist this fact and tries to assume an unattainable external position outside of the technological world. This resistance—Simondon suggests—in actuality *works against* the purity that philosophers try to pursue by exempting themselves from technological being, and he rather suggests that recognizing and receiving our status as being enfolded together with "the machines" is actually a *more* propitious step towards achieving philosophical purity.

The second suggestion of Simondon's is similar to the first, and follows naturally from it. Upon condescending to be with machines as relative equals, Simondon hopes that we will then come to "respect" the technical object.[87] In respecting the technological we come to experience a creative care about the world in which we are—the world which we shape and which shapes us. In vaguely Heideggerian language, Simondon summons us to "liberate" and "save" the technical object, and in saving the object we are doing work to save ourselves because we are never radically other than it anyway. In Muriel Combes' work on Simondon she conveys this view of Simondon's very clearly: "Without a doubt, the ontological postulate, or rather, the ontogenetic postulate, central to a philosophy of individuation, is that individuals consist in relations, and as a

[86] Simondon (2017, p. 140)
[87] Simondon (2014, p. 204)

consequence, relation has the status of being and constitutes being."[88] Being with technology in this respectful way is crucial because being with technology is precisely what we always already are in the first place. By this hypothesis, being with technology is ontogenetic; it's not other than us, it is us. As Combes writes, it "constitutes being." If care for being is at the heart of existential thought, then care for those entities which have been erstwhile dismissed as "things" is also (and the same as) the work of the existential philosopher.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

Stiegler, Foucault, and Simondon have all suggested a more existentially open way of thinking about being with technology, and their thoughts are in the background of my thinking about online algorithms as a possible form of existential maieutics that contravenes the Socratic Suspicion that still holds sway in philosophy today. While these thinkers never engaged directly or extensively with the existential question of the algorithm or online life, their language and attitudes will certainly shape the reflections that will be found later in this dissertation.

[88] Combes, Muriel. 2013. *Gilbert Simondon and the philosophy of the transindividual*. Cambridge: MIT Press. p. 21

3. TURNING TOWARDS THE ALGORITHM: AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM AND A CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIAL-MEDIA ALGORITHM AS A SITE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE*

3.1 Introduction

Now that some general background has been provided on the history of the philosophy of technology, this chapter will begin turning towards the specific topic of this dissertation: the possibility of self-knowledge in the age of the online social-media algorithm. In order to provide a holistic and circumspect account of the existential stakes of the social-media algorithm, this chapter will—perhaps surprisingly—present an argument criticizing the social-media algorithm specifically on the grounds that it could *potentially* undermine the individual user's ability to make authentic choices (and therefore to pursue self-knowledge) while online. However, this critique is conditional: it only applies if the user is unaware of the active presence of the "echo-chambering" algorithms that operate behind the scenes of online life. The reason that I have chosen to include a chapter that dissents from the main thesis of this dissertation is threefold fold: 1) I want to openly acknowledge the limits of my claim. Specifically, I do not believe that the curated online experience is *always* something that facilitates self-knowledge. In certain cases, like those that this chapter argues are possible, the naïve online individual may not realize that there are mathematical forces at work behind their online experience, and that these forces are designed to generate an agreeable and addicting experience based off of the user's previous online activities. In these cases, and as this chapter explicitly acknowledges, the user is indeed being "mediated" upon insofar as they think the curated portrait they are presented with

*Some portions of this chapter are reprinted with permission from: Christopher Black, "Choosing For Yourself in the Age of the Social Media Echo-Chamber: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections on Online Algorithms"; in Mélissa Fox-Muraton (ed.), *Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics.* Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series vol. 41, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020, pp. 107-124. Copyright 2020 by Walter de Gruyter.

represents everyone's online reality in general. Due to their lack of awareness, they are "acted upon" rather than being participatory actors. Only when the user is aware of the basic fact of the existence of the background algorithm is it necessary to go "beyond mediation" to interpret and understand the online experience. 2) I believe that examining the existential ramifications of the contemporary algorithmic online experience is one of the most important existential questions of our time, and therefore it should be examined from all angles, both as potentially "good" and as potentially "bad." While I think that the possibilities for self-knowledge online have been *severely* under-recognized in the existential literature, I do recognize that acclaiming the positive existential possibilities should be modulated so as to be more fair and comprehensive. 3) I want to anticipate rebuttals in advance and demonstrate that I am fully aware of the possibility of this type of existential-minded rebuttal.

The chapter following this one—chapter four—will shift gears in order to make three specific arguments regarding how the social-media algorithm can facilitate the pursuit of self-knowledge. However, the arguments presented in both of these two chapters converge on one common point: the mediation-based theories of thinking about technology, which are rooted in Socratic Suspicion, are inadequate when thinking about online social-media algorithms. Given that the activity of the online algorithm is the self presenting itself to itself, it is much more efficacious to think about the activity of online life as an exploration of the manifold ways in which the self can relate to itself and its past rather than thinking of it as the self being acted upon totally passively by some purely "external" force.

Before presenting these arguments, though, it will first be helpful to examine the nature of the online algorithm, and to outline (in non-technical terms) how they work and what they are meant to accomplish. Therefore, the next section will briefly foray into this territory and try to

clarify what is meant by the "online algorithm" and examine how they became so important in online life.

3.2 General Description of the Online Algorithm

While this is not a dissertation in statistics or mathematics, this short section will attempt to present a broad overview of why online algorithms have become ubiquitous in the online world. It will also briefly present an overview of how these algorithms are *intended* to shape user experience, which is often at odds with how it *actually* does shape (or misshape) user experience. The following section—3.3—will focus much more closely on the philosophical/existential dangers of this type of technology while also identifying some key terms and concepts.

Before continuing I would like to acknowledge that other technological functions—such as machine learning, user design, and data collection—are also actual methods which create similar scenarios to the ones that I have described (and will describe) as being algorithmically generated. However, in order to keep the scope of this dissertation manageable and as focused as possible, this project will concern itself solely with the algorithmization of online life.

A key term to understand when discussing the intended purpose of the online algorithm is the concept of "relevance." Marketers and platform programmers alike strive to present the user with content that is most likely to be "relevant" to their interests. The need for this filtration mechanism is fairly obvious: with literally hundreds of millions of posts across a range of online platforms being made every single day, if there were no digital curator then the user would be inundated and massively overwhelmed by random, "irrelevant" material.[89] This would, of

[89] For a running list of posts across platforms (as well as a very general overview of the use and function of the social media algorithm) see: Barnhart, B. (2021, March 31). *How to Rise Above*

course, make the user less likely to stay on the platform, and thereby cost the company potential advertisement revenue. Therefore, in order to keep users actively engaged while on the platform—and therefore more likely to stay on the platform—companies, like Facebook, began to develop algorithms that promoted material that encouraged "meaningful engagement" of the individual over all other content. In 2018 Facebook even explicitly stated that "meaningful engagement" was the target and objective of their algorithmic programming.[90] Meaningful engagement is content that is likely to appeal to the user's pre-existing interests and preferences while also being likely to prompt them to engage in a discussion about it. For example, if a user has shown a strong affinity for corgi puppies (which many users express) through searches, likes, videos watched, and comments made, then there is a strong likelihood that future content that is selected for them will be germane to this identified interest.

In order to provide a very general definition of the social media algorithm in mind we must keep this notion of "relevance" in mind. In the early days of social media content on a user's "feed" was presented based on publication time rather than based on any qualitative metrics that reflected how likely it was that the user would be interest in it. However, for the above stated reasons, users feed content across platforms came to be curated by an algorithm that presented content based on "relevance" and not publication time. This general insight about how "relevance" came to be prioritized over publication time can be used to help us formulate a very basic definition about what is meant when the term "social media algorithm" is used throughout

---

Social Media Algorithms. Sprout Social. https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-algorithms/.

[90] The following article contains a helpful diagram that visualizes milestone advancements in Facebook's algorithm, and shows the current status of it. It also shows the 2018 objective of "meaningful engagement" that Facebook stated at that time: Cooper, P. (2021, February 23). *How the Facebook Algorithm Works in 2021 and How to Work With It*. Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard. https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-algorithm/.

this dissertation. We can define the social media algorithm as follows: A way of sorting posts in a users' feed based on relevancy instead of publication time.[91] In other words, social media algorithms are tools used by social media platforms to prioritize content that users will be more likely to want to see.

Of course, the usage of the online algorithm is not restricted to the social media sphere. It is a way of organizing content presentation throughout the entirety of the online world, and the scope of the usage of online algorithms should be acknowledged. When you search for some information on a search engine the responses will be algorithmically tailored to mesh with what the search engine "thinks" you are looking for rather than what you literally search for. It, of course, will also suggest "sponsored advertisements" too, which often masquerade—and are deliberately misrepresented—as legitimate search results. Moreover, the autocorrect function may "correct" a search query that you have entered based on what you have tended to search for in the past. Sometimes the auto-corrections can be benign and humorous, but at other times they may be shameful. They may remind you of something about yourself that you would rather forget. (This is a possibility that I will discuss extensively in the fourth chapter's discussion of "digital recollection" and the possibilities for unsettling self-knowledge while online.) Your data from the past is always actively encroaching on the present possibilities for learning and understanding, which is what makes this technology unique and distinctive. In order to expand our set of definitions beyond the above one that defines "social media algorithms," we should also briefly try to define "online algorithms" in general terms. While an algorithm in the broadest technical sense is often defined as "a sequence of steps to be carried out for a required output from a certain given input," if we are to produce a more philosophically-inflected

[91] This definition is inspired by the above mentioned Barnhart article.

definition of the online algorithm we can define it as "a way of organizing online users' search results and experiences in a way that is most likely to reflect the user's interests and desires." This is why a search engine like Google is far more successful than one like Bing: it is much more likely to return a result that is reflective of the one that the searcher consciously or unconsciously wanted to see returned to them.

All of the information contained in this short summary section converges on one common point: the online algorithm in general and the social media algorithm in particular are *generally* meant[92] to provide the user with tailored "relevant" or "meaningful" content over and above the wide range of other content that is available for viewing.

One who takes a more cynical approach, and who is skeptical of the oftentimes capitalistic or otherwise politicized nature of an algorithm's programming may replace the word "provide" with "ensnare." This dissertation puts those possibilities for "hijacking" or "manipulation" by interest groups aside (while recognizing their reality) and rather considers the existential ramifications of the online algorithm considered in its purest possible sense. By the "purest possible sense" I mean that this dissertation considers the question of the online algorithm *in principle,* and will assume that the algorithms being considered are mostly neutral

[92] I write "generally meant" because many online algorithms are not *absolutely* devoted to satisfying the user's desires. That is, they will deliberately fail to present certain user-desired content sometimes, especially is that desired content is deemed to be illegal or against a platform's policies. Obviously, this selective censorship/exclusion of certain content leads to controversy. For example, currently (May 2021) Facebook is embroiled in a scandal because they had been excluding content that promoted the idea that COVID-19 is a man-made virus that was developed in a Chinese laboratory, but they have recently reversed course and are no longer excluding this content. To selectively "exclude" or "include" content requires a modification of the algorithm. See the following article for information on this particular controversy: Hatmaker, Taylor. (2021, May 28). *Facebook changes misinfo rules to allow posts claiming Covid-19 is man-made*. TechCrunch. https://techcrunch.com/2021/05/28/facebook-covid-man-made-lab-theory/.

and are intended primarily to provide the user with the content most likely to appeal to their pre-existing preferences. This assumption—while admittedly naïve and idealistic—will help overcome the problem of situationality[93] and will allow for a more broad-based existential examination of the online algorithm *as such*.

The following section questions whether or not a social media user can really experience "meaning" (as brought about by free choice) while online if they are trapped in an algorithmically-generated echo-chamber *unbeknownst to them*. As a final reminder—and one that bears repeating—this critique of the online algorithm only applies if the user is unaware of the algorithms working to present the users with interests and desires that they have already self-identified. If the user is aware of the algorithms then I believe that they can serve as avenues for maieutic self-examination and Socratic recollection, which is what I will argue at length in chapter four.

Now we will turn to the argument that criticizes social media algorithms at a fundamental, existential level.

3.3 A Kierkegaardian Argument Against Social Media Algorithms

Since Hubert Dreyfus' Kierkegaardian reflections on the suppressive effects that the Internet has had on individuality and on the ways in which it is structured to promote anonymity and conformity,[94] a moderate amount of scholarship has appeared that considers the existential dangers of online life from a Kierkegaardian perspective. Relevant and compelling papers have been written that connect Kierkegaard's thinking to social media via topics ranging from

[93] I.e. only being able to consider particular instances of online algorithms being used rather than addressing the concept in general.
[94] Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs Commitment in the Present Age," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1999, pp. 96-109.

surveillance and social control,[95] concerns about the "post-truth" era,[96] the potential for algorithms to be abused by authoritarian leaders,[97] the "existential dialectics" of online social life,[98] ephemerality,[99] or the Kierkegaardian category of recollection as applied to social media,[100] to name a few. However, this chapter will address a topic that has not yet been addressed by Kierkegaard scholarship, the social media algorithm, and it will argue that the self-obscuring echo-chambering effect of social media algorithms threatens to undercut that which serves as the foundation of Kierkegaardian ethical subjectivity: authentic existential choice. In short, this chapter will argue that the dangers of the crowd, inauthentic selfhood, and mass media that Kierkegaard warned about in *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *The Point of View*, and other works have in many ways been potentially hijacked and rearticulated by the insidious, abstract force that is the online algorithm. What appears to the social media user to be an array of options amongst which to freely choose, is instead a mathematically predetermined set of options tailored to mesh with preferences or interests that

---

[95] Weissman, Jeremy. "P2P Surveillance in the Global Village," *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 21, 2019, pp. 29-47.
[96] Hongladarom, Soraj. "Anonymity and Commitment: How do Kierkegaard and Dreyfus Fare in the Era of Facebook and 'Post-Truth'?", *AI and Society*, vol. 34, 2019, pp. 289-299.
[97] Timcke, Scott. *Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st-Century American Life*. 1st ed., Bristol University Press, 2021. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1c9hmm6. Accessed 18 May 2021.
[98]Verstrynge, Karl. "Being and Becoming a Virtual Self: Taking Kierkegaard into the Realm of Online Social Interaction," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2011, pp. 303-319.
[99] Lombaard, Christo. "Fleetingness and media-ted existence. From Kierkegaard on the newspaper to Broderick on the Internet," *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research*, vol. 35(1), 2009, pp. 17-29.
[100] Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson and Karl Verstrynge, "'Marvel at Nothing': Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Category of Recollection through Social Media Services," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2015, pp. 191-217.

they have already explicitly or implicitly selected.[101] This leads to what is often referred to as a feedback loop, echo-system, or echo-chamber. If the user is unaware that the algorithm is actively "curating" and "tailoring" their experience to mesh with their pre-established interests, this could lead to a problem of authenticity and self-knowledge. When immersed in such a loop the user is never (or at least rarely) challenged to consider new or alternative possibilities, but is always already being reinforced in his or her view of the world. The user's perspective on reality, at least as it is presented through online content,[102] is essentially preformed and ever-ossifying, and the presence of this force is often unknown to the users themselves. The potential existential consequences of these algorithms are dire, especially if the free act of choice is the bedrock of our ethical lives. At its most extreme it would mean that—at least to the extent that one lives in and through social media—there is no possibility for authentic self-choice, only the illusion of choice, and therefore only limited possibilities (if any) for robust ethical subjectivity on algorithm-using social media sites and online platforms.

It will be argued that Kierkegaard would be opposed to this infinite reinforcement of pre-held views on first principles; that risk, possibility, and challenge are necessary conditions for authentic choice to occur, and that the capacity for authentic choice is a condition for the possibility for ethical subjectivity in the first place. Kierkegaard's authorial method modeled the nature of ethical choice by presenting the reader with a wide range of pseudonymous authorial voices to choose among, and this praxis in existential choice will be used as a model for thinking about existential choice online. Towards the end of displaying the existential danger of social

---

[101] Cohen, James N. "Exploring Echo-Systems: How Algorithms Shape Immersive Media Environments," *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, vol. 10 (2), 2018, pp. 139-151. Pages 139-143 are particularly helpful towards understanding algorithm creation methods.

[102] "Content" here refers to features such as advertisement, news feed content, recommended videos, etc.

media algorithms in a Kierkegaardian light, first social media algorithms and their function will be described, then Kierkegaard's thoughts on authentic choice and ethical subjectivity will be presented, and finally this way of thinking will be applied to the ethical subject insofar as he exists as a denizen of algorithm-using social media platforms.

3.4 Social Media Algorithms: Intrusively Invisible, Intentional, and Insidious

The attentive users of social media platforms, and digital media platforms more generally,[103] have likely noticed uncanny events occur during their time online. They may notice that advertisements for a product that they considered purchasing yesterday are now appearing on the Facebook News Feeds' today, or that their recommendations on Netflix and YouTube are disconcertingly similar—if not identical—to content that they, their friends, or people in their demographic class have recently consumed on that same platform (or other platforms). It is almost as if a unique "genre" had been created and tailored in order to appeal to their expected tastes and preferences. The individual who gets this uncanny sense is not succumbing to the delusions of the paranoid, but is instead perceiving the visible effects of the way that algorithms tailor content that is presented to the online user based on of their past activity, their perceived preferences, and their likely interests. The content that is presented to them is curated and calculated in such a way as to maximally appeal to their likely pre-existing sensibilities, thereby increasing the probability that they will stay active on the platform as long as possible and thus

[103] Nick Srnicek defines digital media platforms most broadly as "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects." This definition, which will be used in this dissertation, includes platforms algorithm-using platforms such as Netflix and Hulu, and not just traditional algorithm-using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017, p. 43.

ultimately generate more revenue for the platform. The user is "quantized"[104] by these online services in such a way that their online and offline (*i.e.* GPS tracked location and spending habits) activity may be mapped and tracked in order to render them as predictable as is mathematically possible. However, the active interference of algorithms in curating one's digital life remains opaque to most online users, and a recent study of Facebook users even showed that "more than half of the participants (62.5%) were not aware of the News Feed curation algorithm's existence at all."[105] Recent issues, such as Cambridge Analytica's data harvesting operation, have possibly made people a bit more cognizant of online "dataveillance" practices, but a noteworthy lacuna still exists in popular awareness as well as in the Kierkegaardian literature on this topic.

The targeted advertisements and recommendations that users experience online are but one outgrowth of the larger contemporary phenomenon of "dataveillance," but one that should be especially worrisome when thinking in a Kierkegaardian register. Two features of online algorithms will be discussed—their intrusive invisibility and their intentional structure—and then in the following sections these considerations will be overlaid onto a Kierkegaardian examination of the primitive nature of ethical subjectivity as such.

First, dataveillance techniques geared towards algorithm creation are intrusively invisible in that they surreptitiously monitor elements of one's life that the individual is often not aware of. A recent survey indicates that teenagers spend almost nine hours per day on social media,[106]

---

[104] This term is borrowed from Cohen, "Exploring Echo-Systems," p. 141.
[105] Eslami, Motahhare et al, "'I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her]': Reasoning about Invisible Algorithms in News Feeds," *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems,* 2015, pp. 153-162.
[106] "The Common Sense Census: Media Use By Tweens and Teens," p. 13. See also the article "Teens Spend Nearly Nine Hours Every Day Consuming Media" written by Hayley Tsukayama and published by the *Washington Post* on Nov. 3, 2015.

and the majority of online activity during this time is activity that is tracked and used to generate predictive algorithms. This tracked activity includes all views, likes, reads, searches, comments, shares, amounts of time viewing certain pages, and so on down to the tiniest interactions, sometimes even including supposedly "private" messages.[107] All of this information is compiled into large mathematical databases. Beyond this, negative media use time, or time spent away from social media platforms, is also often factored into predictive algorithm generation. This can include travel habits, offline spending habits, sleep patterns, and so on, all to create a more complete profile of the individual as a media-consuming entity. This concerted compilation and mathematization of user data is the intrusiveness that is also essentially invisible to the one being intruded upon. Algorithms, even as depicted in the movie *The Social Network* (2010), are presented as shadowy forces that only those initiated into the esoteric world of technology (those we might offhandedly call "techies") can hope to understand and control.[108] The rest of us are merely encompassed by it and subject to its mysterious guidance.

The intended purpose of these algorithms is more existentially interesting, and perhaps even more troubling, in that they function to effectively impose a limit on the possibilities of choice that an online user can make or perceive, and all the while purporting to generate a more "authentic" or "positive" display of a user's interests or desires. The goal of the algorithm is to predict "likely choices"[109] and to generate a "positive response," *i.e.* the goal is to present users with options that they already identify with or are deemed likely to identify with, so that they remain on the platform and begin to use it as a location for identity expression and formation. For example, a person of a certain age living in a certain location may have a certain product or a

[107] Cohen, "Exploring Echo-Systems," p. 141
[108] Cohen makes a similar observation on p. 140.
[109] Cohen, "Exploring Echo-Systems," p. 142

certain political campaign continually advertised to him, because the algorithm indicates that such a person who satisfies certain categories should be interested in certain purchases or certain political views.[110] Clicking on one of these targeted bits of content reinforces the loop. If this is the algorithmically-generated world (however it may look) that is continually broadcast to the user online, it may gradually become the perspective on the world that they fall into; the life-view that they begin to identify with. There is a serious existential issue presented here. Did they ever authentically choose this online life-view as their own in any robust sense? Did they ever even have the chance to choose for themselves how to live online? Were their "choices" morally relevant, passionate choices in the Kierkegaardian sense? These are the questions that need to be considered. In order to address these questions we need to understand the significance that Kierkegaard places on authentic choice in his thinking about the nature of ethical life.

3.5 The Fundamental Significance of Existential Choice in Kierkegaard's Ethics

Kierkegaard, both in the general nature of his polyvocal authorial method as well as in many of his writings, emphasized the absolute significance of free, authentic choice as a necessary constitutive element of ethical subjectivity as such. Indeed, some basic concepts that even the most fledgling Kierkegaard reader will associate with him are "passion" and "commitment," ideas fundamentally bound up with ideas of authenticity and existential choice. Consider first the polyvocal, pseudonymous method that Kierkegaard employed throughout the

[110] The algorithmic methods employed in determining what products ought to be marketed to which people evokes thoughts of the father who, in 2011, learned that his daughter was pregnant because Target began sending pregnancy related items advertisements to their household. Their algorithm determined that because she was purchasing large amounts of scentless lotions and soaps, among other indicator items, that she was likely pregnant, and began sending germane advertisements to the address linked to their spending account. See "How Target Figured Out a Teen Girl was Pregnant Before Her Father Did" on Forbes.com, author Kashmir Hill, date of publication Feb. 16, 2012.

course of his authorship. If one takes the time to scour through the Kierkegaardian corpus—including both published and unpublished[111] works—one finds references to or usages of at least 27 different pseudonyms. It is generally agreed that the purpose of Kierkegaard's use of this pseudonymous authorial method is to connect with his target audience—the single individual—via "indirect communication."[112] This method of communication is intended to "goad his readers into pursuing lives of greater inwardness and intensity, precisely so that they might begin or resume the painful, solitary task of self-examination."[113]

It can be seen, then, that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorial method itself, even before we consider the particular content of what the pseudonyms themselves had to say, functions as an existential praxis in authentic choice-making. Kierkegaard, as we know most prominently from his impassioned, polemical non-pseudonymous *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, wrote much of what he did in response to the widespread existential languor and cultural malaise that he perceived to be afflicting his society. But beyond this, he perceived that members of his society were living spiritless lives that denied the freedom and passionate inner life that was available to each one of them; a capacity that, for Kierkegaard, is always available to any spirit-endowed human. In an indictment of his society that still seems germane today, Kierkegaard

---

[111] Here, for example, one would include Petrus Minor, the author of the unpublished *Book on Adler*, or Felix de Saint Vincent the considered (although unused) author of "The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actor," among other unpublished or unused pseudonyms. See Julia Watkin, *The A to Z of Kierkegaard's Philosophy,* Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press 2001, pp. 396-406 for a more detailed list of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and the texts that each pseudonym was "responsible" for writing.

[112] Daniel Conway, "Disclosing Despair: The Role of the Pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's Existential Approach," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2017, p. 131. See also Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*, Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press 1986, pp. 171-182; also Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1993, pp. 140-148 and 254-263.

[113] Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132

claimed that the revolutionary, passionate spirit of his contemporaries had been replaced by a mathematical spirit of calculation, and that this calculative ethos undermined the development of passionate inwardness. He writes about how his contemporaries were beguiled by "spellbinding mirages,"[114] "chimerical exertions,"[115] the "seductive ambiguity of reflection,"[116] and "the calculating sensibleness of the age,"[117] but that beneath this beguilement there was a deep existential hollowness: they sacrificed passionate inner lives; lives of risk and radical self-choice. They relied on external measures, common standards, and mass media (*i.e.* the press) to tell them how to live their lives, and thus never claimed authentic existential identities for themselves. For to have a true identity, one must claim it for oneself not receive it secondhand. Kierkegaard provides an anecdote to this effect, suggesting that those beguiled by the calculative sensibility of his age failed to possess the intensity of spirit needed to claim one's own identity, which occurs through decisive action and authentic decision:

> Action and decision are just as scarce these days as is the fun of swimming dangerously for those who swim in shallow water. Just as an adult, himself reveling in the tossing waves, calls to those younger: "Come on out, just jump in quickly"—just so does decision lie in existence, so to speak (although, of course, it is in the individual), and shouts to the youth who is not yet enervated by too much reflection and overwhelmed by the delusions of reflection: "Come on out, jump in boldly." Even if it is a rash leap, if only it is decisive, and if you have the makings of a man, the danger and life's severe judgment upon your recklessness will help you to become one.[118]

---

[114] *SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69.
[115] *SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69.
[116] *SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69.
[117] *SKS* 8, 68 / *TA*, 70.
[118] *SKS* 8, 69 / *TA*, 71.

In this anecdote, and in a manner similar to the one presented in his later parable of the ice skater,[119] we see risk and uncertainty presented as necessary elements of decisive choice, and decisive choice being a sufficient condition (*i.e.* "Even if it is a rash leap, if only it is decisive…") of one claiming a robust, authentic identity. Those who stay in the "shallow waters" referenced earlier never achieve this fullness of identity because they play it safe and only ever go where pragmatic rule-followers[120] deem prudent or expeditious.

As a thinker deeply opposed to spiritual lassitude and existential languor, Kierkegaard sought to provoke an alternative mode of living, and thus adopted the pseudonymous method in order to intervene and disrupt the internal quietude that had befallen his contemporaries. As has been pointed out, through his authorial style Kierkegaard "aims to discourage his readers from reducing themselves to quantifiable bundles of desires, predictable patterns of behavior, or utilitarian preference functions. He is particularly alert to the ways in which his readers attempt to renounce, discount, or curtail their own freedom."[121] In keeping with this resistance to categorization, there is no ready-made path through which to interpret the Kierkegaardian oeuvre, and Kierkegaard—in his own voice—plead with his readers not to assume that his pseudonymous

---

[119] "If the treasure that every one covets lies far out on a very thin crust of ice, guarded by the great danger to anyone venturing so far out, whereas (let us assume this oddity which after all is odd only in the illustration) closer to shore the ice is thick and solid–in a passionate age the crowd would loudly cheer the bold, brave person who skates out on the thin ice. They would shudder for him and with him in his perilous decision, would grieve for him if he meets his death, and would idealize him if he gets the treasure. This situation would be entirely different in a reflective age devoid of passion. In mutual recognition of shared prudence, they would sensibly agree that it certainly would not be worth the trouble to skate out on such thin ice—in fact it would be foolish and ridiculous" (*SKS* 8, 69 / *TA*, 71-72).

[120] See, for critical comments on "pragmatic" thinkers, this quote: "Just as weapons were freely distributed in the age of revolution and the insignia of enterprise was conferred publicly during the crusades, so today we are everywhere lavishly regaled with pragmatic rules, a calculus of consideration, etc." (*SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69-70).

[121] Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132

voices came from the same source, or that they represented a coherent, discreet life-view:

> What has been written, then, is mine, but only insofar as I, by means of audible lines, have placed the life-view of the creating, poetically actual individuality in his mouth…thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them.[122]

This is a profound and challenging disavowal, and one that has been questioned by some scholars.[123] However, the intended philosophical function of this method—the aforementioned existential praxis—is clear, even if imperfectly implemented.[124] Assuming continuity and coherence would betoken a lazy heuristic of interpretation, and would be inconducive to facilitating the necessarily individual task of self-confrontation and self-examination. His maieutic method, akin to Socrates', requires the individual reader to struggle through the life-views propounded by the pseudonyms and—in critical self-confrontation—"give birth to themselves as

---

[122] *SKS* 7, 569-570 / *CUP1*, 625-627.

[123] Consider, the example, the following question raised by Josiah Thompson: "He implores us to forget about him and to pay attention to his characters—but he *is* his characters in so many ways…what is it that in spite of Kierkegaard's claims to the contrary makes the paternity of the pseudonymous works so clear?" Josiah Thompson, *Kierkegaard*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1973, p. 139.

[124] On the question of the success of Kierkegaard's attempt to completely separate himself from the identities of his pseudonyms see this passage from C. Stephen Evans in *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*: "Kierkegaard tells us we are to regard the pseudonymous authors as independent beings whose views are their own. However, it by no means follows from this that Kierkegaard does not some of their views, still less that he rejects their views… As a matter of fact, it is not hard to show that a good many of the opinions expressed by the pseudonyms were held by Kierkegaard himself. The method whereby this can be done is simply to compare the pseudonymous works with works that Kierkegaard wrote under his own name and with his opinions as expressed in his *Journals and Papers*... This identification is particularly tempting in the case of Johannes Climacus, who more than any other pseudonym (except Anti-Climacus), seems to express ideas that lie at the core of Kierkegaard's own thought." C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, Amherst, New York: Humanity Books 1999 pp. 7-8.

authentic individuals."[125]

But even beyond the literary methodological praxis, wherethrough Kierkegaard demonstrated the fundamental significance of authentic choice as being a necessary condition for ethical subjectivity, we also find an abundance of instances whereupon Kierkegaard—both pseudonymously and non-pseudonymously—argued that authentic choice is the fundamental groundwork of ethical life. Some passages from Climacus and Anti-Climacus' respective authorships will be presented in order to lend support to this point, as well as a passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*. As will be addressed in more detail later, this Kierkegaardian point should motivate us to be concerned about any forces, such as social media algorithms, that may threaten to undermine our ability to make our own authentic choices. For, if authentic choice is as ethically foundational as Kierkegaard insists that it is, then our very ethical subjectivity would be at stake in any such loss.

With regards to references to passages by the pseudonyms, we will focus on Climacus and Anti-Climacus' writings because, as C. Stephen Evans has noted, Kierkegaard's own views tend to most closely align with these two pseudonymous figures.[126] Indeed, Kierkegaard even described himself in relation to these two pseudonyms, and spoke about Anti-Climacus—one of the "higher" pseudonyms—as an idealized spiritual exemplar that he strove to emulate. He says of them, that "Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus have several things in common…I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus."[127] While Kierkegaard saw himself as more religiously advanced than Climacus, and less so than Anti-Climacus, they are still both

---

[125] Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132
[126] C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, Amherst, New York: Humanity Books 1999, pp. 7-8.
[127] *SKS* 22, 130 (NB 11:209) / *JP* 6, 6433.

outlets through which we can gain insight into Kierkegaard's own self-avowed thought.[128]

We will first look at some thoughts on the ethical significance of authentic choice offered by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death*, especially in light of the fact that it has been shown that Anti-Climacus' views closely mirror Kierkegaard's own. In Anti-Climacus' legendarily opaque outline of the nature of the self, we see the full measure of the preeminence that Kierkegaard places on consciousness and self-awareness with regards to self-constitution. In order for a person to be a self at all—and thus in order for a person to be an ethical subject—one must first existentially choose how to live within a context of self-consciousness and freedom, both of which are factors that are absolutely relevant to our examination of the function of algorithms in life online. Consider the following passage from *The Sickness Unto Death*: "The self is freedom...The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self."[129] In this passage Kierkegaard clearly and directly addresses the significance of conscious awareness of our own freedom. The stakes are clear: one is not a self unless one is aware of his own freedom, and one must take responsibility—via the will—for his condition as a radically free being. Anything that obfuscates this consciousness, or cuts against this willful capacity, cuts against the basis of existential selfhood altogether.

---

[128] Jan E. Evans helpfully addresses the question of how we can attribute pseudonymous views (specifically of Climacus and Anti-Climacus) to Kierkegaard and concludes that "We can safely assume, then, that we can ascribe to Kierkegaard the views of Anti-Climacus in *Sickness Unto Death*, though Kierkegaard would not want us to think that he had achieved the lofty goals of which Anti-Climacus speaks." With regards to Johannes Climacus Evans says: "So how should we evaluate what Climacus has to say in light of Kierkegaard's own views? That must be done on an issue by issue basis. But it is clear what Climacus says about Christianity must be seen as an outsiders view." Jan E. Evans, *Unamuno and Kierkegaard: Paths to Selfhood in Fiction*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books 2005, pp. 41-44.
[129] *SKS* 11, 145 / *SUD*, 29.

A few pages later Kierkegaard describes spiritless, secular society's tendency to replace the freedom of the self, through a process called "finitization,"[130] with a reductive numerical conception of what it means to be a self. The parallels that this critique shares with our contemporary algorithmic online societies and click-based cultures are glaring and obvious. Not only does this mathematical reduction of the self to a number lead to "ethical narrowness,"[131] it also "emasculates [one] in a spiritual sense"[132] insofar as it robs one "of one's primitivity."[133] In other words, this form of mathematical thinking about the self isolates one from one's actual, primitive selfhood, which ought to be thought of in terms of consciousness, freedom, and the will. The "dialectic inherent in the self"[134] requires existential space in which to express its dynamic being; "finitization" reduces the possibilities for understanding the self as dynamic freedom, and thus necessarily entails ethical and existential narrowness. The self must not be thought of as an algorithmic "preference function"[135]; it is much more—and radically other—than that. Thus, this critique of the social media algorithm is also a critique of the developers of these algorithms to the extent that they think of social media users merely as numbers and data points. At its most primitive, expressed through the activity of existential dialectics,[136] the Kierkegaardian self is the

---

[130] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
[131] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
[132] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
[133] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
[134] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
[135] A use of this term in a similar context may be found in Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132.
[136] Karl Verstrynge's use of the term "existential dialectics" inspired its use here. He defines it variously as Kierkegaard's analysis of the "balance between being dissolved from oneself, the other or actuality on the one hand, and merely distancing or abstracting from them on the other hand." Karl Verstrynge, "Being and Becoming a Virtual Self: Taking Kierkegaard into the Realm of Online Social Interaction," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2011, pp. 303-320. He, along with Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson, also defines it as an attempt to "grasp Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the human self, and the task of finding a proper relation of the self to itself." Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson and Karl Verstrynge, "'Marvel at Nothing':

freedom of choosing how to live and the appropriation of one's own freedom through conscious, willful choice. To gain a more complete sense of how Kierkegaard describes the reductive narrowness of finitization, we can look at an extended excerpt from "Finitude's Despair Is to Lack Infinitude,"[137] in the first part of *The Sickness Unto Death*. Note how Kierkegaard describes finitization and quantification as fundamentally opposed to the free, energetic activity of the authentic self:

> To lack infinitude is despairing reductionism, narrowness. Of course, what is meant here is only ethical narrowness and limitation…The secular view always clings tightly to the difference between man and man and naturally does not have any understanding of the one thing needful (for it is to have spirituality), and thus has no understanding of the reductionism and narrowness involved in having lost oneself, not by being volatilized in the infinite, but by being completely finitized, by becoming a number instead of a self, just one more man, just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei* [one and the same]…Despairing narrowness is to lack primitivity or to have robbed oneself of one's primitivity, to have emasculated oneself in a spiritual sense.[138]

This self-denying, despairing mathematical reductionism is something that Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus vociferously warns against, and Anti-Climacus' warnings should be taken very seriously, especially given his status as an ideal spiritual individual in Kierkegaard's eyes. It is hard not to think of this sort of mathematical reductionism when we consider today's online algorithms. But we also find similar warnings made by Anti-Climacus' less spiritually developed

---

Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Category of Recollection through Social Media Services," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2015, p. 197.

[137] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

[138] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

counterpart: Johannes Climacus.

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus propounded an equivalent line of attack, and directly alleges that the mathematizing of society renders the individual "accidental"[139] and existentially inert. More to the point of this chapter, though, this mathematization—as stated in the middle sentence of the following selection—makes it such that the individual is no longer capable of the free inward movements needed to make his own existential decisions, and therefore loses his subjective selfhood. *Eo ipso*, he also loses his ethical subjectivity:

> The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, *just like the decision*, is subjectivity. The way of objective reflection now leads to abstract thinking, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of various kinds, and always leads away from the subjective individual, whose existence or nonexistence becomes, from an objective point of view, altogether properly, infinitely indifferent.[140]

This passage, like so many others from the *Postscript*, is exceedingly rich. The notion that the individual might come to see himself as "accidental" is pertinent, and is related to the aforementioned task of existential dialectics. This objective, mathematizing mode of self-relation sees all selves (including oneself) as "quantifiable bundles of desires"[141] that are passively embedded in reality, at the cost of forgetting (or denying) the initial uncertainties and ineffables

---

[139] *SKS* 7, 177 / *CUP1*, 193.
[140] *SKS* 7, 177 / *CUP1*, 193 (emphasis added).
[141] This term is borrowed from Conway, "Disclosing Despair," 132.

that exist at the heart of being, and at the cost of forgetting (or denying) the originary activity of free, dynamic self-relation that undergirds all human experience in the first place. In this schema the self is reduced to its function of predictability and its most basic structure of quantitative intelligibility; it leaves no space for freedom, consciousness, or other constitutive elements of robust selfhood. "The single individual" could be anyone, "just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei*."[142] His or her preferences are related to as mere accidents, and are thought to have nothing to do with the individual himself, for the self is merely a Humean bundle in this model of thinking. Accordingly, everyone and everything is fundamentally interchangeable, and there is nothing distinctly unique about any one individual, insofar as all "individuals" (if we may call them that)—at least within this attitude of relating to existence—exist in the same fungible, quantitative grid of flattened meaning. Individuals do not passionately choose for themselves how to live, but they instead—by dint of a deterministic ethos—passively accept what happens in their life as representing how it simply is or must be. It is this manner of existence that Kierkegaard refers to as "levelled" in *Two Ages*. In levelled existence one gets the sense that individuals truly do not exist, for the qualitative differentiations between individuals—those marked by heroic strivings, faithful convictions, and the like—have been corroded by an assembly of homogenizing forces (the press, broadly systematic thinking, Christendom, etc.) and subsumed within a quantitative grid. Kierkegaard—using the helpful metaphor of a "coiled spring"—compares the enervated, homogenized character of leveled existence with the dynamic, heterogenous character of passionate existence in a challenging passage from *Two Ages*:

> The coiled springs of life-relationships, which are what they are only because of qualitatively distinguishing passion, lose their resilience; the qualitative expression of

[142] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

> difference between opposites is no longer the law for the relation of inwardness to each other in the relation. Inwardness is lacking, and to that extent the relation does not exist or the relation is an inert cohesion.[143]

The existential threat of the quantized model of existence is not only that it will lead to leveling writ large, but that individual relationships—to oneself and to others—will be rendered "inert." For a relationship to have resilient and animating "coiled springs" requires that the self not be thought of as predictable, quantifiable bundle of desires, but instead to be always related to as the kind of entity that has a free, active, and ongoing choice in the question of how to live.

This matter—the question of the individual's capacity to choose for himself how to live—is precisely at the core of Kierkegaardian ethics, and is also at the core of the question of what role predictive algorithms play in our lives online. Due to the pressing nature of this contemporary ethical issue we should take some time to consider, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, what ought to be done in light of this contemporary state.

3.6 How Should We Live Online?

Given the above descriptions of how social media algorithms function, and given the outline of the ethical significance of authentic existential choice in Kierkegaard's thought, it is obvious that a significant reevaluation of how we live online is in order. First, a few more reflections on the existential dangers of online algorithms will be presented, and then a few thoughts on how we might live online in the face of all of this will be offered.

Algorithmically determined content presentation on online platforms seem to potentially undercut the existential capacity for authentic choice in two ways. First, through infinite reinforcement of already selected preferences, and secondly, through the presentation of an

[143] *SKS* 8, 75 / *TA*, 78.

abstract crowd (or a "target market," "phantom public," etc.) that the user is predicted to be likely to align with. On the first matter, it seems clear that Kierkegaard would be fundamentally opposed to the way in which—through the harvesting of users' earlier activity—algorithms blindly reinforce users' preferences and beliefs. Instead of challenging the online individual to continually decide for himself how to live, algorithms used in this way only encourage the user to hear something that he has already heard, or to see from a perspective that he has already seen from, or to affirm a position that he has already affirmed. These algorithms are programmed to present users with options that it thinks that they already want to see; the user is never rattled by uncomfortable new possibilities, but is instead swaddled in the comfort of being infinitely reinforced within his own cozy echo-chamber. This cuts against the Kierkegaardian practice of free choice being enacted via the rigorous and unguided examination of various mutually exclusive possible life-views, and instead tries to make "choice" as easy as possible for the user. In attempting to make it easy, it essentially erases the possibility of existential choice altogether. As has been shown throughout this chapter, Kierkegaard was fundamentally opposed to the passive inheriting of life-views, but instead implored his reader to be challenged by new possibilities and to experience the inner tension of engaging with alternative life-views. This sort of painful self-examination is a precondition for authentic choice, and authentic choice is discouraged by the passive life-view reinforcement mechanism that is characteristic of the social media algorithm. Kierkegaard exemplified existential self-examination through his poly-vocal authorial style and promoted it with many of his pseudonyms as well as promoting it directly, but algorithms (at least to users who are unaware of their presence) provide no such poly-vocality. Only one kind of voice answers back in the online echo-chamber, and the algorithmic feedback loop provides no space for new existential possibilities and no latitude for authentic choice-making. Alternatives, by

definition, are systematically excluded.

On the second matter, online echo-chambering algorithms formulate a "phantom public"[144] meant to seduce the user into a false, easy[145] sense of identity. One is presented with a mathematically-generated online experience, rife with targeted advertisements, as if the user were no more than a predictable bundle of desires. The self—as Kierkegaard might say—has been reduced to a number, a probability. These targeted advertisements present a contrived reality meant to capture the user for various economic or political purposes, but the inattentive user may think that these targeted advertisements simply represent the views and opinions of the crowd and that they reflect what everyone else is seeing and thinking, and thus casually go along with it. As Kierkegaard displayed throughout his work, the crowd has a way of seducing and eliminating the individual. The user may simply slide into the fabricated, ready-made identity that has been contrived for him without ever having made his own free, conscious existential choice about how to live online in the first place.

We have seen how online algorithms pose a dire existential threat to the contemporary ethical subject, but we have yet to address how one might live in light of this threat. Instead of proposing a flight from society in search of the self, a solution akin to Thoreau's famous experiment in solitude, this chapter will argue that severing the relation to the online world is not what is called for. Such severance, if it were even possible, would amount to a refusal to address a fundamental contemporary question of meaning, and to engage with a fundamental condition of

---

[144] For Kierkegaard's use of the idea of the "phantom public," see *SKS* 8, 86 / *TA*, 90.
[145] A Kierkegaardian example of an "easy" sense of identity might be the follower of "Christendom." These people identified as Christians, and treated Christianity as the ready-made task of following the rules and conventions of the Danish State Church. Kierkegaard repeatedly lambasted these people, and largely on the grounds that they treated their claims to identity casually and unscrupulously.

contemporary existence. Instead, awareness and invigoration are avenues by which the self, as a self that exists online, may preserve—and perhaps even intensify—his ethical subjectivity.

First, and most importantly, is the matter of awareness. From awareness, online existential invigoration should follow. Recall the previously mentioned quote from *The Sickness Unto Death*: "The self is freedom...The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self."[146] This quotation provides an important model for thinking about how we ought to exist online. What does it mean to have "consciousness" online, and especially in the context of online algorithms? To be sure, this must be an individual task, and a task that takes the form of a continual activity of recognition and self-awareness. The online ethical subject should recognize that while online, he is continually within a system of "finitizing"[147] dataveillance techniques that are not necessarily intended to cultivate individual ethical subjectivity, but are instead intended to seduce the user into extending their time spent online. In other words, one ought to take extra care to guard one's inner life while online. One should recognize that this existential entrapment is often effected through echo-chambering and targeted content presentation, and take measures to be sure that one has not slipped into an identity or milieu without first going through the rigorous self-examination that necessarily precedes authentic commitment.

This activity of online self-awareness requires a reconsideration of how it is that we relate to our lives online. Instead of relating to the online world as a "digital dualist"[148] would, that is, as one who thinks of the online and offline worlds as ontologically disconnected, the contemporary

---

[146] *SKS* 11, 145 / *SUD*, 29.
[147] *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
[148] Joke Bauwens and Karl Verstrynge, "Digital Technology, Virtual Worlds, and Ethical Change," *Techne: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 17(1), 2013, p. 125.

ethical subject must recognize that existentially relevant activity also occurs online, and that this activity pertains to the selfsame subject. Rather than relying upon Socratic Suspicion to prematurely dismiss all online life as deficient, the conscious online user should recognize that the content presented online is *about their lives* and also that this targeted content is often invited by they themselves. Moreover, this online self-awareness should lead to a newfound existential invigoration. This invigoration may take place when we realize that our online world, and the algorithmically-generated interpretation of reality that it presents us with, calls for our close and ongoing attention. This sequence falls in line with Kierkegaard's above-mentioned identification of consciousness, will, and self. The online subject, now acutely aware of the existential danger of online algorithms, may start to carefully examine the nature of his relation to online platforms, and to each of the tiniest choices he makes while online. This attentiveness will intensify his relationship not only to the platform, but also to himself; in these algorithmically augmented social media worlds, there is only a hazy difference. The algorithmic platform presents the self with a certain impoverished version of his own self; the conscious user needs to the assess the content that is targeted towards him and examine why it is *this* type of content that is continually presented to him rather than other possibilities, and to continually ask whether this targeted content authentically represents who and how he is. Instead of a passive, enervated[149] relation to life online the conscious user will ideally take a more active relation to his online life; he will recognize that online algorithms often push users into echo-chambers and feedback loops, and thus he may seek out opportunities for feedback loop disruption and consequently experience authentic choice-making. These disruptions may take place by the user intentionally stepping outside of his online echo-chamber and attempting to find that which is hidden from him, and in so doing go through a

[149]See *SKS* 8, 69 / *TA*, 71 to see Kierkegaard use "enervation" in a similar context.

process of deciding truly for himself—in light of all this—how it is that he will live while living online, and examine why he chooses to live this way. There are certainly other ways through which this consciousness may lead to invigoration, but what is really of utmost importance is that this invigoration lead to authentic existential choice-making while online, especially as this chapter has shown that—at least for Kierkegaard—existential choice-making is a fundamental condition for the existence of ethical subjectivity at all.

Kierkegaard, in his time, recognized how certain features of his culture—including the press, the Danish State Church, systematic "objective" thinking, and a general crowd-like sensibility—negatively impacted the ability of his contemporaries to exist as authentic subjective individuals. They largely neglected their freedom to consciously choose for themselves how to live, and thus failed to perform the most basic movement of ethical subjectivity. Today we have our own contemporary set of problems, including algorithmically generated online echo-chambers. The nature of this problem is close to much of what concerned Kierkegaard, and it shares similar features to many of the issues that he addressed. Thus, we should consider what he had to say in relation to these questions of online existence. If our very ethical subjecthood is at risk—as has been shown—we must consciously guard against falling into online echo-chambers, and we must take great care to preserve our own freedom to choose how to live while online. [150]

---

[150] Many ideas presented in this chapter were initially presented at "Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics" conference at ESC Clermont in Clermont-Ferrand, France, which took place on May 2nd-3rd of 2019. I would like to thank the participants of that conference for the abundance of helpful advice they gave me on this topic. Additionally, George J. Stack's 1977 book *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics* was helpful in the preparation of this chapter, and the third chapter of the book titled "Existential Choice" was particularly helpful. George S. Stack, *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press 1977.

4. THE ALGORITHM THAT I ALSO AM: THREE ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF DIGITAL MAIEUTICS

4.1 Introducing the Counterarguments: Pseudonymous Self-Examination, the Algorithm as Digital Recollection, and Digital Self-Construction

This section offers three arguments—with many sub-arguments—that challenge the Socratic Suspicion of technology, and these arguments are intended to demonstrate ways that online algorithms and social media algorithms may very well actually provide unique opportunities for pursuing self-knowledge. The first argument—contained in sections 4.2 through 4.2.7—examines the question of what it means to be authentic in our online lives, and promotes the idea that the careful use of "fake" online profiles—which this chapter equates with pseudonyms—is a possible way to cultivate self-knowledge. By referring to Socrates' maieutic method, as well as to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorial method, the case is made that the contemporary denizen of the online world can potentially enact a maieutic practice of self-examination by simultaneously indwelling multiple distinct online personae. The reader will see that the argument presented below reverses the argument presented above in the previous chapter. The argument presented above argued (from a Kierkegaardian angle) that the online user who is trapped unconsciously in an online echo-chamber is incapable of making the authentic, free choices that are a precondition for authentic Kierkegaardian ethical selfhood. This is because the unconscious user in such an algorithmic echo-chamber is not presented with alternative life-views to choose among, and in the absence of alternative possibilities for being no authentic choice of how to live (i.e. "this way" as opposed to "that way") may be sincerely made.

However, the first argument in this chapter inverts this line of reasoning, and argues that the self-aware online user can and may exploit the social media algorithm's echo-chambering tendency to their existential advantage. The basic claim is that an individual can explore possibilities for how to live by creating various online identities and inhabiting each of them simultaneously while allowing each one to become algorithmically "ensnared" in its own distinctive echo-chamber. This will allow the conscious user to tentatively inhabit various Kierkegaardian "life-views." This pseudonymous self-examination will lay the existential groundwork (the laying out of authentic possibilities) which will put the user in a position to make an authentic choice about which life-view to choose and to make a sincere affirmation of who they want to be. The argument also challenges attitudes which reduce online profiles to either "fake" or "real," and argues for a theory of online authenticity that validates the maieutic and existential possibilities of operating pseudonymous online profiles.

The second argument—which will be found in section 4.3—will be broad-ranging and detailed. By making reference to the Socratic category of recollection, it will argue that online algorithms can and do facilitate what I call "practical" or "digital recollection." By this, I will argue that the suggestive and relevance-based structure of online algorithmic recommender systems makes it such that the past of the online individual is always thrust upon their present experiences. Traces of their past activities and decisions always remain—appearing as recommendations, auto-fills, targeted advertisements, etc—and thereby function to remind the individual of "where" they have been in cyberspace, what they have done, and, more generally, who they are. I also argue in this section that these systems can function as a *memento mori,* and can cause the user to reflect on their finite existential condition.

The third argument will be less formal, and will provide a cluster of modes of thinking about technology that attempt to go beyond mediation.

4.2 The First Argument. Digital Duplicity and Self-Knowledge: Using Online Pseudonyms as a Form of Technological Maieutics[151]

The social media age has brought with it its fair share of critics, many of whom criticize it from an existential angle, often arguing that it facilitates inauthenticity—or "fakeness"—in several different ways.[152] This critique is often attached to the notion that because it is so easy to

---

[151] An early version of this argument was presented as an oral presentation titled "Faking It While Making It: New Possibilities for Authentic Self-Examination in Online Social Networks" at the 1st annual meeting of the Southeastern Association for the Continental Tradition (SEACT), which was held from February 28th-29th, 2020 in Tampa Bay, Florida and which was hosted by Saint Leo University. The presentation was (moderately) well-received and sparked a very engaging discussion as many thought of the argument as provocative and "too friendly" to social media and too optimistic about its existential potential. I expected this skeptical response given my understanding that continental philosophers often have an ingrained technophobia, and I am grateful that fellow philosophers were willing to say this to me in person. I have made a few adjustments to the argument based off of some suggestions that I received, but the spirit and major claim of the argument has remained the same as I've developed it for inclusion in this dissertation.

[152] Hubert Dreyfus argued over two decades ago that the internet is structured so as to promote anonymity and conformity at the expense of individuality and commitment: Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs Commitment in the Present Age," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1999, pp. 96-109; Shannon Vallor's book chapter "New Social Media and the Virtues" argues that the anonymity of social media obstructs the development of the virtue of honesty: found in Philip Brey, Adam Briggle, and Edward Spence. *The Good Life in a Technological Age*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. 193-202; Murray Skees questions whether the contemporary internet user is able to experience authentic *aporia* or wonder, which traditionally serves as the origin of philosophical self-examination. See: Murray Skees, "*Aporia* and Wonder in the Age of Big Data," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and* Technology, 23:2 (2019): 137–152; For one example of a paper about how perceived authenticity is curated and commodified by social media influencers see: Jeremy Shtern, Steph Hill, and Daphne Chan, "Social Media Influence: Performative Authenticity and the Relational Work of Audience Commodification in the Philippines," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019), 1939–1958; For a paper that assesses how social media platforms themselves make authenticity claims (i.e. "real life," "genuine," etc.) to attract users and consequently to generate revenue. See: Meredith Salisbury and Jefferson D. Pooley, "The #nofilter Self: The Contest for Authenticity among Social Networking Sites, 2002–2016," *Social Sciences* 6:1 (2017), 1-24.

be anonymous online, this capacity for anonymity encourages various forms of existential irresponsibility. While this critique is certainly valid, and oftentimes accurate, it is not what the concern of this section will be. I want to offer an alternative to this view by considering the possibility that contemporary social media platforms—especially in their algorithmically-generated form—also create new possibilities for authenticity insofar as they offer new possibilities for self-encounter and self-examination. During this time, with COVID-19 keeping people indoors and digitally active more than ever before, it is especially urgent to think about online authenticity. So, towards offering one new way of thinking about online authenticity, I will argue that simultaneously inhabiting multiple algorithmically-driven online "identities" is a way of creating the possibility for what I will call "pseudonymous self-examination." The activity of inhabiting and negotiating these "identities" may—if done conscientiously and in good faith—incite and facilitate a maieutic process of authentic self-examination akin to one propounded by thinkers such as Socrates and implemented in the writing of his 19th century acolyte Søren Kierkegaard.

First, referring to Socrates, I will contend that the philosophical task of self-examination begins in uncertainty and openness, and that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorial method exemplifies a maieutic existential praxis through which one examines themselves. It will be argued, then, that inhabiting various distinct online personalities simultaneously is a way by which one may transpose this maieutic activity into the social media world, and thereby act as their own hypermodern Socratic midwife. Just as one may join different organizations and may "try on" various identities as they grow older to gain a better sense of who they are, so also may one "try on" various online identities to gain a clearer sense of themselves. Secondly, I will argue that the fake/real dichotomy that people often use when referring to online personalities is

not equivalent to the authentic/inauthentic dichotomy—even though our language often slips into making this false equivalence—and that one may certainly be performing authentic self-examination and self-understanding even when operating "fake" social media profiles. Thirdly, I will articulate a limitation to my idea of online pseudonymous self-examination: that it must be done in "good faith." Finally, I will attempt to articulate a model of someone using online pseudonymous self-examination as an authentic existential praxis.

4.2.2 Being Your Own Midwife Online, or, Virtual Maieutics

Philosophical scholarship that considers the positive existential generativity of the online world in general, and social networking services (SNS) in particular, has been noticeably lacking. Since Hubert Dreyfus rang the alarm bell in the late 1990s by warning of the dangers to authenticity posed by the internet, specifically that anonymity leads to rampant, intractable irresponsibility, many have followed his lead, adapting their critiques to newly developing aspects of the internet.[153] The most recent philosophical threat to authenticity that academics are worried about seems to be the complicity of SNS in perpetuating "post-Truth" culture. Those bringing attention to this issue are typically worried that individuals cannot make authentic (here read as "accurately informed") sociopolitical decisions in such an epistemically dubious online climate, and these attention-bringers often weave dystopian narratives about how the unverifiability of information online has the world under siege.[154] The perpetuators that disseminate the "fake news" that generates "post-Truth" online culture are often alleged to be "fake" accounts, hackers, bots, trolls, or other profiles that do not candidly and accurately

[153] Some of these were mentioned in the first endnote.
[154] For an example that addresses this tendency towards the digital dystopian narrative: Farkas, Johan, and Jannick Schou. *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*, Routledge, 2019.

represent the identities or motives of their operators. No shortage of critical literature has come out regarding this matter either.[155] This worry—along with sensationalistic media phenomena like the show "Catfish," the Manti Te'o saga, rumors of "finstagram" accounts, inaccurate information spread about the coronavirus by troll accounts, and the role of "Twitter bots" in elections—has led to a general disdain for the using and inhabiting of "fake" online profiles, and such digital duplicity is often regarded as a uniquely contemporary form of inauthenticity. The operator of a "fake" account is automatically presumed to be engaging in an ethically dubious and inauthentic practice merely by dint of operating such accounts. I will argue against the current of this cultural trend, and instead claim that using and inhabiting "fake" online profiles *can* actually lead to a heightened form of authenticity for the fake profile operator. This is not to imply that *all* fake online profile operation is done authentically—or as practice in self-discovery—but simply that this possibility invites us to expand our thinking about what it means to be authentic in our digital lives.

4.2.3 Self-Knowledge in Plato's *Theaetetus*

In order to frame this inquiry we will first turn to one of the earliest philosophical accounts of self-knowledge and the method for bringing it about: Plato's *Theaetetus.* In this dialogue Socrates describes knowledge and self-knowledge as coming about through a process of examining various possibilities and observing what holds and what falls away. This helps separate the essential from the non-essential and the true from the false. Enacting this process of self-examination is Socrates' sole merit as a philosopher, for, as he says: "I myself, therefore, am

[155] For an article that actively avows such a troll-driven dystopian narrative in no uncertain terms see: Hannan, Jason. "Trolling Ourselves to Death? Social Media and Post-Truth Politics." *European Journal of Communication*, 23:2 (2018), pp. 214–226.

quite devoid of wisdom; my mind has never produced an idea that can be called clever."[156] Socrates famously compared himself to a "midwife" in this passage, and considered his task to be assisting his interlocutor in uncovering in themselves what is already there. Clearly hearkening back to Plato's theory of recollection (*anamnesis*), Socratic maieutics involves helping people "give birth to" or "deliver" what it is that they produce in themselves.[157][158] For this chapter the most important part of this Socratic maieutic process that it involves the dynamic presentation of possibilities to the individual, which the individual then affirms or denies, and eventually—in an existential register—their life comes to be shaped through the experience of this process. In other words, through this dynamic process true knowledge (of self, virtue, etc.) is drawn out. Socrates clearly states this in the *Theaetetus* when he states: "Well, my midwifery has all the standard features, except that I practice it on men instead of women, and supervise the labour of their minds, not their bodies. And the most important aspect of my skill is the ability to apply every conceivable test to see whether the young man's mental offspring is illusory and false or viable and true."[159] At the beginning of the process the relevant knowledge remains concealed or obscured and is revealed only in the process of possibility-presentation—or, conversely, it leads to *aporia*. Critically, there is no stable and certain self at the beginning of the maieutic process, instead there is only the openness—the tentative possibility of coming to know who one is and what one can know. Via the interrogation of possibilities for truth the "illusory and false" is discarded and the "viable and true" is retained, and, ultimately, true self-knowledge is approached. A similar process may be undertaken by testing out various "fake" online profiles

[156] Plato 1997, 167
[157] Plato 1997, 63-67 and 881-886
[158] This idea of learning as unveiling is also developed in Socrates' discussion with Simmias in *Phaedo* (72e-77a) and in the slave-boy story in *Meno* (82a-85c).
[159] Plato 1997, 167

and discerning which one (or ones) reveal the "viable and true" self to oneself and which ones conceal it. One will come to the recognition that a certain online persona—or a narrow set of personae—are truer to who one is, while others fall away because they fail to resonate with who one comes to learn themselves to be.

4.2.4 Kierkegaardian Pseudonyms as Online Pseudonyms

There seem to be significant and meaningful parallels between Søren Kierkegaard's polyvocal authorial style and the online pseudonymous self-examination that this section discusses. Citing Kierkegaard will not only further embed this dissertation's idea in extant philosophical discourses, but will also deepen and enrich our thinking about the philosophical efficaciousness of using pseudonyms to promote self-knowledge. Therefore, I will discuss Kierkegaard's Socrates-inspired pseudonymous authorial method and consider how it may be thought of as a model for online pseudonymous self-examination.

As has been well documented, Kierkegaard was enthralled by Socrates from the beginning to the end of his short life, noting that Socrates was that "man with whom I have had an inextricable rapport from a very young age…"[160] Kierkegaard wrote his doctoral dissertation on Socrates[161] in 1841 and in 1849 even went as far as explicitly comparing himself to Alcibiades, the Athenian statesman who famously (and drunkenly) interrupted Plato's *Symposium* in order to lavishly praise Socrates and also to describe his failed attempt to seduce Socrates. In his *Christian Discourses* Kierkegaard even revealed that his "heart… beat violently" for Socrates just as Alcibiades' allegedly did. More importantly, though, Kierkegaard modeled

---

[160] Sarf 1983, 257. This quotation may also be found in *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong in six volumes (Bloomington, 1967-1977), entry 6839.

[161] Titled "On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates" and completed in 1841 under F. Sibbern.

his philosophical career on Socrates and on Socrates' maieutic method: he says "The only analogy I have before me is Socrates. My task is a Socratic task…"[162] Apart from vocalizing praise for Socrates in his own voice, Kierkegaard's very pseudonymous authorial style itself modeled Socrates' maieutic method of drawing out self-knowledge, and in a way that is useful for thinking about online identity and self-knowledge. Specifically, Kierkegaard used at least 27 different distinct pseudonyms throughout his authorial career.[163] Each of these different pseudonyms had distinctive voices and advocated for a different "life-view." Some would promote an aesthetically-minded interpretation of the meaning of life, while others would advocate an ethical or religious interpretation, for example. Kierkegaard's target reader—the "single individual"—was ideally intended to occupy the perspective of each unique pseudonym, to at least temporarily indwell each pseudonym's view of existence, and in so doing come to learn more about who they are. This method of communication is intended to "goad his readers into pursuing lives of greater inwardness and intensity, precisely so that they might begin or resume the painful, solitary task of self-examination."[164] That is, by inhabiting these differing and contradicting pseudonymous voices the ideal reader would eventually come to recognize which "identity" they identify with most closely and which ones they did not, thereby "unveiling" or disclosing a more authentic understanding of the self. Only by exploring various untrue identities do they come to approach their true identity.

---

[162] Kierkegaard 1944, 283. For more on the topic of Kierkegaard's reception of Socrates see: Harold Sarf, "Reflections on Kierkegaard's Socrates," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44:2 (1983), 255-276.
[163] See Julia Watkin, *The A to Z of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press 2001, pp. 396-406 for a more detailed list of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and their corresponding writings.
[164] Conway 2017, 131

This way of thinking about the pursuit of authentic self-knowledge offers an alternative model to the typical fake/real dichotomy found in discussions of identity—specifically with regards to online identity—and an alternative that could be philosophically rewarding when considering how to pursue authentic self-knowledge in our online lives. Essentially, creating and inhabiting various distinctive online identities and allowing them to run their course—especially with online algorithms assuring that these differing identities stay siloed away in ever tighter echo-chambers—could allow for the contemporary individual to be their *own* Socratic-Kierkegaardian midwife.

4.2.5 Challenging Philosophical Attitudes Regarding Technology and Authenticity

While the title of this section may sound oxymoronic at first, this need not necessarily be one's conclusion, especially if we expand our model of thinking about what it means to exist authentically online. The expanded model of thinking about online authenticity which this paper proposes places the earnest pursuit of individual self-understanding at the center, and it de-emphasizes mere accuracy and alignment of facts as the standard for assessing authenticity. That is, authenticity is herein theorized as an existential task rather than as a factual threshold. In so doing this theorization of online authenticity deviates from Shannon Vallor's well-known claim about social media "dishonesty" being inextricably linked to a failure to "put our authentic selves into play" —a claim she makes in her well-regarded 2012 essay "New Social Media and the Virtues."[165] For indeed, according to my claim we are more than a simple aggregation of facts—as the existentialists would also have us know—but are also always the process of striving to understanding who and how we are. Troubles abound when we attempt to reduce one's identity to a list of predicates, and if this is the case then we may not so glibly accuse someone of

[165] Vallor 2012, 193-202

behaving inauthentically simply because they operate "fake" profiles that do not accurately reflect their apparent material, social, political, or religious circumstance. Just as reading novels may help get "inside" alternative worldviews and thus guide us to a clearer understanding of ourselves, so also may operating pseudonymous profiles allow us insider access to differing life-views. It could draw us nearer to ourselves in a dynamic, digital, poly-perspectival movement of self-encounter and self-understanding. To clarify, what is mentioned in the earlier portion of this paragraph is precisely what I mean by "fake profiles." A "fake" profile is simply one that does not perfectly align with how one presents oneself in everyday in-person life. For example, a "fake" profile could be a profile that presents itself as identifying with one religious or political group, while the so-called "actual" person "behind" the account has historically thought of themselves—at least tentatively—as identifying with varying groups.

However, despite the existentialists' warning against identity reductionism, philosophical attitudes—surprisingly even within the existential tradition—have tended to consider technological modalities of being as necessarily deficient and inauthentic, *even when* the user seeks to accurately portray themselves in online life. This philosophical discourse that describes technology-as-mediation—and therefore as an alienating force—can be traced back, again even to Socrates, who ironically also provides this paper's inspiration for thinking about how digital technology might enhance possibilities for authentic self-examination. In the *Phaedrus* Plato's Socrates offers a retort against an early technology: writing. Socrates' critique is largely based on the idea that writing, as a technology, is alien or foreign, and that the *practice of* and *reliance upon* writing distracts us from what we essentially are as humans. It is both alien and self-alienating. Indeed, in Socrates' indictment of writing states that it is an "invention" that is "produced by external characters which are no part of themselves," and that this technology

facilitates the "appearance" of wisdom as opposed to the cultivation of "true" wisdom.[166] Throughout this Socratic argument is embedded the idea that there is a true or authentic experience of self-understanding that occurs exclusively in unmediated, artifact-less, or artifact-minimal experience. Rather than being an *expression of* or a *practice in* self-understanding, the technology of writing is an alien force that encroaches on our capacity to know ourselves and to develop certain virtues.

What if we went beyond this Socratic Suspicion, and instead considered technologies in general—and virtual (social) worlds in particular—as possible intensifying occasions for self-examination and self-disclosure? We can use Socrates against himself, and use his employment of maieutics against his own belief that technology is self-alienating by revealing ways in which technology can be used to pursue the goal of maieutics: self-knowledge.

Some philosophically-minded work has already been done which considers the self-disclosive possibilities of virtual worlds and online life, although none to my knowledge have yet considered the possibility of fake profiles being used as practice in virtual maieutics, or what I have also called pseudonymous self-examination. For example, Gualeni has authored several texts which ably advocate for the self-disclosive possibilities of indwelling virtual worlds. In *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools* Gualeni refers to the possibility of virtual worlds as being "accompanied by a reflective, open, and critical attitude toward the larger contexts in which mankind develops thought, and establishes social practices and relationships"[167] and as a "deepening" rather than a "break with our… philosophical past."[168]

---

[166] Plato 1997, 552
[167] Gualeni 2015, 40
[168] Gualeni 2015, 42

But, as mentioned, the relevant literature has yet to broach the question of whether operating "fake" profiles may facilitate a pathway for practicing online self-examination.

4.2.6 Final Kierkegaard-Inspired Thoughts on How to Enact Virtual Maieutics

Returning to Kierkegaard, when discussed in the literature he is rarely, if ever, critiqued for being disingenuous or inauthentic. Rather, he is regularly heralded as being something of a virtuoso of the inner life of self-examination—as a figure who inspired many later figures such Unamuno, Marcel, and Levinas to examine themselves. Yet Kierkegaard's writing is often vociferously non-commital regarding which life-view his reader should identify with, and his texts rarely reveal the avowed beliefs of Kierkegaard himself—with his main wish being that they find themselves always as "the single individual." In some texts, such as *Either/Or*, different pseudonyms present different arguments for why their view on life is correct within the exact same book. For example the first half the book (A) argues for an aesthetically-oriented worldview, while the latter half (B) argues for an ethically-oriented life-view. No decisive conclusion is given. It is the singular task of the reader to determine for themselves which of these views is true and best. In this process of weighing these possible life-views against one another they learn more about themselves and enact a praxis of self-examination. This same pattern—which I consider a maieutic method—holds true across Kierkegaard's published corpus. For example, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus—author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—represents an aesthetic, subjectivist, non-believing worldview, while Anti-Climacus, a later pseudonym and author of *The Sickness Unto Death,* represents a highly idealized religious exemplar. Only in his unpublished notebooks would you find Kierkegaard explicitly favoring one over the other. When reading Kierkegaard's writing (excluding the "Upbuilding Discourses," book reviews, and journals entries) the reader is

inundated and attacked by the aforementioned army of 27 pseudonyms, pseudonyms who often attack, undermine, and contradict one another, and sometimes even themselves. No stable ground is given; the single reader must navigate the whirlwind of life-views, and in so doing become more singular, or, to be cliché, "discover who they are."

As has been argued, a similar task of examining oneself from multiple different directions may be undertaken online. For instance, to use an example that pertains to matters a bit more anodyne—depending on your convictions—than the matters Kierkegaard often discusses (i.e. the health of one's spirit), imagine that an individual be torn as to who they wish to vote for in an upcoming election. To help this individual clarify to themselves where they stand they may create various accounts masquerading as fans of several different candidates—this to know what it means, to some extent, to be the kind of person who supports this or that candidate, and in so doing revealing to oneself over time and through considered experience which candidate they most closely align with. Creating an account that portrays oneself as a partisan of a certain candidate will allow them insider access to that candidate's online world, and thus allow them to discern for themselves whether it is a world that they truly belong in. By eliminating false (i.e. inauthentic) possibilities, the true, authentic self becomes ever more visible.[169]

Switching examples, and to be more appropriately Kierkegaardian, some denizens of the online world may work within the triad of life-views that Kierkegaard offers us in his writings—aesthetic, ethical, and religious—and simultaneously indwell online personae reflecting these divergent life-views. Over time robust tensions will inevitably appear among these life-views—

[169] Something like this should of course be done in good faith, and while being careful to avoid causing harm to anyone interacted with in the given online communities. Establishing and articulating the ethical limits of using fake profiles is a certainly a project worth exploring, and one that will be addressed in my forthcoming work.

through conversations within the personae's community and through online atmospheric contrasts—thus enacting a maieutic process and (ideally) prompting the personae-operator to existentially commit to one of the theretofore pseudonymous identities. Online identities and pseudonyms are uniquely positioned to help the individual undergo this poly-perspectival self-examination in that online identities are especially prone to the echo-chambering effects of predictive algorithm content presentation and exclusive community membership. Thus, the individual operating the various "fake" profiles will find themselves atmospherically immersed (i.e. different targeted advertisements, different community guidelines, etc.) in distinct online worlds—thus intensifying the contrast between the different life-views and intensifying the engagement with oneself that one must go through to decide for themselves *how* to live and *who* they are. Performing this practice would approximately replicate (while also technologically contemporizing) the self-examination that reading Kierkegaard's pseudonym-based corpus enacts upon the reader. The individual performing this experiment would act as their Socratic-Kierkegaardian midwife, using the role-playing possibilities of the online world as a tool for dynamically eliciting self-knowledge. The personae-operator, in a sense, creates a "community" of the self that they ideally should eventually break out, and break into the sphere of passionate individual existential commitment, the sphere of Kierkegaardian "selfhood."

4.2.7 Conclusion of the First Argument

More could be said about how this process of virtual, pseudonymous maieutics, and the questions—and especially ethical questions—that it inevitably gives rise to, but that is a project for future work. This chapter has attempted to evoke a challenge to broaden our thinking regarding online authenticity, online identity, and possible modes of self-examination in online life. One way of doing so is loosening our grip on fake/real and mediated/unmediated binaries in

thinking about online life and recognizing the self-disclosive existential possibilities of so-called fake profiles. The question of online authenticity and of the existential contours of virtual life is a question that will only get more pressing and involved as technology advances. As our virtual lives get more advanced and immersive this domain of inquiry will increase in importance, and it will be philosophically fascinating to see how thinking about online authenticity changes and about how it stays the same.

4.3 The Second Argument: The Online Algorithm as Practical Recollection

The first argument in this chapter presented a very particular method through which the online individual can pursue self-knowledge. However, while I think this argument is sound, its greatest demerit is that it is so narrow. Therefore, this second argument will present a much more general account of how online algorithms *as such* can quite easily be theorized as vehicles that effectuate what I will call "practical" or "digital recollection." While the first argument in this chapter read Kierkegaard against himself—as Kierkegaard was (as has been displayed) no keen fan of the existential possibilities of technology, he also provided a model (the pseudonyms) for thinking about self-knowledge that can be applied to online life—this chapter will endeavor to read Socrates against himself, as Socrates was obviously also no keen fan of the self-disclosive possibilities of technology. To read Socrates against himself, this chapter will use the Socratic notion of "recollection" as a starting point to demonstrate how these algorithms and recommender systems—in a very practical sense—may in fact remind us of ourselves and of who we are. Rather than being a site of self-forgetfulness and inauthenticity this section will cut against the grain of the contemporary philosophical discourse and suggest instead that the online world may very well be exceptionally intensified site of acute self-memory and self-reflection. Additionally, these

arguments will suggest that these systems may also serve as "prompters" or "Socratic figures" in prompting the individual to ask themselves fundamental questions of existence.

4.3.2 A Reminder About Recollection

Before we may be justified in using the Socratic concept of recollection to read Socrates against himself, it will first be responsible to revisit this critical concept. Therefore, in order to recollect what Socrates means by recollection we will turn to the *Phaedo* to understand what Socratic recollection is and how recollection relates to self-knowledge. While Socrates was primarily concerned with the immortality of the soul in his discussions of recollection, it is also the case that recollection figures prominently in our ability to satisfy the Delphic injunction to know ourselves.

The activity of the *Phaedo* takes place at Socrates' bedside as he prepares to drink the hemlock that will, in turn, end his life. While his friends are distressed, Socrates maintains an equanimity of spirit that disturbed those around him. This equanimity was maintained because he believed that his soul was immortal, and consequently that—in keeping with his belief in metempsychosis—he would ascend to a higher form of being following his death. When asked why he believed that his soul was immortal he presented several arguments, such as the argument from opposites and the argument from the form of life, but the most crucial argument was the argument from recollection.

The argument from recollection states that we can come to know ourselves by being reminded of things that we have forgotten throughout the course of life. Nature, for example, can prompt us to remember truths that we have forgotten. Cebes, Socrates' friend and companion, even indicates that recollection is a favorite idea of Socrates': "Cebes added: Your favorite doctrine, Socrates, that knowledge is simply recollection, if true, also necessarily implies

a previous time in which we learned that which we now recollect. But this would be impossible unless our soul was in some place before existing in the human form; here then is another argument of the soul's immortality."[170] Learning (including about ourselves and the world) is remembering. In a grand sense this refers to the Forms, but in a more existential and proximal sense it could refer to the way in which we assess ourselves: we reflect on what we have done, what we have thought, who we have been around, what we have searched for and studied, and where we have been. The algorithm serves as a prompter for recollection in both senses, although perhaps most clearly in the more proximal sense. Let us now understand what Socrates means by recollection in the most general and abstract sense. Then we will move to analyzing how it's possible that this notion of recollection—in a modified and updated usage—can be useful in thinking about online life.

Socrates and his friends provide three arguments in favor of recollection during the *Phaedo*, which will now be summarized individually.

The first argument is similar to the one that is demonstrated in the *Meno* by the "slave boy." Cebes, who learned this argument from Socrates, articulates the basic structure of it to Simmias: "One excellent proof, said Cebes, is afforded by questions. If you put a question to a person in a right way, he will give a true answer of himself, but how could he do this unless there were knowledge and right reason already in him? And this is most clearly shown when he is taken to a diagram or to anything of that sort."[171] In other words, the ability of the individual to have an epiphantic realization of a truth—be it mathematical knowledge or otherwise—is evidence that knowledge and reason is always already contained within them. All that is

[170] All quotes taken from William Jowett's translation of the *Phaedo*.
[171] *Phaedo* 401

required to draw this knowledge out of us is an appropriate prompter, which is what Socrates thought of himself as being. A leading question must be asked, though: can only humans be "prompters" to humans? Certainly not, as Socrates discusses in detail how nature can remind us of the forms. If an uneven collection of sticks could prompt knowledge of the form of equality, then certainly other non-living entities could prompt knowledge, too. What are some contemporary prompters? Online life is certainly a flashpoint that calls the modern individual into their being—for better or for worse—and I will argue later that the curated underlying structure of online life prompts us to "become ourselves" in a similar way.

The second argument for recollection that we see being made discusses how certain *objects and things* (demonstrating my point made at the end of the previous paragraph) can remind us of what has been lost through time and inattention: "True. And yet what is the feeling of lovers when they recognize a lyre, or a garment, or anything else which the beloved has been in the habit of using? Do not they, from knowing the lyre, form in the mind's eye an image of the youth to whom the lyre, belongs? And this is recollection: and in the same way any one who sees Simmias may remember Cebes; and there are endless other things of the same nature. Yes, indeed, there are—endless, replied Simmias. And this sort of thing, he said, is recollection, and is most commonly a process of recovering that which has been forgotten through *time and inattention*."[172] The above line "Do not they, from knowing the lyre, form in the mind's eye an image of the youth to whom the lyre, belongs?" is especially helpful when thinking about recollection in a technological context. The line shows that recollection applies to both things and people, and that the range of sources that can prompt recollection is expansive. It is as if the spirit of the lover *indwells* the lyre. While Socrates probably would not make this claim of

[172] Ibid. Italics mine.

indwelling, it does not seem farfetched to make this extrapolation: that our identity (and the identity of self and others; see Proust, for example) exists *in and through* things. While Socrates is suspicious of technologies (which indeed is a core premise of this dissertation), this particular Socratic argument for recollection seems to suggest that technologies are crucial facilitators of the process of recollection, and thus we should assess how contemporary technologies facilitate this process. This is but one further justification for reading Socrates against himself with regards to technologies. If a fairly primitive (as least relative to contemporary technologies) technology such as a lyre can enact the process of recollection, how much more intensely and successfully could contemporary digital life do the same thing? The increased efficacy of contemporary digital technologies in enacting recollection is further justified by the very fact that they are designed to remind us of ourselves, to always throw traces of our past onto our present, and because the data that is used to generate this "digital recollection" is often a form of data that we ourselves produce, not data that has been generated externally or that exists accidentally in nature.

The third Socratic argument for recollection also relies strongly on the idea that our senses are what help us to recollect forgotten knowledge about ourselves and the world. In this specific argument Socrates argues that the experience of seeing a clump of sticks can help us recover our knowledge of the idea of equality:

> "And shall we proceed a step further, and affirm that there is such a thing as equality, not of wood with wood, or of stone with stone, but that, over and above this, there is equality in the abstract? Shall we affirm this? And whence did we obtain this knowledge? Did we not see equalities of material things, such as pieces of wood and stones, and gather from them the idea of an equality which is different from them? — you will admit that? Or

> look at the matter again in this way: Do not the same pieces of wood or stone appear at one time equal, and at another time unequal? Then these (so-called) equals are not the same with the idea of equality? I should say, clearly not, Socrates. And yet from these equals, although differing from the idea of equality, you conceived and attained that idea? …Whenever from seeing one thing you conceived another, whether like or unlike, there must surely have been an act of recollection?" "And from the senses then is derived the knowledge that all sensible things aim at an idea of equality of which they fall short — is not that true? Yes. Then before we began to see or hear or perceive in any way, we must have had a knowledge of absolute equality, or we would not have referred to that the equals which are derived from the senses?—for to that they all aspire, and of that they fall short?"[173]

In this argument Socrates once again refers to the possibility that entities in the world point the way towards true knowledge. In a sense, then, the things themselves, like the prompter Socrates, function to initiate the maieutic process of learning. I would like to repeat, though, that Socrates is not self-consciously making a point in these arguments about the philosophy of technology, nor is he *intentionally* advocating for an expanded way of thinking about the avenues through which self-knowledge can be acquired. As we well know, Socrates—in a famously proto-Christian manner—disdained the things of this world and instead advocated for a life of spartan contemplation and world-rejection. This would, by extension, imply a rejection of the technologies of this world, which are merely deficient reflections of the higher world of forms. And, as I argued in the first chapter, Socrates is largely responsible for initiating the suspicion of technology that has become a significant thread of Western philosophy throughout its long

[173] Ibid. 401-402.

history. In this argument Socrates is simply thinking about how we recollect things, and he makes the rather simple claim that we often recollect things through association with other things and people.

Regardless of whether or not Socrates was trying to make a point about self-knowledge and technology, these arguments of his open up a lane through which his aforementioned pathological suspicion of technology will be critiqued, and this critique will be made all the easier when he consider the specifically "recollective" nature of contemporary communicative technologies. While it is admittedly whiggish to critique a past thinker on the basis of the existence of technological formats that did not exist while they were alive, there are a few things that may be said in response to this potential critique: 1) The primary intention of this dissertation is to provide a much needed update to philosophical attitudes towards technology, therefore it is essential to directly engage with the primary source that is responsible for the need for this update in the first place. Moreover, instead of simply dismissing Socrates as "wrong" with regards to technology—which would be quite un-Socratic to do—it is much more philosophically interesting to try to align and update his categories of understanding with a world that has taken on a largely new and unpredictable shape. Socrates is at once the origin of that which this dissertation criticizes, but he also provides a wellspring of ideas that may be used against it. This is how Socrates engaged with others—by enticing them into a self-contradiction—and this paper tries to the same thing, but against Socrates himself. 2) Socrates would have done the same thing. He provides the grounds of the critique against himself by arguing in the *Phaedrus* that technologies work against memory (see chapter one with the example of writing promoting forgetfulness) while later saying here in the *Phaedo* that

technologies (like lyres) actually assist with memory and recollection. Socrates would never let a good contradiction go to waste, and neither should we.

The germane question is: What would Socrates think about contemporary algorithmically-powered digital platforms? Obviously, we can never know this answer. However, if Socrates were dogmatically opposed to the use of digital communicative technologies, for example, we could criticize him on the grounds that he isacting against his own stated beliefs: namely, that one should pursue self-knowledge and recollection even if it is uncomfortable.

The following section will make an unorthodox argument that claims that online algorithmic systems and recommender systems actually facilitate (at times) what I will call "practical" or "digital recollection," and that one is actually repeatedly thrown up against oneself, warts and all, when existing online. Chapter three showed the possible downsides of these recommender systems, however the downsides of these systems—as that chapter argued—only exist if the online denizen is not conscious of the "insidious" algorithms operating behind the scenes. However, if they are conscious of them, this argument will claim that they can help the denizen to be reminded of themselves, who they are, and of fundamental questions of existence.

4.3.3 Online Algorithms as Recollection: Prompting us to Remember Who We Are

If a passive lyre can prompt the recollection, how much more so can algorithmic online recommender systems prompt recollection? I argue that because online life often traces our past digital life and is always actively shaping our present online life (through recommendations, autofills, targeted advertisements, etc.) that the digital landscape is an optimal site for the individual to experience particularly intense forms of recollection of self and others. Whether

being reminded of a past lover through an unexpected "suggested friend" on Facebook, being made conscious of one's excessive beer consumption because every targeted advertisement seems to be peddling it, or by being reminded of an inside joke with an old friend because autocorrect always misspells a word in a unique way shared by you and them, the possibilities for algorithmically "prompted" moments of digital recollection are plenty. As with any type of recollection, what is recollected may be a lovely reminder of one's virtues and strengths, but it could just as easily cut in the opposite direction and remind the individual of their weaknesses and vices. Of that which they need to improve upon. This section will detail events of digital self-recollection that may (and do) occur. It will examine how these moments 1) require going beyond mediation and 2) facilitate rather than impede the pursuit of achieving self-knowledge.

4.3.4 Encountering Uncanny[174] Targeted Advertisements as Generating Digital Recollection

Anyone who has spent time online is familiar with the experience of being targeted by advertisements that are intended to appeal to the user's interests and potential purchasing habits. Paying close attention to the content of these advertisements and asking "Why is this being presented to me?" can be disclosive of multiple layers of existential truth, such as 1) uncomfortable revelations about one's "true" character, 2) revelations about how you (as a potential purchaser) are perceived by corporate forces, 3) reminders about the reality of corporate and government oversite and, therefore, of one's powerlessness in society, or even 4) a surprising revelation about your physical health or the health of a loved one. Each of these four options are possibilities for digital recollection that are specifically made possible by the

[174] For more on the notion of the uncanny see: Withy, Katherine. *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*. Harvard University Press, 2015.

"encounter" with algorithmically-informed targeted advertisement. I will go through each of these four options in turn, discussing their existential potential.

First, though, it will be helpful to define "targeted advertising" as well as to clarify the two major types of consumer factors—psychographic and demographic—that algorithms use in order to identify *who* to target with *what* type of advertisement. According to a 2005 article in the journal *Marketing Science:* "Major improvements in the quality of consumer information and the growth of targeted media vehicles allow firms to precisely target advertising to consumer segments within a market."[175] Here, in this relatively early reference to "target" or "targeted" advertising, we see a mention of what has made targeted advertising improve so much in efficiency in the contemporary digital age: "the quality of consumer information." Simply put, there is vastly more publicly available information about individual consumers and consumer segments, and marketing mathematics have become advanced enough that online advertisements can be tailored to the preferences of the individual consumer. The authors of this paper laud the rapidly progressing efficiency of targeted advertisements as well as how targeted advertising mitigates "waste" (advertisements targeted to unlikely future consumers):

> With targeted advertising, we find that firms advertise more to consumers who have a strong preference for their product than to comparison shoppers who can be attracted to the competition. Advertising less to comparison shoppers can be seen as a way for firms to endogenously increase differentiation in the market. *In addition, targeting allows the firm to eliminate "wasted" advertising to consumers whose preferences do not match a product's attributes*. As a result, the targeting of advertising increases

[175] Ganesh Iyer, David Soberman, J. Miguel Villas-Boas, "The Targeting of Advertising." *Marketing Science* 24 (3) 461-476

> equilibrium profits. The model demonstrates how advertising strategies are affected by firms being able to target pricing. Target advertising leads to higher profits, regardless of whether or not the firms have the ability to set targeted prices, and the targeting of advertising can be more valuable for firms in a competitive environment than the ability[176]

As a short attempt at a definition, targeted advertising is an attempt to "match consumer preferences with product attributes." But how is this accomplished in the age or the internet? My research has revealed that two factors are primarily relied upon by marketing algorithms to "target" their advertisements: demographic factors and psychographic factors.

Demographic factors consider the individual's demographic status in order to get a better sense of what their purchasing preferences are most likely to be. The algorithm developers may consider demographic factors such as race, gender[177], economic status, sex, age, generation, level of education, income level, or employment in identifying consumers to target. Some targeted advertisements even rely upon user's heart-rate information as recorded by the individual's wearable technology (such as Apple watches).[178] Certain age groups are more likely to interested in buying water guns, while other age ranges are more likely to be interested in treatments to slow down the process of balding, and so on. While the use of these demographic

---

[176] Ibid. 461. Italics mine.

[177] For an article on how the category of "gender" is used for targeted advertisements see: Jansen, B.; Moore, K.; Carman, S. (2013). "Evaluating the performance of demographic targeting using gender in sponsored search" in *Information Processing & Management*. 49 (1): 286–302.

[178]Orazi, D.C., & Nyilasy, G. (2019). "Straight to the Heart Of Your Target Audience: Personalized Advertising Systems Based on Wearable Technology and Heart-Rate Variability." *Journal of Advertising Research, 59 (2),* 137-141

factors in developing targeted advertisements is justifiably controversial for a number of reasons[179], it is less important to the idea of digital recollection than the next category is.

Psychographic factors consider variables such as browser history, purchase history, and other recent online activities. (In chapter three I wrote extensively about "dataveillance" and the various ways that social media platforms gather psychographic information. The same applies for targeted advertisements.) Psychographic analyses also try to assess what the consumer's values are, their personality type, their opinions towards political and cultural issues, as well as their general attitude towards the world.

Psychographic factors are more important that demographic factors when considering the idea of digital recollection because they rely on past personal activity in order to shape and inform current content presentation. The past self (or a version of the past self) is also thrown back onto the present self and reflected towards them through a digital collage of targeted, psychographically-informed advertisement content. While this "version" of the past self may be distorted or misunderstood by the advertising agency's algorithm, it will inevitably bear traces of the user's authentic past.

4.3.4.2 Targeted Ads May Remind us of Our Past and of Our Character

Some years ago I woke up one morning and—like so many people do—I began surfing the internet on my phone to see what had happened in the world while I was asleep. Scrolling through various websites (social media sites, video hosting platforms, etc) a slow sense of something being slightly "off" began to settle upon me. I had a sense of the uncanny. After registering this sense I began to notice what was out of the ordinary: I was being bombarded with

[179] See, for example: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/12/business/media/toyota-camry-ads-different-ethnicities.html

advertisements for Peroni beer. This was certainly out of the ordinary, and so I thought about why this might be and began to consider possibilities based off of my past behavior.

Only after spending some time in contemplation was I able to get to the source of what must have generated this targeted advertisement bombardment. The previous night had been a long one. The prior day I had driven up to Dallas to spend a few days visiting with my family, and the prior night I went to a local bar to catch up with some of my friends. After mentally reconstructing the events of the earlier evening I began to recollect a conversation that I had with some friends about Peroni beer. The discussion ranged from how it tasted (verdict: mediocre), how much it costs in Italy compared to in America, and what the alcohol by volume percentage of Peroni is. In order to discover the answer to some of these questions that were being asked I began to use my phone to search for information about Peroni. After disbursing the newly discovered information about Peroni to the group that I was with we ordered a round of Peronis, and then perhaps a few more. Then the entire topic of Peroni was quickly forgotten about and our attention was quickly redirected to more important things.

While the above anecdote may seem mundane and unimportant, it does point towards a real, concrete encounter that individuals have with targeted advertisements. More importantly—and as was demonstrated by this anecdote—is that these digital encounters can lead to an experience of digital recollection, and that these events of digital recollection can (and do) have existential ramifications. For instance, this particular moment of digital recollection prompted me to ask myself a series of questions about myself and my character that would otherwise been ignored, such as: "How was I behaving towards my friends last night? Was I being rude, controlling, or dismissive in any way?" "Why did I drink so much last night? Is this becoming a problem?" "Did I act authentically during the prior evening?" This litany of self-examining

questions was prompted simply by the presence of a series of targeted advertisements that I saw on my phone. Each of these questions probed towards achieving an enhanced sense of self-knowledge, and the targeted ads are recognizable as being the condition that prompted this process in the first place, rather than being mere online marketing. In a sense, the advertisements were extremely personal, even if it's understood that their appearance was merely the manifestation of a deeply impersonal underlying algorithm.

This above example is but one of many, and one can imagine that encounters with moments of digital recollection can be of a much more serious nature than the one recounted above. One can imagine an individual coming to recognize that a preponderance of targeted advertisement directed towards them have to do with guns and violence, and this could prompt the individual to reflect on their online activity only to recognize that they spend an unhealthy amount of time watching gruesome, violent, weapon-heavy content. This could then easily segue into an event of self-confrontation and critique: "Why am I attracted to viewing this type of content?" "What does being targeted by these types of advertisements say about my character?" Perhaps this moment of digital recollection could even potentially lead to a reckoning; perhaps the individual could change their ways because they do not want to be the type of person who inhales an inordinate amount of this type of content.

A few more examples of moments of digital recollection prompted by targeted advertisements will be presented in order to emphasize the existential possibilities afforded by such algorithmized content.

In the event that an individual has an unhealthy relationship with medication it can easily be imagined that such an individual would notice an uncanny amount of medicine-related content targeted towards them. As with the prior example of excessive violent content, this

moment of recognition may motivate the individual to intervene in their life and re-evaluate how they are living. Similarly, if one begins to be targeted by advertisement of an extreme political or religious nature, this could lead them to an awakening that they have been sliding down the slippery slope into extremism, and that it's time to dial it back. As one's extremism becomes more intense, the "fringe" ads targeted towards them inevitably increase in frequency, which would, naturally, make the user more likely to recognize that something might be "off" in their life.

Out of fairness it should also be mentioned that targeted advertisements could just as easily—and perhaps more easily—"accomplish their goal" and drive the individual further into their pre-existing problem, as in the above example of extremism. Chapter 3 discussed this possibility. However, the point of this subsection is to show one avenue through which algorithmically-generated targeted advertisements can (and do) also lead to moments of self-examination and increased self-knowledge.

4.3.4.3 Targeted Ads as Revealing One's Perceived Demographic

While the above subsection (4.3.4.2) relied upon psychographic factors to discuss how targeted ads facilitate self-knowledge, this section refers to the demographic variables that targeted advertisements use. Targeted advertisements may also reveal how one's demographic is perceived by corporations, and this may in turn shape how one thinks about their "place" in society. Much has been written on this topic, and for good reason.[180][181] Online advertisers will

---

[180] See, for example: Rummo, P.E., Cassidy, O., Wells, I., Coffino, J. A., & Bragg, M.A. (2020). Examining the Relationship between Youth-Targeted Food Marketing Expenditures and the Demographics of Social Media Followers. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17* (5).

[181] For a short article on the possible racist nature of some targeted advertisement published on the website of the American Marketing Association see: https://www.ama.org/marketing-news/the-ethics-of-targeting-minorities-with-dark-ads/

attempt to appeal to the users perceived demographic by using advertising strategies—such as phrases, color schemes, song choices, etc.—that they believe will resonate with that target demographic. Marketing algorithms may guess a user's demographic based off of search queries, songs listened to, time of day spent online, and so forth. By paying attention to targeted advertisements, therefore, the user may gain a sense of who they are perceived to be by marketing companies. If there is a disconnect between how the user perceives themselves and how they are "perceived" (as disclosed by advertisement content), this could prompt the individual to reflect upon themselves and to examine specifically how their self-perception is in contrast with the one "imposed" upon them. For example, there have been moments in which advertisements for young parents (such as diaper and stroller advertisements) have been targeted towards me even though I am not a parent. This targeting has likely occurred due to an assortment of factors such as my age (28), the fact that I have been looking to move into a house with more bedrooms, the fact that I'm looking for more traditionally suburban housing, and the fact that I have been communicating with my brother about his newly born son online. However, despite the fact that the algorithm is wrong in thinking that I am a new parent, merely being misclassified by the targeted advertisements can enact its own process of self-examination. I soon found myself asking myself about whether or not I did, indeed, want to have children or not. Because the advertisements suggested that I was a parent, this made me ask serious questions about the meaning of fatherhood, the ethics of having children, and even more broadly, what the nature of ethical obligations to future generations is.

This is but one further avenue through which targeted advertisements can enact a process of digitally-prompted self-examination. By identifying the demographic category that online

marketers think that one belongs to, this can prompt the individual to ask themselves who they really are, and who they want to potentially become.

4.3.4.4 Targeted Advertisements as a Reminder About the Reality of Government and Corporate Oversite and, Therefore, of One's Relative Powerlessness in Society

It has been well documented that both corporate and government forces use various digital technologies, such as cell phones[182], to "spy" on citizens. The microphone (and even sometimes the camera) on one's cell-phone can be, and often is, accessible by third-parties. The capacity for this invasion of digital privacy is often revealed through targeted advertisements. It is exceedingly common to hear someone tell a story about how they know that their phone is "listening" to them because after merely speaking about a topic advertisements regarding that merely-spoken-about topic began to appear. While some used to dismiss this as simple paranoia, now many more people are coming to realize the reality of what some have referred to as the "digital panopticon."

Whenever such a targeted advertisement appears on one's phone or computer—one that clearly proves that their microphone is being "listened" to—this can serve to remind the individual about the forces of control in the world that seek to gather as much information about the individual as possible. Such a reminder could very likely prompt the individual to be become ever more suspicious of the government and the corporate world, but also it would reveal to the individual approximately where they stand in the greater power hierarchy. It may even provoke them to become more politically and socially active. This type of encounter would allow the individual to recollect an uncomfortable truth: one always exists within a power structure, and

[182]Bailey, R. (2013). Your Cellphone is Spying on You. *Reason*, 44 (8), 34-39.

those at the top of the structure are not always honest and forthcoming about the truth of what they are doing.

4.3.4.5 Targeted Advertisements as Revealing Intimate, Unknown Truths

In 2011 a father was surprised and upset because he all of the sudden began to receive maternity-related coupons at his house. The coupons were being sent by Target and were addressed to the father's high-school aged daughter. The father called Target to express his frustration at the fact that Target was sending this type of stuff to his teenage daughter who still lived in his house. He did not like the fact that they would send this to his non-pregnant daughter. However, he was wrong about one thing: his daughter, in fact, was pregnant. And Target knew that she was pregnant before he did.[183]

Target was able to identify that the daughter was pregnant because they had developed an algorithm developed to identity when a consumer was pregnant or not based on their spending habits. Women prolifically purchasing products such as calcium, unscented lotion, and cotton balls were considered "likely" to be pregnant. The girl was purchasing similar products, and so the targeted advertisements began.

This is an example that shows the final possibility for how targeted advertisements can reveal intimate, unknown truths. While this example does not involve reference to online targeted advertisement, online targeted advertisement would foster even more opportunities for these types of moments of truth-disclosure, especially as these current online algorithms have access to much more information than Target's algorithm did in 2011.

[183] See "How Target Figured Out a Teen Girl was Pregnant Before Her Father Did" on Forbes.com, author Kashmir Hill, date of publication Feb. 16, 2012.

4.3.5 Recommendation Systems

When using digital platforms such as Youtube, Netflix, or Twitter, the user is often "recommended" to view certain content. This comes in the form of recommended videos (on Youtube), recommended movies (on Netflix), recommended tweets (on Twitter), recommended songs (on Spotify), and so on. Auction sites, book review sites, and fan sites also rely on these so-called "recommendation systems." Often these platforms will create customized playlists for a user based off of their perceived interests as determined by their past viewing, listening, or "favoriting" activity, and also factor in demographic variables as well. According to Kembellec, Chartron, and Saleh in regards to recommendation systems: "Acclaimed by various content platforms (books, music, movies) and auction sites online, recommendation systems are key elements of digital strategies. If development was originally intended for the performance of information systems, the issues are now massively moved on logical optimization of the customer relationship, with the main objective to maximize potential sales."[184] In other words, these systems, in general, are intended to generate user enthusiasm, maintain customer loyalty, and—of course—to ultimately generate revenue. As Dixit, Gupta, and Jain say with regards to this latter point: "A recommender system (RS) is a tool that provides personalized services to its customers in e-commerce sites….The main aim of e-commerce websites is to turn their visitors into customers."[185]

The experience of these recommender systems is typically straightforward, although at times they can assume a more sly disguise. The most popular and likely the most controversial

---

[184] Kembellec, G., Chartron, G., Saleh, I., & Kembellec, G. (2014). *Recommender systems*. ProQuest Ebook Central

[185] Veer Sain Dixit, Shalini Gupta, and Parul Jain. (2018). *A Propound Hybrid Approach for Personalized Online Product Recommendations.* Applied Artificial Intelligence 2018, VOL. 32, NOS. 9–10, p. 785

recommendation system used by a major online platform is the one used by YouTube. There have been no shortage of controversies surrounding people who have been dumbfounded by the recommendations that they have received on this platform, or who have accused the Youtube algorithm of being partially responsible for "radicalizing" others.[186] Recently, in April of 2021, the New York Times even published an article provocatively titled "YouTube Brainwashed My Dad: Can I Reprogram His Feed?"[187] The classification for this article (which may be seen in the url) is under the descriptively titled category of "YouTube Radicalization."

These above-mentioned articles clearly demonstrate that many people actively realize the transformative power of recommendation systems, and specifically YouTube's. However, why is it that papers that acknowledge the transformative power of such systems are almost always pejorative, and describe such systems as being self-concealing or brainwashing? If they have the power of self-concealing, do they also have the power of self-revealing? I argue that the answer to this question is an obvious "yes."

An easy example of practical digital recollection prompted by recommendation systems is when such a system 1) reminds an individual of a loved-but-forgetten song buried deep in their memory or 2) points an individual towards a song that is representative of a style of song that they always liked but did not yet know yet. These mundane examples of encountering songs through recommendation systems work to *reaffirm* or *reawaken* one's sense of self. The individual in these cases is not brainwashed, but is instead prompted to reinforce their aesthetic

[186] See, for example: Abul-Fottouh, Deena; Song, Melodie Yunju; Gruzd, Anatoliy. Examining Algorithmic Biases in Youtube's Recommendations of Vaccine Videos. In *International Journal of Medical Informatics*. August 2020 (140)
[187] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/magazine/youtube-radicalization.html

self-identification or are prompted to expand and modify how it is that they think about themselves in relation to that which has been revealed as desirable to them.

However, not all meaningful existential encounters with recommender systems are so mundane as song preference. Suggested videos—often displayed as "related content"—can prompt transformations of the individual's soul. One often hears people describe the phenomenon of entering an online "wormhole," which is a way of describing an intense exploration of some topic outside of the domain of standard exploration. It can be on some "fringe" topic—cults, an unsolved murder, a dispute between two famous figures, etc—or it can be something of a more spiritual or religious nature. If an individual is already trying to "discover themselves" (to use a relevant phrase of our time) and are on the path of pursuing some hazy idea impressed upon their mind, algorithmically-generated recommender systems are a perfect tool to help the individual discover resources to help clarify their as yet unclear desire. To be able to "find" what one wants implies that that desire was already there but was simply submerged, and recommendation systems are designed to help one find what they might be looking for.

It is no far stretch to imagine an individual "finding" something in the recommendations that transforms one's life "for the better," and this would not happen without algorithmic digital technology. What demonstrates this sort of digital discovery as a form of digital recommendation is that it is always inevitably the *self discovering itself.* How is this the case? This is because the information that generates the recommendations is always information generated by the individual about their pre-existing preferences in the first place. In other words, the recommendation systems operate so as to show the self what it always "knew" about itself in some earlier, imperfectly articulated way. As always is the case in a massively commodified

world, these recommendations may be (and often are) “hijacked” by generic recommendations that are not targeted but rather are broadcast to everyone equally, similarly to a billboard on the side of the highway or on the side of a sports arena. This is the case, for example, with the “new releases” section on Netflix. Every user sees it equally. However, outside of these generic and equally-displayed recommendations, those that are generated by past user activity discover a real potential to help the individual both “discover” and recollect themselves through digital means—yet another possible mode of digital recollection.

4.3.6 Autofills as Digital Traces

When entering a search query on a search engine, or when sending a text or digital message to a friend, the user has almost certainly encountered—and perhaps been surprised by—the autofill function. The purpose of the autofill function is to assist the user in completing their query/search by automatically filling in information or completing the spelling of a word before the individual has finished typing it. The data that the autofill function relies upon to make these automatically generated inputs is derived from the user’s past messages and spelling tendencies. The following passage provides a brief summary of autofill functions while also providing an amusing hypothetical scenario about how autofill functions can dredge up information about one’s past and remind the user of past situations and individuals that they would likely rather forget:

> Briefly stated, autofill is a function which many computer applications and programs have that automatically fills in a field. The benefit of autofill is evident and obvious: rather than key stroking the full name of every individual or email contact in one's address book, if you type in the first few letters of an individual's name, autofill completes the name in full. That is all well and good if you have only one Melvin Taylor,

> even when sending Melvin a confidential email on a particularly sensitive matter. However, if you previously sent an email to Melvin Smith and autofill has filled in the name of Melvin Smith for that new email, you may wind up sending that email to the wrong individual. This creates several immediate problems, the first of which is that Melvin Taylor never received the email, thus defeating the purpose of the communication. The second is that Melvin Smith is now conversant with your strategy and tactics on the matter of which, until reading your email, he was unaware. Upon realizing your error, if Melvin Smith happens to be your adversary or can fairly be characterized as someone who does not wish you well, there is good reason for you to have a lump in your throat and feel your temperature rising, recognizing that the panic attack now under way has a substantial basis in reality.[188]

This passage is interesting in a number of ways. For example, the above example reveals the privacy and security risks of autofill, and demonstrates a very real way in which this digital tool can thrust the user into a compromising position. There have been no shortage of humorous or "cringy" mistakes that have been caused by autofill, and a quick internet search will reveal several pages that are dedicated to documenting these autofill failures. However, I want to focus on another existential-technological possibility that this hypothetical scenario reveals: autofill functions can (and do) prompt individuals to recollect elements of their past that would otherwise have been lost to time. The above-mentioned "Melvin Smith" would very likely have been relegated to the realm of the forgotten had autofill not been actively preserving and inputting digital traces of the email-writer's past onto their present. Due to the preservation of these

[188] Lang, R. D. (2016). Double-edged sword of autofill: The need for speed while avoiding errors, the. New York State Bar Association Journal, 88(3), 25-27.

digital traces the email-writer is forced to confront themselves anew. A possible self-examining question that is perhaps the most obvious question to ask in this scenario, and an easy example of practical digital recollection is: What did I do such that I upset Melvin Smith in the first? Or it could prompt an even more challenging line of self-confrontation: What is it about me that makes it such that I have accumulated so many enemies? Do I need to change? Do I have an anger problem? Moments of digital recollection—due to the above reflections—can and should be theorized not only as digital interference and obstruction, which would be the line of Socratic Suspicion, but also as potentially prompting moments of Socratic existential intervention.

4.3.6.2 Autofills and Recommendations as *Memento mori*: Digital Preservation and Digital Traces

In this section I will argue that online Autofills and Recommender Systems facilitate the accomplishment of a most critical existential task: remembering the dead and being reminded of our own mortality. Throughout the history of philosophy thinkers have been preoccupied with the meaning of death, and have generally advocated the position that the authentic individual does not ignore the reality of death, but rather maintains a realistic attitude towards our "ownmost possibility[189]." Socrates even defines the purpose of philosophy as being that of "practice" or "preparation for death" when he makes statements such as:

> For I deem that the true disciple of philosophy is likely to be misunderstood by other men; they do not perceive that he is ever pursuing death and dying; and if this is true, why, having had the desire of death all his life long, should he repine at the arrival of that which he has been always pursuing and desiring?[190]

[189] This language is borrowed from Heidegger's discussion of "being-towards-death" in *Being and Time*.
[190] Phaedo p. 390

Nevertheless, these figures maintain the garden variety skepticism of the existential possibilities of technologies, and would almost certainly think that technologies do not help us achieve the "earnest thought of death" or allow us to become authentically "co-identical with our own death."[191] However, I want to claim that the "digital traces" that linger online—and that constitute the data that operates the algorithmic systems that I have been describing—serve as a way through which the dead are preserved online, and that they in fact remain an active force in the online experience of those still living. All of the online data (profiles, comments, etc.) generated by the deceased while they were still alive lingers on long after their deaths, and even when they are dead, they still "reappear" as living to those loved ones that they have left behind.

The academic concept that I am drawing on right now is the concept of the "digital afterlife." This is a concept that has begun to be theorized quite a bit in the recent literature[192], and it basically refers to the content and data that remains online about a person after their death. In this academic context, these remains are often described as "traces," so I will follow suit and adopt this terminology as it seems quite appropriate to describe the concept.[193]

The field of "thanatechnology" is a field developed in 1983 by Carla Sofka and is a field dedicated to studying the relationship between death and the internet.[194] This field is rife with

---

[191] Both of these are terms that Kierkegaard uses in his upbuilding discourse titled "At a Graveside." He describes the authentic existential attitude towards death in these terms. This discourse may be found in: Kierkegaard, S., Hong, H. V., & Hong, E.H. (2009). *Three discourses on imagined occasions.* Princeton University Press.

[192] See, for example, this very helpful and recently released collection of essays on the topic: Savin-Baden, M., & Mason-Robbie, V. (Eds.). (2020). *Digital afterlife: Death matters in a digital age*. ProQuest Ebook Central

[193] For a discussion of this idea of "digital traces" see the chapter "Posthumous Digital Material: Does It 'Live On' in Survivors' Accounts of Their Dead?" by Mórna O'Connor in the above mentioned collected volume. Chapter 3, pages 39-54.

[194] For a discussion of this idea of "thanatology" see the chapter "The Transition for Life to the Digital Afterlife: Thanatechnology and Its Influence on Gried" by Carla Sofka in the above mentioned collected volume. Chapter 4, pages 57-70.

commentaries and studies about how people use all manner of digital methods to grieve the death of others. She even notes how there is now a new industry described as "Emotional Life Insurance" which is devoted to making sure that the "digital traces" of the deceased are preserved online long after their first "physical" death.[195] According to Sofka, there is a new term being used by thanatechnologists to describe how the death of the other is re-experienced digitally even after the "initial" death of the deceased: "Second Death" or "Second Loss." In surveying the literature on this newly developed term, Sofka writes:

> Bassett (2017) suggested the term 'second loss' to capture how the loss or deletion of digital memories would impact the bereaved, and Stokes (2015) contemplated the impact of the deletion of 'digital remains' or 'second death'. Based on information from the mass media, academic research, and anecdotal evidence, Kasket (2018) noted that 'we are seeing more and more anxiety about whether the online legacy of our dead will continue to be preserved'[196]

This concept of "second death" vis-à-vis the encounter with the presence (or sudden disappearance) of digital remains decisively displays that serious existential engagements with fundamental questions of existence occurs in our online experience, and that this notion of digital "second death" is one that existential philosophers should begin to take seriously. The traces of the deceased other are regularly thrust upon those who are left behind, and prompt recollections of the other that would otherwise not be prompted. The dread of losing the digital traces of the other evokes recollections of the initial death-event, and requires that the individual maintain

[195] Ibid. 63
[196] Ibid. 64

their care and worry for the other over time. This prompts questions of mortality and anxiety that any existentially-minded thinkers should be most engaged by.

While I prefer to stay away from personal anecdotes in my academic writings, I have experienced "digital traces" of the deceased as well as the above described worry about a "second death" in such an acute way that it may help give phenomenal validation to this concept. One of my closest childhood friends, whom I shall hereafter refer to as "D," tragically and unexpectedly died in a motorcycle accident some years ago. Immediately after his death I was stunned, forlorn, but otherwise went through the process of grieving in what might be considered a "normal" way, if such an experience can ever be described as normal. However, as time began to pass and the acuteness of the loss became dulled, I began to notice some unsettling events in my digital life. Facebook would remind me: "Today is D's birthday." My smartphone would occasionally prompt me to send D a message. "Send D a message?" When typing in the first letter of his name on my phone or online sometimes his name would be auto-filled in for me. Certain words that were spelled idiosyncratically—and that we used as part of a "private language" in our friend group—would be auto-filled in for me. His online profiles lingered and could still be easily viewed as if it were still the last day of his life. All of these reminded me of my lost friend.

As someone who has experienced relatively little in terms of the loss of loved ones in my life, I wonder how much more extensive and intense other, less fortunate people's encounters with the digital traces of the dead are. We should consider how the digitization and algorithmization of life provides new horizons for the experience of grief, remembering the dead, and for understanding existential finitude. Autofills and recommendations serve as a *memento mori*. They serve as Democritus preparing himself for death by spending time wandering among

tombs, as Socrates reminding his friends that we are all death-bound and that philosophy properly understood is no more than training for death. They are similar to Seneca writing another injunction to meditate on death, or Epictetus telling us that each time we kiss our friends or family we should remind ourselves that we are mortal. It is Marcus Aurelius asking the reader to "consider how mean and ephemeral all mortal things are" in his *Meditations.*[197]

Even to this day, even on this very day, I encountered digital traces of D while online. The more I linger on these traces, the more likely I am to re-encounter future traces. This is the algorithm at work seeing to it that I don't forget the dead. If, during a quiet hour, I decide to go peruse his old YouTube channel and view some of the videos that he uploaded onto that site, "recommendations" to view other videos by him will inevitably find their way into my YouTube feed for the next several weeks or months. Then I will inevitably click on one of those recommended videos, and the cycle of digital recollection of the dead will continue unimpeded into the future. His "second death," his digital death, has not yet occurred for me, and I hope that it does not. The implicit message of these recommendations is one that I agree with: do your best to keep the memory of the dead alive; try to avoid allowing them to experience a second death.

When I have encountered these events of digital recollection of the dead through encountering digital traces it is not only the death of the other that I am prompted to think about, but also the death of myself. If seeing the digital afterlives of others is a *memento mori,* which I argue that it is, then it reminds us of death in general. Figures such as Emmanuel Levinas have demonstrated that we cannot understand our own death until we encounter the death of the other.

---

[197] Fischel, Henry Albert. *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings,* E.J. Brill, 1973, p. 95.

When we “encounter” the death of the other digitally then we inevitably must encounter our own death, for to think the absence of the other we must attempt to think the possibility of the absence of ourselves. Theorized as such, algorithmically-intensified digital traces of the dead are profoundly existential; they actively prompt us to think about our own finitude through encountering the finitude of others. This technology does not drive us away from self-knowledge, it pushes us towards it.

4.4 The Third Argument: Some Final Possibilities for Thinking About Digital Maieutics

The following sub-sections of this dissertation—4.4.2 through 4.4.6—will appear less as a fully-developed linear arguments, as the prior two sections (the argument from pseudonyms and the argument from digital recollection) did. Rather, this section will simply present some possible modes for thinking about digital technology that go beyond mediation theory, as well as one example of an individual for whom mediation theory seems inadequate. Subsection 4.4.2 will discuss how for some individuals digital life is folded into—in fact co-identical—with their experience and understanding of reality in the world. One route could be to dismiss them as misguided. This section, instead of doing that, will ask whether or not virtual world-building can be thought of as a mode of self-creation and world-understanding. Sections 4.4.3 through 4.4.6 will identify three possible philosophical orientations towards technology—namely Confession and Intimation, Self-Interpretation, Embodied Expression—that offer possible theoretical perspectives that would enact the praxis of this section. While none of them are fully developed, they build off of the major idea of this dissertation and try to establish possibilities for implementation.

4.4.2 Virtual World-Building as Self-Creation and Existential Landscaping

The world—as experienced and indwelled online—offers an imaginative and often lively space of self-creation and self-interpretation. Rather than encroaching on our existential lives and alienating us from ourselves, the digital world may just as easily be thought of as a site of—or even a condition for—the possibility of existential fulfillment and intensification, as a site for the pursuit of self-knowledge. Just as the outside artifact-minimal world offers a space in which people—usually children—may imaginatively develop and articulate understandings of themselves through play and exploration, so also does the online world offer profound possibilities for self-articulation. Rather than as a mere platform or medium upon or through which individuals inscribe and promote their pre-held beliefs, virtual worlds—and the process of creating them—are a context in which can both generate, articulate, and interpret their self-understanding. Just as the non-digital world is limited, so also is the digital, but within these boundaries a free, self-creative project may be undertaken while still retaining vital existential categories of individuation often focused on by the existentialists: anxiety, despair, faith, freedom, tragedy, and the like. While discourses of mediation typically consider this type of technology as an existential encroachment, some small bits of academic work—such as Stefano Gualeni's *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools*, have sought to challenge this belief. But one need not stay in the virtual halls of academia to see how virtual world-building may be a practice in self-creation and self-examination.

Consider, for example, the case of Terry A. Davis, who single-handedly developed TempleOS, an open-source operating system which he first released in 2005 and worked on continuously until his recent death.[198] This program—which one may freely download—is an

[198] https://templeos.org

intimate point of access to the lifeworld of Davis, and its labyrinthine halls, cryptic messaging, computer generated "hymns," and games are Davis' articulations of his "visions from God." More strikingly, though, over time one discovers that for Davis his program—TempleOS—*is* itself the Third Temple prophesied in the Bible.[199] As a self-proclaimed prophet with a background in computer programming, the digital landscape afforded him the possibility to accomplish his existential task, and to understand his task in an eschatological vision of the world, the task of which he believed to be the construction of the prophesied Temple of Ezekiel. TempleOS is the culmination of revelation in this case, and is the immersive digital mapping of Davis' existential landscape, rich in contradiction, hope, dead-ends, and mystery. While religious existentialists have doubted the spiritual potential of technology—like Gabriel Marcel, who argued that technology stultifies the mystery of spirituality and us into "mere technicians"[200]—it is obvious in this case that technology, for Davis, is the condition for expressing and experiencing divine mystery and revelation. The program itself in an existential and spiritual act—a Kierkegaardian leap of faith—that Davis performed to strive for closer unity with the divine. Models of mediation are not equipped to address the existential layering of such situations, as some form of alienation or separation is necessarily built into them, but virtual worlds—at least ones like TempleOS—are better understood in an existential register, as, for example: fulfillment, completion, and intensification.

---

[199] See Ezekiel 40-47.

[200]Marcel, G. (1965). *The existential background of human dignity*. Oxford University Press. *160*

4.4.3 Modes of Thinking Beyond Mediation: Confession and Intimation, Self-Interpretation, Embodied Expression

In order to attempt the task of thinking technology outside of discourses of mediation and encroachment, it will be helpful to introduce a tentative new vocabulary for thinking technology in an existential register. While not exhaustive or final, I think it will be useful—and it will be a task of my larger project—to attempt to access modes of thinking about technology that do not revert to mediation discourse. In a sense this may be a way of attempting to think towards the "saving power" that Heidegger cryptically refers to in the *Question Concerning Technology*.

4.4.4 Technology as Confession and Intimation

It is especially timely to think of technology as a confession and intimation during a time of social distancing. Technologies—such as Zoom and Houseparty—that help to overcome the barriers of physical distance are multiplying. In flocking towards technologies that overcome social distancing people confess a desire to be close, and a desire to salvage whatever intimacy may be preserved even while physically apart. Communication technologies often seem to work towards this end, and even "trivial" technological adaptations like emojis feebly attempt to reconstruct the intimacy of physical presence. They intimate or hint at existential needs.

In general, one may think of technologies as confessions of weakness or of desire, and ones that are often intermingled. A technology is a confession of weakness when it reveals to us something that we cannot do on our own, while also articulating the possibility of hope. Eyeglasses—rather than simply being conceived of as the example of technological mediation of perception *par excellence*—also tell us that we cannot see well, that our vision is frail. Medical technologies force us to admit that we need help, books that our capacity for memory is feeble, and vehicles that we are slow. The development of or reliance upon a certain technology is often an implicit self-confession, an attestation of some form of primordial incapacity, or the need to

satisfy some form of pressing desire. So, in this act of technological self-confession we reveal ourselves to ourselves in confessing what we cannot do on our own, or confess what our ownmost existential desires are. Technology here is not an encroaching mediation but is rather a modality of self-attunement and a praxis in self-knowledge.

In thinking about technology as confession and intimation we think first and foremost about the user—about the single individual—rather than about the "object." In thinking about technology through this lens we may come to recognize the veracity of fundamental claim that was made in chapter one: human questions (such as "What is the good life?") are always already technological questions. Technologies reveal what we need, who we are, what we admit to desiring, and—ultimately—what we think is best for us.

4.4.5 Technology as Self-Interpretation

Thinking of technology as self-interpreting is most easily done when thinking about digital technologies such as the ones I mentioned earlier: recommender systems, feedback loops, and the like. In the case of the algorithmic structure of digital technologies the self is literally cast back upon and re-portrayed to the self over and again. Virtual worlds also give us the chance to undergo the hermeneutic task of self-interpretation is a free and creative space. A similar possibility is acutely activated in role-playing games (online, over the board, etc) where possibilities for self-interpretive activity are centered. While the cynical interpretation may treat these activities as a form of "escapism"—a common existential critique—these technological activities may just as easily be theorized as the opposite. That is, as praxis in self-examination and as a pursuit of self-knowledge.

More broadly, though, technology in general may be thought of as self-interpretive in that it is often self-selected. That is, the individual makes technological decisions and encompasses

themselves in a web of technologies, each artifact or system referring back to the individual and to their world-making decisions. Tattoos and body modifications may be a most obvious example of this, as well as writing, but the basic premise may be extrapolated to even the most basic of technologies.

In other words, to think or technology as self-interpretation is to recognize that each "technological choice" that one makes is a choice about who they think that they are, or an aspirational decision about who they want to become. There is never a detachment between the individual and their choices. Choices about technology are just as meaningful choices as any other, and—as Sartre reminds—they fundamentally constitute who one is. One cannot be identified as anything other than as the sum of their choices, and if many of their choices are technological, then technology is crucial to establish who one *is*.

4.4.6 Technology as Embodiment or Embodied Expression

Recent movements have argued that we ought to expand the scope of what is open for hermeneutic interpretation beyond traditional written texts—see Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, Richard Kearney's recent push for a carnal hermeneutics[201], or Don Ihde's *Expanding Hermeneutics*. Others have written extensively about the inextricable entanglement between the body and technologies, often using terms such as "cyborg" and promoting the "strong view or technological artifacts." (This is an idea developed by figures such as Bruno LaTour, Donna Haraway, Pieter Vermaas, Peter-Paul Verbeek that posits that humans and technologies form "hybrid entities" and are thus mutually responsible for moral harms.[202]) These concurrent

---

[201] See: Kearney, R., & Treanor, B. (2015). *Carnal Hermeneutics*. Fordham University Press.

[202] See, for example: http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/54-TECHNIQUES-GB.pdf or http://www.pietervermaas.nl/PDF/Pieter_Vermaas_ARTEFACTS_blackwell.pdf

philosophical movements, enact a 1) a push to expanding the domain of hermeneutic inquiry and to 2) identify the hybridity of human-technology relations. This creates an ideal intellectual climate in which an embodied technological hermeneutics may occur. If technological artifacts are extensions of the body, then technologies ought to be thought of as inseparable from our hermeneutic task of self-understanding, both at singular and collective levels.

One way of initiating this embodied technological hermeneutics would be by thinking of technologies *as* embodied expressions, hermeneutically rich, no different than the embodied expressions found on our face in moments of bliss or disgust, or the tense grip of the hand in moments of stress. If we can hermeneutically interpret embodiment, then we may also interpret technologies likewise. Just as carnal hermeneutics does not rely on the flesh as a mediator between the self and expression—but instead sees flesh as a self-standing expressive signifier—neither would an embodied hermeneutics of technology need to rely upon mediation discourse. Rather, technologies would be seen as "just" another form of expressive and interpretive possibility, similar (and perhaps even no different than) to bodily gestures. In interpreting our technologies, then, we will also be interpreting ourselves, and in so doing pursuing the foundational philosophical task of self-knowledge.

If we live in and through technology (as I have argued), and if we live in and through our bodies (which is self-evident), why would be assume that we can perform an intensive hermeneutics of one but not the other? Interpretive traces of who we are inscribed all around—not only in books, in paintings, or on our bodies, but also upon our buildings, tools, digital platforms, and all other aspects of our built world. We could close off hermeneutic avenues for interpreting our humanity, or we could expand. The philosophical decision seems to me to be to expand rather than contract; to push boundaries for analyzing who we are.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented an array of arguments that demonstrate why thinking about online algorithmic life within the traditional framework of Socratic Suspicion—which has been rearticulated by existentialists as "inauthentic" or "deficient" and by contemporary philosophers of technology in terms of mediation—is inadequate and untenable. This fourth chapter constitutes the most important section of this dissertation, insofar as it presents the concrete possibilities for trying to step outside of Socratic Suspicion and into a space of thinking that is open to new avenues for pursuing self-knowledge. Some of these arguments are probably more convincing than others, and some are absolutely more developed than others. Nonetheless, they all push a common agenda to motivate the contemporary philosopher to open themselves up to the real possibilities for fulfilling the Delphic injunction to "Know Thyself" (*gnothi sauton*) while online. Moreover, these arguments promote responsibility for online life: instead of reflexively blaming the technology for what occurs during their experiences online, one may now be more inclined to blame themselves for what happens online, especially given the fact that this dissertation has demonstrated how much of what is presented to the online user is self-generated rather than externally imposed.

This dissertation will now turn to its final chapter. This brief final chapter's purpose will be to reiterate the future of thinking about technology, while centering it around the existential and ethical question of bad faith. How much longer can philosophers blame an imaginary other for harms that they themselves invite and oft generate? Because of the future-oriented nature of the final chapter it will admittedly be quite speculative in nature, but that does not mean it is without purpose. We can't critique the character of contemporary thought without also asking

where it’s going. We must also always be attentive to the new possibilities for bad faith that the ever-becoming future presents us with.

5. THE FUTURE OF BAD FAITH, OR, THE FUTURE OF THINKING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

The final section will attempt to place all that has been discussed thus far in an ethical light. In view of what has been discussed in the prior chapters, how should this shift the way that we think about existential responsibility and bad faith in relation to technology, and specifically in relation to online life? I will argue that in view of my earlier claims about contemporary technologies becoming increasingly less mediated and more personalized, a new ethical obligation to "consciously create" our online world has come into being.

Because of the concerns raised in the third chapter of this dissertation it is imperative that the contemporary individual assume a *responsibility to be conscious of the "algorithmization" of the modern world*. By extension, the contemporary individual ought to recognize that in shaping their online world, they are shaping themselves, and thus the concept of "character development" is also a helpful way to think about online life. This aforementioned responsibility "to be conscious" is as much an existential responsibility to oneself as it is to others. This responsibility—I argue—is best thought about in the Sartrean context of "bad faith," and specifically in terms of avoiding bad faith. If the algorithmically informed online experience that we have is largely self-generated and informed by our prior online activity, then it is ethically insufficient to simply cast the blame for the nature of our online experience on the "technological other." This type of instinctual blaming would simply be a hyper-modern form of bad faith. Rather, in holding the character of online experience to account, we must also always be open to the possibility of holding ourselves to account, too. If we create these possibilities for self-experience, then we much accept what these experiences tell us about ourselves, and take decisive ownership of our own lives. In so doing, we may experience the "saving power"

discussed by Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology*, and we will be opened up to the possibility of a more authentic technological life.

In order to understand how this claim will be supported, first some time will be spent defining Sartre's concept of bad faith. Following this, some time will be spent connecting this idea of bad faith to the contemporary online experience, and this will then be connected to the discussion to the idea of the saving power.

5.2 Bad Faith Then

In his monumental 1943 book *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre extensively discussed a phenomenon which he called *mauvaise foi,* or "bad faith."[203] Roughly speaking, bad faith can be defined as "self-deception" or as "lying-to-oneself." Bad faith is critical to Sartre's philosophical concerns insofar as he is concerned with the question of existential authenticity, and he observed that the individual's ability to lie to themselves is a primary mode through which the individual can avoid existential responsibility for their own lives, and, by extension, avoid living authentic lives. Authenticity, in Sartre's usage, most simply means "not lying to oneself." First, we will examine how bad faith works (what its structure is), and then we will briefly discuss some of the examples of bad faith that Sartre discusses.

Bad faith occurs when a very particular type of lying occurs. The standard lie, or what Sartre simply refers as "the Lie" in *Being and Nothingness*, requires the presence of an other. It requires the presence of a separate perpetrator and victim.[204] In this case the victim of "the Lie"

[203] The term "bad faith" is also sometimes translated (mainly by Kaufmann in his *Existentialism from Dostoevski to Sartre*) as "self-deception."
[204] For this discussion of "the Lie" see: Sartre, J.-P., & Barnes, H. E. (1996). Being and Nothingness. Routledge. p. 87-89

is not operating in bad faith insofar as they are not participating in active self-deception. They are simply being deceived by someone else.

However, in the case of bad faith the victim and the perpetrator of the lie are co-identical. This necessarily involves a contradiction, given that for self-deception to occur the individual must believe something to be both true and false at the same time. As Sartre says of this phenomenon: "the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know the truth in my capacity as deceiver, though it is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived."[205] Bad faith is largely, if not primarily, an ethical concept insofar as it centers around the question of responsibility. An individual in bad faith is interested in the project of avoiding taking responsibility for their own lives, but rather is invested in making excuses for their actions or in claiming (to themselves) that they never had the capacity to make a true decision in the first place. This alleviates the individual from having to undergo the strain and anguish of having to act decisively and authentically, and Sartre believes that most individuals are more interested in living tranquil, secondhanded lives than in living authentic lives of self-accountability and self-criticism. To the extent that an individual can convince themselves that decisions which *actually* are in their control are outside of their control the individual is able to displace responsibility for their choices (and the consequences thereof) onto an external other.

While I ultimately intend to connect Sartre's notion of bad faith to our experience of online existence, I will first situate Sartre's concern with bad faith in relation to the existential-philosophical concerns of his time.

[205] Ibid.

Early in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre spent considerable time critiquing Freud's notion of the idea of the "unconscious" on the grounds that it facilitates bad faith and renders the individual irresponsible for their own lives. Of the unconscious versus the conscious Freud's claim is totalizing and uncompromising. In Freud's own words "...the conflict between the two psychical agencies which we ... describe as the 'unconscious repressed' and the 'conscious', dominates our whole mental life..."[206] Sartre critically assesses this rigid dichotomy espoused by Freud and thinks that it 1) renders the self in a deterministic way, and therefore it renders the self ethically irresponsible, and 2) that it denies the self's capacity to know itself. Sartre, of course, thinks that one can know themselves much more than Freud does, and Sartre has little patience for the comprehensive "excuses" that Freud makes for human actions. Instead of constructing a philosophical barricade between two parts of the self as Freud does, Sartre advocates for a notion of "translucency" in his criticism of Freud. As Adrian Mirvish writes of Sartre's critique of Freud:

> Sartre substitutes what he terms a "translucency" of mind in its place. This in tum militates against the kind of determinism espoused by Freud in that, for Sartre, any sentient subject always has some form of access to what the former would want to see as a completely hidden aspect of the mind. Thus by means of a dextrous counterpoise the stage is set early in *Being and Nothingness* for attributing freedom and a share of direct

[206] Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXll, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 15.

> responsibility to *la realite humaine*, as opposed to the picture of a human being driven by unconscious forces which, relative to the conscious ego, he is in effect a stranger to.[207]

In order to further clarify the nature of his refutation of figures such as Freud, and in order to clarify his notion of *mauvaise foi*, Sartre provides a famous, if in some ways problematic example of bad faith: the woman who "allows" herself to be seduced and that of the waiter.

In the example of the woman who allows herself to be seduced in bad faith Sartre describes a situation in which a woman refuses to actively affirm or rebuff the advances of a suitor, but rather treats all that happens during the courtship to be accidental; as if it is entirely outside of her control whether or not she leaves her hand in the hand of the suitor who is attempting to flirt with her. What is interesting about this example—and what will be especially relevant with regards to thinking about bad faith vis-à-vis online life—is how Sartre describes the individual in bad faith of being in a state of self-denying contradiction. The woman simultaneously believes that she is her body and that she isn't, and she vacillates conveniently between these two beliefs in order to continuously delay having to make an authentic decision:

> To leave the hand there is to consent in herself to flirt, to engage herself. To withdraw it is to break the troubled and unstable harmony which gives the hour its charm. *The aim is to postpone the moment of decision as long as possible.* We know what happens next: the young woman leaves her hand there, but she does not notice that she is leaving it. She does not notice because it happens by chance that she is at this moment all intellect. She draws her companion up to the most lofty regions of sentimental speculation; she speaks

[207] Mirvish, Adrian. *Freud Contra Sartre: Repression of Self-Deception?* Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, Vol. 21, No.3, October 1990. p. 216.

> of Life, of her life, she shows herself in her essential aspect—a personality, a consciousness. And during this time the divorce of the body from the soul is accomplished; the hand rests inert between the warm hands of her companion—neither consenting nor resisting—a thing.[208]

In order to "postpone the moment of decision as long as possible" (that is, to take responsibility for her life) she is able to simultaneously believe that she both is and is not herself; that her body is an element of the interacting that she is involved in but also at the same time that she is entirely other than it.

Sartre senses that the structure of the bad faith involved in this example is similar to that which is exemplified by Freudianism: it involves splitting the self in two while treating the two elements of the self [in this case facticity (embodied presence) and transcendence] as if they are 1) both equally fundamental to the self and 2) fundamentally incommensurable. Sartre thinks that this belief is a mode of existential escapism. To clarify this notion of bad faith self-denial Sartre helpfully writes:

> Finally while sensing profoundly the presence of her own body… she realizes herself as not being her own body, and she contemplates it as though from above as a passive object to which events can happen but which can neither provoke them nor avoid them because all its possibilities are outside of it. What unity do we find in these various aspects of bad faith? It is a certain art of forming contradictory concepts which unite in themselves both an idea and the negation of that idea. The basic concept which is thus engendered utilizes the double property of the human being, who is at once a facticity and a transcendence. These two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination.

[208] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* p. 96-97

> But bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences.

Sartre variously characterizes bad faith as an "art" or as an aspect of the "project" of life. The impetus for bad faith is rather straightforward; it allows to rest in the tranquility of inauthenticity and to avoid the travails of making decisive commitments or feeling the sense of responsibility resulting from making authentic decisions.

A second example that Sartre gives of bad faith will also be helpful in thinking about bad faith online. He describes a waiter who spends their life in inauthenticity acting *as if* they are a waiter but never recognizing that they themselves indeed *are* a waiter. In treating his working life as a waiter as no more than a game, the waiter is able generate distance between 1) who he is and 2) what he does. This is bad faith insofar as the individual is setting aside responsibility for their life as a waiter insofar as they treat it secondhandedly; they adopt the "view from above" that the woman in the previous example adopted, which allows them to treat themselves as other than themselves. This is quintessentially bad faith: to lie to oneself about their own existence. Sartre writes of this example:

> Let us consider this waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his

> movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: *he is playing at being a waiter in a cafe*.[209]

In this example we see the contradiction of bad faith clearly at work. The individual lives merely as if they are playing a role, but they come to identify themselves with their actions. However—as Sartre very famously claims in his renowned essay *Existentialism is a Humanism*—an individual is no more than the sum of their actions. According to Sartre, to believe that one is other than their actions/decisions is incoherent and self-deceiving. As he did with the example of the seduced woman, Sartre provides a helpful explication of the structure of the bad faith exemplified by the waiter example:

> It is by no means that he can not form reflective judgments or concepts concerning his condition. He knows well what it "means": the obligation of getting up at five o'clock, of sweeping the floor of the shop before the restaurant opens, of starting the coffee pot going, etc. He knows the rights which it allows: the right to the tips, the right to belong to a union, etc. But all these concepts, all these judgments refer to the transcendent. It is a matter of abstract possibilities, of rights and duties conferred on a "person possessing rights." And it is precisely this person who I have to be (if I am the waiter in question) and who I am not. It is not that I do not wish to be this person or that I want this person to be different. But rather there is no common measure between his being and mine. It is a "representation" for others and for myself, which means that I can be he only in representation. But if I represent myself as him, I am not he; I am separated from him as

[209] Ibid. 101

> the object from the subject, separated by nothing, but this nothing isolates me from him. I can not be he, I can only play at being him.[210]

In these examples and descriptions of bad faith one common idea continues to reappear: the individual refuses to take responsibility for their life, and instead adopts an attitude of evasiveness, indifference, abstraction, or blaming an external other. The opposite of bad faith is good faith. For Sartre, the idea of good faith is an ideal of "being-in-itself," and one that we should always strive towards. We should strive to be exactly who we are and root out the temptation to deny ourselves to ourselves through the manifold mechanisms that our mental life presents us with.

It seems abundantly clear to me how Sartre's notion of bad faith applies to contemporary philosophical (and non-philosophical) attitudes towards technology in general, and to the online world in particular. As the first several chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated in detail, the history of philosophy—from the deep past to the present—is permeated by an idea that dismisses technology as an "other" that only serves to alienate. This de-responsibilizes the individual vis-à-vis their technological lives, and provides them with a ready-made "other" to displace the responsibility for their personal failings upon. Secondarily, this attitude towards technology treats technologies as a black box of anonymous, impersonal data that still mysteriously shapes (or, perhaps, distorts) our being in a coercive fashion. This attitude—which denies the possibility of technological self-knowledge—parallels the Freudian dualism (unconscious/conscious) that Sartre challenged as being a bad faith attitude. It parallels this Freudian attitude by treating our online lives as 1) simultaneously outside of our control (like the

[210] Ibid. 102

unconscious) while also 2) treating it as having a powerful, determining influence on the quality of our individual lives.[211]

In the following section I will discuss the possibilities for the future of "online bad faith." Given that I've demonstrated how self-knowledge is possible online, it is paramount that we take ownership of our online being, and instead of "playing" as ourselves online, we must treat our online experience as our *real* lives that we are responsible for creating.

5.3 The Future of Bad Faith

In this section I will first discuss the specific nature of what I call "online bad faith," and then turn to a discussion of how this contemporary ethical-existential issue might be addressed and resolved.

As shown above, Sartre's strategy in identifying cases of bad faith involved identifying contradictions in the individual's sense of self-identity. I believe a Sartrean contradiction can be identified in the way that people relate to their identity in the context of technology in general, and specifically in the context of algorithmized online life. If we are to cultivate the capacity for a more "authentic" understanding and experience of technology, we must identify and overcome (at least) the two forms of technological bad faith—the general and the specific—that I will identify here in sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3.

5.3.2 General Technological Bad Faith: Technology Viewed Always as an Alienating Other

Throughout this dissertation, and specifically in chapter one, I have demonstrated how philosophical attitudes towards technology have been thoroughly characterized by "Socratic Suspicion." This characteristic Socratic Suspicion, if not inherently always already completely

[211] I identified several of these techno-cynical academic papers early in my third chapter.

shot through with bad faith, is at minimum on the way to bad faith and shares many features with it.

Socratic Suspicion shares at least two features of bad faith insofar as it is 1) predicated on an existential contradiction and 2) insofar as it very often seeks to displace responsibility for one's behavior.

In order to understand the existential contradiction mentioned above we must first understand Sartre's thoughts on the meaning of action in defining the value of human life. To understanding this, we need to get a broad overview of his central thoughts. Sartre's famous definition of existentialism, which is that "existence precedes essence[212]," is related to his notion of "abandonment." According to his doctrine that existence precedes essence, which is a central tenet of his existential atheism, man is born into the world with no pre-given essence. Therefore, Sartre rejects religious views that hinge on notions of "human nature," "fate," destiny," and the like. He also rejects any other philosophical system that he identifies as relying on an idea of "human nature," such as Kant's. He considers these types of views to be comforting myths that we tell ourselves in order to avoid the burden of freedom—indeed, he says that man is "condemned to be free[213]"—but that they do not match up with the reality of lived experience. "Abandonment" is the consequence of the realization the absence of God, and it is the condition that he believes the modern individual finds themselves in. Because of this realization of abandonment, the individual must shape themselves anew and they must do it for themselves.

---

[212] This definition may be most famously found in *Existentialism is a Humanism.* Sartre, J.-P. & Kulka, J. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism: (L'Existentialisme est un humanisme)*. Yale University Press. p. 12

[213] Ibid. 14

They may not rely on some external force to do it for them. In Sartre's vision of human life "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards.[214]" Because of this requirement for each individual to "define himself," this leads to a radical responsibility for each individual to continually make decisions that will shape their being.

This leads to his thoughts on the paramount importance of action, which I will soon superimpose onto thinking about technology in terms of action. According to Sartre, given our lack of any essential nature, there is no reality except in action. Man is nothing else but what he purposes, and he exists on insofar as he realizes himself. He is therefore nothing but the sum of his actions; nothing else but what his life is. To think that one is anything other than what they do (which is how one realizes oneself) is woefully abstract, deluded thinking.

This leads to the contradiction of technological bad faith identified as Socratic Suspicion. If man is the culmination of his actions, and man is realized through what he does, then man is realized through what he builds and creates. In other words, we know ourselves *in* and *through* our technologies (tools, houses, books, etc), which give shape and structure to our ability to identify ourselves. In the absence of our artifacts it seems like it would be difficult (perhaps impossible) for us to identify ourselves and distinguish ourselves as who we are as opposed to someone else. The contradiction of Socratic Suspicion is that while it seems perfectly obvious that technologies (in the broadest sense) are fundamental to realizing oneself and to establishing one's identify, Socratic Suspicion also treats technologies as if they are entirely other and unrelated to the "true" identity of our being, even though our being cannot be understood outside of the culmination of what it is that we do. Even those who perpetuate Socratic Suspicion would

[214] Ibid.

likely advocate the view that technologies are important is shaping one's identity. Indeed, implicit within Socratic Suspicion is an acknowledgement of the transformative power of technology, because if technology was totally inert then there would be no reason to be suspicious of it. In this case, then, suspicion is an admission. The contradiction resides in implicitly admitting the transformative power of technologies in shaping (and perhaps even constituting) identity while also simultaneously acting as if technologies are totally other external contaminates to the purity of one's identity. In the same way that the "seduced woman" in Sartre's example of bad faith thinks of her body simultaneously as who she is and not who she is, the Socratic Suspect is in contradiction by thinking that technology constitutes identity while also simultaneously thinking of it as totally external to the self.

The second element of bad faith contained in Socratic Suspicion is much more straightforward: perpetuators of Socratic Suspicion often blame technologies rather than individuals. As noted above, bad faith attempts to displace responsibility for one's decisions onto an external force so as to make it seem that whatever happens is simply "outside" of their control. For the person in bad faith, technologies offer easy, ready-made excuses to blame for one's own decisions.[215] While certain technologies (I think of things like mustard gas) certainly have a net negative impact on the quality of human life and would best be eradicated from existence, this is different than acknowledging that on an individual level one may be better off refusing to instinctively blame things for their quality of life. One may instead consider holding themselves to account.

[215] This is not to undermine the real impact that social, political, and financial forces have in pressuring people towards certain courses of action, but rather to acknowledge that blaming technologies operates as one possible avenue for bad faith to play out.

5.3.3 Specific Online Bad Faith: Online Life Viewed as Completely "Outside of My Control"

This section will pivot from the very general language of the previous section and will instead focus on bad faith as it occurs in relation to algorithmized online life. I argue that algorithmized online life ought to be understood as a "project of self-discovery" or as a creative, explorative technology of the self rather than as an external space of alienation. While I have yet to come across any academic literature that makes this *specific* claim, there are a smattering of philosophers—apart from those ones already mentioned in chapter three—who are both thinking about contemporary technologies and are also simultaneously interested in the possibilities for self-knowledge that contemporary technologies offer. Before I make my specific claim that the algorithmized online world is a zone of self-knowledge that the individual is responsible for (and therefore that denying this responsibility is a hyper-modern form of bad faith), I will briefly list a smattering of relevant philosophical figures. They have been important in (re)shaping the way that I think about technology, and therefore I cannot end this dissertation in good faith without briefly mentioning their ideas that I have been somewhat inspired by. They are: Donna Haraway, Maarten Coolen, and Stefano Gualeni.

In Haraway's 1991 *A Cyborg Manifesto* she makes the bold claim that "the cyborg is our ontology."[216] Throughout the paper she rejects rigid boundaries between categories such as human/animal[217] and human/machine. In so doing she opens a line of thought that goes against the current of Socratic Suspicion and instead creates a pathway through which we can learn about ourselves not as reflected against technologies, but rather as built through them. Moreover,

---

[216] Haraway, Donna. 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* New York (NY): Routledge. 149-181.

[217] While not massively invested in the question of the difference between humans and animals, in my thinking and in my practical life I do still maintain this distinction.

and more relevant to the specific argument that I will soon make, Haraway argues against the clean distinction between human and "the machine" by arguing of the machine that "it demonstrates (both in its practical integration with technology and as a revealing metaphor) the fundamental structure of human being."[218] While I am not so concerned with cyborg technologies and "cyborgology" in the way that Haraway is, it is clear that her work in blurring calcified ontological distinctions between categories of beings, as well as her openness to thinking about artifacts as revelatory sites in which human being can be observed unobstructed, laid a groundwork for the type of project that I am (and have been) pursuing in this dissertation.

Soon after Haraway's breakthrough manifesto Dutch philosopher Maarten Coolen pursued a similarly provocative line of thought, and at least invited the reader to reframe thinking about fabrications (i.e. technologies) within the context of thinking about self-knowledge. In his interestingly titled "*De machine voorbij. Over het zelfbegrip van de mens in het tijdperk van de informatietechniek.*" (The Machine and Beyond; on the Self-Concept of Man in the Age of Information Technology[219]) Coolen writes that he is "interested in precisely those anthropological ideas that one can associate with the act of technological transformation itself. *What can man learn about himself from his own fabrications*?[220]" This question which Coolen asks at the end of this quotation is precisely the question that this dissertation has pursued. Upon reading this question in this passage I was struck by its directness but also by its importance, and I thought that it was most striking how he located this question within the age of contemporary

[218] Gualeni, Stefano. 2015. *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 73.
[219] The is the name of the title as translated by Peter-Paul Verbeek in De Mul, 2013, 234.
[220] Coolen, Maarten. 1992. *De machine voorbij. Over het zelfbegrip van de mens in het tijdperk van de informatietechniek.* Amsterdam (The Netherlands): Boom. Italics mine.

technology. While Coolen's work is often afield of my more specific existential-philosophical interests, the idea that we can learn about ourselves through our technological endeavoring had a decisive impact on my thought, which has transformed from run of the mill techno-skepticism to the expanded view represented in this project.

Finally, the work of Stefano Gualeni—and specifically his 2015 text *Virtual World as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize With a Digital Hammer*—has had a tremendous impact on my desire to go beyond mediation and to interrogate the scope and limits of Socratic Suspicion[221]. While his primary focus as a thinker is on video game development as an exercise—which is a topic I touched on briefly in 4.4.2—Gualeni approaches the topic of existential self-disclosure in the context of digital experience in a more thorough and systemic fashion than any other figure that I am aware of.

5.3.3.2 Specific Online Bad Faith: Argument Continued

Certainly, the self is targeted by nefarious and insidious forces while online.[222] However, it is also equally certain that the self encounters itself while online. This second claim is the fulcrum upon which this present argument hinges. If the online self is simply "preyed upon" while online, and does not have the possibility of exerting any agency with regards to shaping their digital experience, then it would be unreasonable to accuse anyone of bad faith with regards to their online experience. In order to be guilty of bad faith one must be responsible for their actions, and to be responsible for their actions one must be capable of doing otherwise. Therefore, if the online individual was simply passively preyed upon online then they could have

[221] I should make clear that Gualeni relies on the concept of mediation and distortion throughout his work. However, his emphasis on the existential elements of technological mediation theory largely prompted me to interrogate it.
[222] (See section 4.3.4.4 for a reminder of this.)

no responsibility towards shaping their online experience, and could not be reasonably accused of bad faith. However, this is not the case. As I have spent a significant amount of time showing in chapter four, there are a plethora of ways that the online individual shapes and knows themselves while online. These ways and self-experiences are ways that they are at least significantly responsible for, and therefore the modern algorithmized denizen of the digital world may reasonably be accused of online bad faith.

In keeping with my Sartrean disposition towards the concept of bad faith I will now identify what I take to be a fundamental existential contradiction with regards to the commonly assumed attitude towards online life. What I observe to be a bad faith contradiction in relation to online life are the concurrent and self-contradictory views that 1) the digital world and our digital life is an expressive, value-laden manifestation of our identity but also that 2) the digital world and our digital life is in some fundamental way *not who we are*.

The first statement in the above contradiction is self-evident. If one spends any time at all observing oneself and the world, it is immediately evident that countless people communicate meaningful messages, have important conversations, and construct meaningful identities[223] while online. This is especially so during the age of COVID-19 in which broad swaths of meaningful human activity have been shifted from in-person to online, from education to intimacy to religious ceremony to political activity. Academics are encouraged to be active on Twitter, while families reflect on their memories and collective aspirations on Facebook. Or, related to this and to refer to new term of our time, we are in the age of so-called "cancel culture." While the precise definition of "cancel culture" is hotly disputed, and the debate around it is contentious

[223] Which are always their (the user's) identities. As was shown in the early part of chapter 4, one cannot speak on one's "online identity" as if it is in some way detached from their "true" identity.

from all angles, what matters for the sake of this claim is that "cancel culture" works to erase any presumed fissure between the online and the in-person.[224] People find love and experience genuine heartbreak in their online life; such strong and authentic emotional experiences are not limited to occurring within a Tudor Era castle or chateau, but can (and do) occur online. All of this is to fill out the first part of the online existential contradiction: meaningful actions of existential significance do occur in online life.

The second half of the contradiction is the tendency of individuals to claim that online life is not "real" life. This is an exceedingly common distinction that infuses our everyday language, and one that often appears in offhanded statements such as "Kids these days don't know about the *real* world" or "Yeh, but are you friends in real life?" This distinction even regularly slips into popular academic discourse. For an example from a more popular, public outlet, an article from *Psychology Today* glibly states that, compared to unreal life (i.e. online, digital life):

> Real life offers us experiences that are open-ended, giving us the opportunity to create whatever box we choose based on what the universe of options has to offer. The only limits that exist are those of our creativity and the physical parameters of real life. Real life is also value driven, meaning the direction that we take our lives is based on what we deem most important. As a result, life has personal meaning and relevance to us.[225]

---

[224]For a short article that makes some attempts at defining and clarifying "cancel culture" see: Velasco, J.C. (2020). You are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(5), 1-7.

[225] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-prime/201105/technology-virtual-vs-real-life-you-choose

The ease with which this distinction between “fake” and “real” is so uncritically accepted is existentially disclosive, as if the contemporary individual is building in a ready-made excuse for whatever it is that they do in the “virtual” world. It may simply be brushed off as unreal, and therefore unworthy of serious consideration or of being considered as something designating an attitude of ethical responsibility. So while people—through their actions—demonstrate the self-evident fact that meaningful existential activity occurs online, they simultaneously adopt an incompatible attitude which assumes that whatever happens online is unreal. This is an attitude of existential self-exoneration; an attitude that refuses to take responsibility over a domain of their life that they have responsibility over. The simplified form of this online bad faith contradiction is: it is treated both as if it real and as if it is not real.

Another element of online bad faith is related to the question of self-knowledge and algorithmized online life. As has been shown throughout this dissertation self-knowledge occurs online, especially as the algorithmic structure of online life assures us that we are always reminded of who we are online. The denial of the possibility of learning about oneself online is an example of an online bad faith contradiction insofar as it denies that one can learn about oneself from oneself. This is a quite clear contradiction, because the substance of what one *can* know about oneself must originate from oneself. If one encounters the substance of oneself online (via digital traces, recommendations, etc.) but also refuses to consider these as legitimate avenues for acquiring self-knowledge, then the individual is denying that self-knowledge comes from the self. This is a manifest absurdity. While many online denizens may not be aware of the self-encounters that occur online (this was a possibility mentioned in chapter 3), if someone is conscious that such self-encounters do occur online but they also choose to deny that the online

world is a site of potential self-knowledge, then the individual is guilty of the manifest absurdity that I have just outlined above.

5.4 Conscious Online Life as Character Development?

Now that I have outlined the ways in which I think technological bad faith in general, and online bad faith specifically, express themselves, I will now propose some ideas for how online bad faith may be rooted out, and how the contemporary individual can adopt a more existentially and ethically responsible attitude towards their online life. The first proposal is 1) to practice active algorithmic consciousness and the second is 2) think of online life as praxis in character development.

Active algorithmic consciousness will help root out online bad faith insofar as it will continually remind the online individual that each present digital choice they make will craft their future online possibilities. The individual who practices this type of consciousness will recognize that their online experience is not totally outside of their control, but rather that it is (somewhat[226]) within their control. Bad faith is rooted in the individual's refusal to take responsibility for what is within their control. Therefore, the individual ought to strive to be aware of what they have control over with regards to constructing their online lives so as not to be guilty of blaming something that is within one's control as if it is outside of their control. As chapter three points out, the existential danger arises when the online individual is inattentive to the algorithmic constraining of online "choices." However, the fourth chapter showed how self-knowledge can be attained if one maintains an attentiveness to the self-shaping nature of online life. Therefore—similarly to the claim that came at the culmination of chapter three—this is a

[226] That which is outside are the "billboard" style advertisements that I discussed in section 4.3.5.

call for the online individual to active practice online self-consciousness. Instead of potentially "losing" themselves online, they should, rather, try to find themselves online.

Secondly, I think it would benefit the philosophically minded digital denizen to think of digital life in terms of character development. This dissertation has discussed how one's online experience is (somewhat[227]) a reflection of the user's identity and character. Given this fact, the conscious digital denizen should also continually ask themselves "What kind of person do I want to be?" with each search, click, like, and so on. If the online experience is one of the self, then online activity is one of virtue, vice, authenticity, self-deception, and all other questions of what it means to exist in the world. Therefore, great care must be taken with it.

5.5 Conclusion

The saving power, now as ever, is within ourselves. And if we recognize that we are in our digital experience, and that this digital experience is often a mode of self-experience, then the saving power may be found online as much as it may be found offline, especially if—as this dissertation argues—there is no fundamental *existential* difference between these two modes of being.

[227] See above footnote.

REFERENCES

Aristotle. *Metaphysics* 983b. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vols.17, 18, translated by Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1933, 1989.

Abul-Fottouh, Deena; Song, Melodie Yunju; Gruzd, Anatoliy. Examining Algorithmic Biases in Youtube's Recommendations of Vaccine Videos. In *International Journal of Medical Informatics*. August 2020 (140).

Bailey, R. (2013). Your Cellphone is Spying on You. *Reason*, 44 (8), 34-39

Barnhart, B. (2021, March 31). *How to Rise Above Social Media Algorithms*. Sprout Social. https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-algorithms/

Bauwens, Joke and Karl Verstrynge, "Digital Technology, Virtual Worlds, and Ethical Change," *Techne: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 17(1), 2013.

Behrent, Michael C. (2013) 'Foucault and Technology,' History and Technology, 29:1, 54-104

Bryson, J. J. (2012). Internet memory and life after death. Bereavement Care, 31(2), 70–72.

Democritus. *Demonax: Hellenic Library Beta*. Democritus: Fragments [Demonax | Hellenic Library Beta].(n.d.).http://demonax.info/doku.php?id=text%3Ademocritus_fragments.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. 1999. "Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs Commitment in the Present Age" in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, eds. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart and Karl Verstrynge, 96-109. New York: De Gruyter.

Evans, Jan E. *Unamuno and Kierkegaard: Paths to Selfhood in Fiction*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books 2005.

Evans, C. Stephen. *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, Amherst, New York: Humanity Books 1999.

Eslami, Motahhare et al, "'I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her]': Reasoning about Invisible Algorithms in News Feeds," *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2015.

Cohen, James N. "Exploring Echo-Systems: How Algorithms Shape Immersive Media Environments," *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, vol. 10 (2), 2018.

Combes, Muriel. 2013. *Gilbert Simondon and the philosophy of the transindividual*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Conway, Daniel. 2017. “Disclosing Despair: The Role of the Pseudonyms in Kierkegaards Existential Approach” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook.* eds. Brian Söderquist, René Rosfort, and Arne Grøn, 131-152. New York: De Gruyter.

Coolen, Maarten. 1992. *De machine voorbij. Over het zelfbegrip van de mens in het tijdperk van de informatietchniek.* Amsterdam (The Netherlands): Boom.

Cooper, P. (2021, February 23). *How the Facebook Algorithm Works in 2021 and How to Work With It*. Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard. https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-algorithm/

Coulthard, Darryl and Susan Keller, “Technophilia, Neo-Luddism, eDependency and the Judgement of Thamus”

Farkas, Johan, and Jannick Schou. 2019. *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Fischel, Henry Albert. *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings,* E.J. Brill, 1973, p. 95.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. XXII, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 15.

Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson and Karl Verstrynge, “‘Marvel at Nothing’: Reconsidering Kierkegaard’s Category of Recollection through Social Media Services,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook,* 2015.

Gualeni, Stefano. 2015. *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gualeni, Stefano. 2016. “The Experience Machine: Existential Reflections on Virtual Worlds.” *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research,* 9 (3): 1-11.

Hannan, Jason. 2018. “Trolling Ourselves to Death? Social Media and Post-Truth Politics.” *European Journal of Communication,* 23 (2): 214–226.

Hatmaker, Taylor. (2021, May 28). *Facebook changes misinfo rules to allow posts claiming Covid-19 is man-made*. TechCrunch. https://techcrunch.com/2021/05/28/facebook-covid-man-made-lab-theory/.

Heraclitus. *Ancient Greek Philosophy* v.2, ed. Vijay Tankha.

Hongladarom, Soraj. “Anonymity and Commitment: How do Kierkegaard and Dreyfus Fare in the Era of Facebook and ‘Post-Truth’?”, *AI and Society,* vol. 34, 2019.

Ihde, Don. *Technics and Praxis.* Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, v. XXIV. Eds. Robert S. Cohen and Mark W. Wartovsky.

Iyer, Ganesh, David Soberman, J. Miguel Villas-Boas, "The Targeting of Advertising." *Marketing Science* 24 (3) 461-476

Jansen, B.; Moore, K.; Carman, S. (2013). "Evaluating the performance of demographic targeting using gender in sponsored search" (PDF). *Information Processing & Management*. 49 (1): 286–302.

Jaspers, Karl. Trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (1957). *Man in the Modern Age.* Anchor Books. Garden City, New York.

Jones, S. (2004). 404 not found: The internet and the afterlife. OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 49(1), 83–88.

Kearney, R., & Treanor, B. (2015). *Carnal Hermeneutics*. Fordham University Press.

Kembellec, G., Chartron, G., Saleh, I., & Kembellec, G. (2014). *Recommender systems*. ProQuest Ebook Central

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1967-78. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers,* Vol. I-VI, ed. and trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kierkegaard, S., Hong, H. V., & Hong, E. H. (1983). *The sickness unto death: a christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*. Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, S., Hong, H. V., & Hong, E. H. (2009). *Three discourses on imagined occasions*. Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 2009. *Kierkegaard's Writings, XVII: Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress.* ed. and trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1944. *Attack Upon Christendom*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kroker, Arthur. 2004. *The Will to Technology and the Culture of Nihilism: Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Marx.* Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press.

Lang, R. D. (2016). Double-edged sword of autofill: The need for speed while avoiding errors, the. New York State Bar Association Journal, 88(3), 25-27.

Lindberg, Susanna. "Being with Technique—Technique as Being-with: The Technological Communities of Gilbert Simondon" in Continental Philosophy Review (2019) 52:299–310. P. 299.

Lombaard, Christo. “Fleetingness and media-ted existence. From Kierkegaard on the newspaper to Broderick on the Internet,” *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research*, vol. 35(1), 2009

Mackey, Louis. *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*, Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press 1986

Marcel, G. 1965. *The Existential Background of Human Dignity.* Oxford University Press.

McCarthy, John and Peter Wright. 2004. *Technology as Experience*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

McCullough, Glenn. “Heidegger, Augustine, and Poiēsis: Renewing the Technological Mind.” *Theology Today*, vol. 59, no. 1, Apr. 2002.

Miller, G., Black, C. Review of Aaron James Wendland, Christopher Merwin, and Christos Hadjioannou, Eds., *Heidegger on Technology. SOPHIA* 58, 763-766 (2019).

Mirvish, Adrian. *Freud Contra Sartre: Repression of Self-Deception?* Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, Vol. 21, No.3, October 1990. p. 216.

Orazi, D.C., & Nyilasy, G. (2019). Straight to the Heart Of Your Target Audience: Personalized Advertising Systems Based on Wearable Technology and Heart-Rate Variability. *Journal of Advertising Research, 59 (2)*

Plato. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*, Vol. I. ed. John M. Cooper, assoc. ed. D.S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Poole, Roger. *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1993.

Rabbås, Øyvind. “Writing, Memory, and Wisdom: The Critique of Writing in the *Phaedrus”* from *Symbolae Osloenses* 84, 2010.

Restivo, Sal. *Technology and Culture*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1981

Rummo, P.E., Cassidy, O., Wells, I., Coffino, J. A., & Bragg, M.A. (2020). Examining the Relationship between Youth-Targeted Food Marketing Expenditures and the Demographics of Social Media Followers. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17* (5).

Salisbury, Meredith and Jefferson D. Pooley, “The #nofilter Self: The Contest for Authenticity among Social Networking Sites, 2002–2016,” *Social Sciences* 6:1 (2017), 1-24

Sarf, Harold. “Reflections on Kierkegaard’s Socrates,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44:2 (1983), 255-276

Sartre, J.-P., & Barnes, H. E. (1996). *Being and Nothingness*. Routledge.

Sartre, J.-P. & Kulka, J. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism: (L'Existentialisme est un humanisme)*. Yale University Press. p. 12

Savin-Baden, M., & Mason-Robbie, V. (Eds.). (2020). *Digital afterlife: Death matters in a digital age*. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Sawicki, Jana. ‘Heidegger and Foucault: Escaping technological nihilism.’ In Foucault and Heidegger: Critical Encounters, Ed. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, 55–73. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Schillp, Paul Arthur, ed. *The Library of Living Philosophers IX: The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*. Open Court Publishing Company, 1957. Jean Wahl “Notes on Some Relations of Jaspers to Kierkegaard and Heidegger.”

Simondon, Gilbert. 2017. *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Translation by Cecile Malaspina and John Rogrove. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing.

Simondon, Gilbert. 2013. *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information*. Paris: Jérôme Millon.

Simondon, Gilbert. 2014. Sur la technique. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017.

Stack, George S. *Kierkegaard’s Existential Ethics*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press 1977.

Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus.* Stanford University Press, 1998.

Jansen, B.; Moore, K.; Carman, S. (2013). “Evaluating the performance of demographic targeting using gender in sponsored search” (PDF). *Information Processing & Management*. 49 (1).

Taylor, C.C.W., “*Nomos* and *Phusis* in Democritus and Plato”

Thompson, Josiah. *Kierkegaard*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1973.

Thorbjornsson, Gudmundur Bjorn and Karl Verstrynge, “‘Marvel at Nothing’: Reconsidering Kierkegaard’s Category of Recollection through Social Media Services,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2015.

Timcke, Scott. *Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st-Century American Life*. 1st ed., Bristol University Press, 2021.

Turkle, S. (2007). *Evocative objects: Things we think with*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press

van den Hoven, Birgit. (1996) *Work in Ancient and Medieval Thought: Ancient Philosophers, Medieval Monks and Theologians and their Concept of Work, Occupations, and Technology.* J.C. Gieben, Publisher.

Van Seters, John (1998). "The Pentateuch". In Steven L. McKenzie, Matt Patrick Graham (ed.). *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues*, page 5

Velasco, J.C. (2020). You are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(5), 1-7.

Verbeek, Peter-Paul. "Beyond Interaction: A Short Introduction to Mediation Theory." Ron Wakkery and Erik Stolterman (eds.) 2015. Interactions 22, 3 (May-June 2015).

Verstrynge, Karl. "Being and Becoming a Virtual Self: Taking Kierkegaard into the Realm of Online Social Interaction," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2011, pp. 303-319.

Watkin, Julia. *The A to Z of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press 2001, pp. 396-406

Weissman, Jeremy. "P2P Surveillance in the Global Village," *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 21, 2019, pp. 29-47.

Whitney, E. (1990) *Paradise restored. The mechanical arts from Antiquity through the thirteenth century.* Philadelphia. [Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 80.1