

Research Report

Personal Identity, the Self and the Online World

Soraj Hongladarom

Submitted to
Chulalongkorn University
Research Fund for Supporting In-depth Research,
Rajadipiseksompoj Fund

2011

Acknowledgments

This report has been supported in part by a grant from the Rajadipiseksompoj Fund for Support of In-Depth Research in High-Potential Areas, 2010-2011.

Abstract

Personal Identity, the Self and the Online World

The spread of social networking media on the Internet has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in today's world. Furthermore, it has opened a plethora of philosophical problems. One such problem concerns the notion of personal identity. Social networking websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and so on, allow for powerful ways for one person to get connected with others in a variety of ways. The connection is always mediated by some kind of construction of "identity" which more or less represent the real person behind it. The construction is also known as an "avatar," a term borrowed from ancient Indian mythology where gods assume the body of a mortal being (which can be either humans or non-human animals) in order to combat and defeat problems that beset the world. In social networking websites, such avatars are made possible through the use of images and texts that are related to the person through the means of email addresses and passwords.

The use of avatars has raised many interesting conceptual and normative problems. First of all, it is always possible for one person to have more than one avatars. In fact this is a common practice. But if avatars represent the identity of persons (in the same way as a divine avatar 'embodies' a god in the ancient myths), then in the case of multiple avatars do these avatars all represent the person equally? One strong belief in personal identity is that a person should be unique, but what does the existence of multiple avatars tell us? Is this a case of a psychological or even a pathological condition?

Another problem concerns how well an avatar reflects the actual personality of the person behind it. In the ancient myths, once a god adopts an avatar, such as when the god Vishnu assumes the body of a turtle, then he needs to move about like a turtle. But no one believes that Vishnu has actually become a turtle. Is this the same as modern avatars online? Or is it more the case that avatars tend to assume their own unique personalities which could diverse from that of the real person?

The findings of the research are that there are no essential differences between the online and the "offline" selves; any problems that lie with the self in the offline world are still there in the online version. Personal identity, a difficult philosophical problem that seeks to account for the identity of a self or a person, is still a problem in the online world too. This has strong implications in understanding the online self and the use of avatars and attempts at constructing a self image in social networking sites. It shows that the two worlds are merging into one.

This research, in short, aims at proposing a number of philosophical issues behind the construction of avatars or online identities on social networking media and propose that insights gained from the ancient wisdom of Buddhism could illuminate at least some of the perplexities behind the phenomena. As is well known, a key Buddhist

teaching is that of the Non-Self, i.e., the self as we understand it, as the seat of personality, as the subject of thoughts, emotions, and so on, are in the last analysis nothing more than a construction. So Buddhism seems to say that there is as a matter of fact no real distinction between avatars and persons. But if that is the case (and I will try to present an argument showing why it is so), then a number of interesting questions emerge. The report will discuss these questions with the aim of trying to understand what is really happening with the situation of online identity through the social networking media.

Introduction

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

Borgmann presumably would regard our own selves as ineluctably parts of the basic reality he is championing. After all, we would not be able to appreciate the Montana landscape so loved by him if we did not possess a self who acts as the onlooker and the experiencer of the landscape. Borgmann's bedrock reality, in other words, would not be possible if we did not possess a self. Nonetheless, the onset of information and communication technologies, especially what has happened during these last few years with social networking phenomena seen as sites such as Facebook or Twitter, seems to throw much of the traditional thinking about the self and the object into confusion. A main characteristic of social

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

But things are not as simple as Borgmann would have it any longer. With the growing strength and number of users of social networking sites, Borgmann’s vision of information becoming reality has not only materialized, but it seems that we can no longer separate reality and information from each other. The real thing and the ersatz are fusing toward each other, so the real becomes more informational and the other way round.

It is the contention of this paper that the fusion between the real and the ersatz is also taking place in the area of the self. This threatens the very foundation of much thinking in traditional philosophy, which is founded on the

distinction between the self and reality, the subject and the object. This fusion between the self and the object can be seen clearly in the online world, where the self and subjectivity seem to be more and more pervasive, and where the objects talked about are also increasingly informational in nature (Wheeler 1990: 5; Floridi 2004). This leads to a conclusion that the online self is ultimately speaking nothing but a construction and does not have any essence of its own. Furthermore, since the line between the online and offline worlds are increasingly fuzzy, these characteristics increasingly apply to the offline self too. Borgmann's metaphysical analysis of the online world as superposing upon the offline one seems to be overturned, with the online and the offline worlds irretrievably merging into each other. The characteristics of the self existing in one world are spilling out onto those of the self existing in the other.

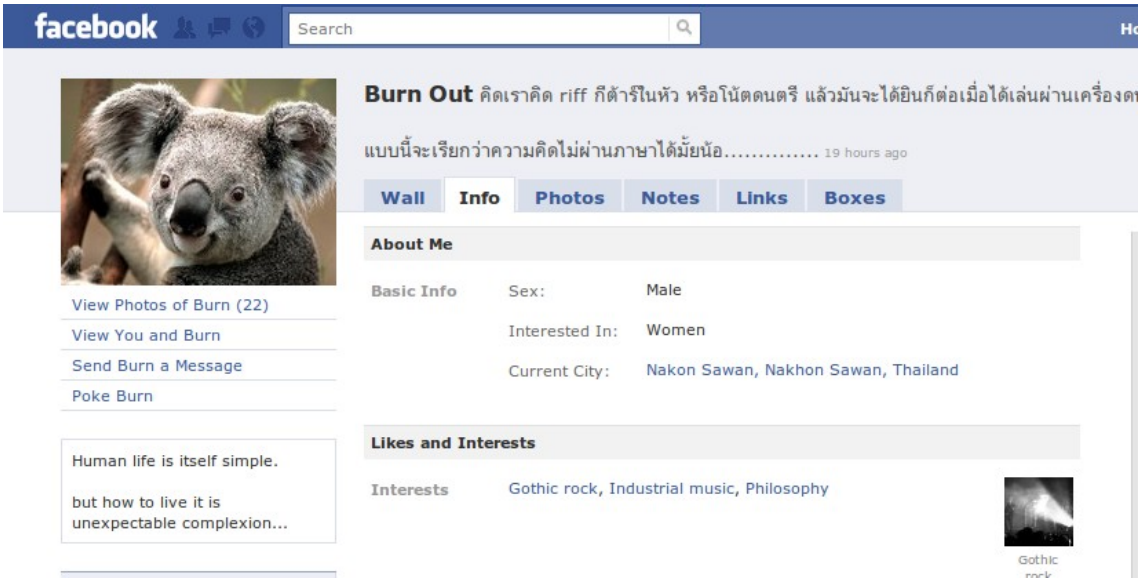
The Putative Self, Social Networking Websites, and Thai Culture

When we look at the popular social networking websites today, we are struck by the sheer number of the people who are connected to one another through them. Facebook has more than 500 million users at the last count (http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics), and the number far exceed the entire population of many countries. Twitter has around 75 million (http://www.numberof.net/number-of-twitter-users/). These users put up their "profile pages" on the websites, which are essentially a projection of their own identities in the online world for their peers, colleagues and friends. In most cases

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

against criticizing the King in Thailand this might be interpreted as insulting to the King himself.

Let us look at a profile page of one Thai user of Facebook. He calls himself "Burn Out." Then we can analyze his strategies in constructing his online identity on the social networking website:



We do not need to worry about his real identity here, because he does not use his real name on his profile page. He also substitutes a picture of a koala bear as his profile picture. The result is that, if one does not know beforehand who Burn Out really is in real life (only his friends do), then there is no possibility of knowing his real identity.

So there is a way Burn Out creates his online persona that does not necessarily connect with his real life person. The name "Burn Out" is only used for his Facebook account. The koala apparently does not have anything to do with

his personality (I know this because I know who "Burn Out" really is, and he is just an ordinary Thai man having no essential connection to a koala.) Thus, it seems that the profile page here functions only as a place holder, a neutral platform on which Burn Out can project his thoughts and ideas to his friends most of whom already know him in real life. Furthermore, those who do not know him personally also can interact with him; they know that he is a Thai person and has certain likes and dislikes based on what he posts on his Facebook profile. Since they are all Thai, they already share quite a lot in common so there is little need to reintroduce background information as is the case when people from remotely different background need to do when they interact. The situation here represents Hall's view of the "high context" (Hall 1976), in contrast with the "low context" situation normally found when people from different cultural background meet and interact with one another.

Strategies that Thai users are using to construct their identities can also be seen in Twitter. Let us look at this profile page of a user who calls herself "Supamas:"



What is interesting in this profile page is that the owner does not give her family name, thus making it impossible to know who she is. It is as if someone named "Mary" puts up her Twitter profile calling herself by just her first name. Nonetheless, she does construct her online identity clearly through her engagement with her followers and those who follow her. Her followers typically do not want to know who she really is; what is interesting to them is that she puts up good content and interacts with them. The identity emerges through all the tweets that she puts out, all of which form the image that her followers have of her as a Twitter account user.

A result of this brief and preliminary survey of identity construction in social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter in the Thai context seems to show that, contrary to the received view that Facebook and Twitter tend to reflect the true identity and personality of the users, in the Thai context at least the characteristics of the earlier anonymous online discussion tends to carry over onto social networking sites too. This is a new finding that deserves a closer look

and more systematic research, which is not the intent of the present paper here. Nonetheless, if this preliminary finding is tenable, then it would contradict studies such as one by Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008), which shows that construction of identity in social networking websites tend to reflect more of the true identity of the user. In their terms, social networking sites such as Facebook are 'nonymous' rather than 'anonymous' (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin 2008). However, the data from the Thai use of Facebook tends to show that there are strong elements of anonymous asynchronous discussion found in earlier online discussion lists, and the implication for construction of self and identity appears to be different from the one presented by Zhao et al (2008).

One thing that Zhao et al (2008) shows as a result of the emerging social networking sites is that users there tend to show their identities implicitly rather than telling the version of themselves that they want others to know. However, the preliminary investigation of such users as Burn Out and Supamas seems to show that the role of telling is still very much alive in the Thai context. The pictures which they could have used to show who they are without telling are of not much use here because Supamas uses a picture of a small dog as her Twitter profile picture, and Burn Out uses that of a koala on his Facebook account. So there are no pictorial clues. Without any overt means by which the friends and the public can know the real identity of these users, what the public have seems to be only what either Supamas or Burn Out tell through the tweets or on Facebook updates and comments. This, however, does not mean that pictures have to role at all. The pictures do have some role, since both Twitter and Facebook are highly graphic

systems, but the pictures do not overtly point to their identities. In the case of Burn Out, who is a Facebook user, the pictures are usually posted by him as an illustration of the points he is making to his circle of friends. One can only gauge his personality, his likes and dislikes, through the kinds of pictures he posts. On the other hand, the case of the Twitter user Supamas, she obviously does not rely much on pictures because of the constraint posed by Twitter system. What she can do is only to point to a location of a picture online on one or more of her tweets. So the role that a picture or a graphic file can play is much more limited in Twitter.

Another interesting profile is by someone who calls himself "Rahu." His posts on Facebook are very critical of the current government, and especially the King; he conceals his real identity so completely that nobody who does not know him already has any clue as to who he really is. Presumably this is because he does not want to be persecuted by the authorities since his posts almost always risk violating the lese majeste law. The name "Rahu" is taken from that of an Indian god who specializes in chasing the sun and the moon. Once Rahu catches the sun or the moon, he eats them, causing solar or lunar eclipses on earth.



The picture on his profile page is not his own picture. In fact he used to mention in his wall post that some people tried to guess who he really was, how old he actually was and so on, but they were wrong. So he is taking pride in the fact that he is hiding his identity and is successful in doing so. When we look at Burn Out's profile, we can still find his real identity if we search hard enough, going to his info page and look at some of the pictures. But in Rahu's case this is not possible. He purposefully hides any indication that could lead one searching to know his real identity.

The tendency of some Thai users of social networking sites to shield their true identities and to construct a kind of persona they use in their online lives seems to show that there are two kinds of selves and identities, one existing in the online world and the other in the offline one. This may seem to show, *prima facie,* that there is a bridge between the two selves such that one does not spill out or carry over onto the other. One of the motivations to study how the self is doing in

the online world of social networking sites, however, is that the online self tends to share many characteristics of the offline one, since the presupposition here is that through the function of the social networking sites the two selves appear to be merged to each other than hitherto possible with the earlier kinds of interactive websites such as web chat or web discussion forums. Nonetheless, this is not necessarily the case, as the putative bridge between the online and offline selves among Thai users may be only more apparent than real. As people can construct their identities in their online world, it is, and indeed has always been, possible for them to construct their identities in the offline world too. One is certainly aware of the psychological ability of people to create a persona, a front that they create to interact with others, an image of themselves that others immediately see when they first get to know them, and their real selves that they reveal when they get very intimate and personal with someone. Many think that Facebook tends to blur this line, but the Thai data seem to show that the line is still there, but the point I intend to show here is that the line is not an objectively existing one, but one that can always shift according to the needs and desires of the subject. In short, the line here is a construct too.

Personal Identity Online, But Who or What is the Person Here?

So far we have conducted a preliminary investigation on the behaviors of some Thai users on social networking sites that appear to contradict what seems

to be a received view on how social networking sites are being used to construct identities. But what exactly do these behaviors tell us about the philosophical problem of self and identity in the online phenomenon? Perhaps the link between the profile and the person behind it is not as it appears. Instead of using social networking profile to show who they really are, many Thai users are using it in a creative way, essentially to create a new persona which exists only in the online world. A reason behind this move may be due to the fact that Thailand still has very limited freedom of speech; it is a serious crime, punishable by jail terms up to fifteen years, to commit lèse majesté, or insult to the king. This law has in recent years been interpreted in such a way as to suit the political agenda of the factions that are currently vying for power in Thailand, with the result that more people have been charged with the crime than ever before, and many of them have been so charged because they have posted information and ideas on the Internet. The newly created persona, then, allows the person behind to say things in such a way that is not possible if the person reveals who she is to the world. Another situation is that more and more users are connected with those whom they do not know before. This is understandable given the situation where many are putting up invented profiles.

In order to understand the effect of this new phenomenon on the conception of the self, one needs to know that what the self is made of. Personal identity seems to be connected intimately with continuity of the self, for it is the identity of the person involved that is usually understood to be the basis of the continuity of the self of the individual in question. However, it should be noted

that the self has a subtle difference from the person in that the former contains within it the conception of the first-person perspective. It is the self that functions as the referent of the first-person pronoun "I." In any case, what is uncontroversial is that the self is not the same as the body. I, obviously, am not my body, because my body does change—I might become thinner as a result of an exercise program—but that does not mean that I become another person. Another thing is that the self is not entirely continuous with any of my mental events or episodes, or any collection thereof either. My mental episodes change very rapidly during the course of a day, but that does not mean that I become different persons each time my thinking changes. The problem of personal identity is precisely to account for the apparent existence of the self even though analysis shows that everything that constitutes it does change over time. But is there actually something that remains the same in one person amidst all these changes?

One might object to the presentation above, arguing that some set of mental episodes do constitute the identity of the person. Memory, for example, has been cited by Locke as a means by which the person can be identified (Locke 2008). However, it is also well known that relying memory results in a vicious circle (Cf. Butler 2008; Reid 2008), for in order to me to verify that an episode of my memory, say, of a young kid playing a toy car that I seem to remember, as belonging to me, I would need an account to tie up the young kid and myself at this moment together. There must be something which is external to the young kid and to myself as of now that is responsible for the one-year-old playing a toy car and the 48-year-old college professor to be one and the same person. But this is

what precisely the memory account of personal identity denies. There cannot be anything external. But if there is not, if it is the memory itself that is responsible, then the memory account clearly presupposes that continuance of the person, which is exactly what needs to be explicated through the memory account in the first place. The proponent of the memory theory might object that memory can certainly be fallible, but my memory largely is true, which shows that what I do remember is largely true, so the memory account is tenable after all. However, the proponent still needs to account for the assertion that the memory he is having is largely true. If he relies on his memory to do that then the vicious circle spins again.

We can also find this account in the online world. An analog of the memory account of personal identity in the online world seems to be that, in order for me to verify that my past episodes of posting, for example, what I posted online a year or two ago, really did belong to me and not somebody else, is that I do remember doing so. I can look up what I did post exactly twelve months ago (it seems to me now rather difficult to do that because I post so much material on Facebook), and the reason why I know that these postings belong to me, or belong to my online self, is because I remember doing so. However, the vicious circle argument against the memory account of the offline personal identity should be applicable in the online world too. After all, the structure of the argument is the same, the difference only being the characteristic of the person in question, whether he is online or offline.

It is clear, at any rate, that in the offline world I do have my body, and

bodily continuity seems to count heavily for personal identity. Even though the popular view that every cell in the human body gets replaced every seven years seems to be wrong (nerve cells in the brain, for example, never get replaced), there are enough number of cells in the body that do get replaced that talks about the human body itself being more like an event rather than a static thing does not seem to be too far off the mark. Human body indeed looks like an event as there are dynamic activities going on there all the time, ranging from the blood circulating within the body, the firing of the nerve cells, to all the movements of the limb. That the body is usually regarded as a thing rather than an event is due perhaps more to habit and our overlooking of these dynamic activities than otherwise. But if the body is more like an event, then the criterion for its identity and continuity needs to be different from that of a static thing. For example, an event has to have a clear beginning and ending, which in the case of the body, of course, refers to the birth and death of the body and also of the person. Then we have familiar means by which we individuate the body, such as giving it a special status of a human person, giving it a name, a place in the society and community, and so on. These are the means by which the identity of the body and of the person is fixed.

Arguing that such factors as the community—what other persons perceive and think of the person whose identity is in question—shows that personal identity is fixed rather by external factors than internal ones. This line of argument is akin to the externalism/internalism debate in epistemology. In their attempts to locate the source of justification of belief, epistemologists have

traditionally tried to look at the subject's beliefs, i.e., what lies internal to the subject's own cognitive field, as the source of justification. Thus we find Descartes locating the ultimate source of justification of his belief in the cogito statement through the fact, evident to himself, that it is clear and distinct to him that he thinks and he exists. However, recently many epistemologists have started to look at external sources for the justification. For example, Alvin Goldman has argued for a kind of social epistemology where the source of justification of belief is located outside of an individual and among the social interaction that the individual has with her social environment (Goldman, 1999; 1986; 1975). Perhaps in the same way, personal identity has traditionally been associated with internalism—factors thought to be responsible for fixing the identity have come from internal sources such as the subject's own beliefs and memory episodes. However, one could follow the lead of the social epistemologists and other externalists in epistemology and start to argue that external factors are really the ones that fix the identity. For example, instead of trying to find the source of the identity internally, one could broaden out and try to locate the source instead outside of the subject's cognitive domain. A candidate could well be what others think of the subject in question, what their collective behaviors are like such that these behaviors taken together succeed in fixing the identity of the subject. Suppose I am not absolutely certain if the picture of a young one-year-old that I am holding is that of myself, I can certainly ask my mother. My mother's testimony (usually mothers are very good at recognizing her young child even though decades have passed) will then fix the identity of the boy in the old picture

and my own self today. Other clues are also possible; perhaps the picture is associated with some notes or documents that could relate back to me. These notes and documents thus serve as the external factors too. In fact these are the standard methods used by societies to identify persons in real life, such as in solving identity disputes and in courtrooms. Here trust seems to be given more by society to external factors than the merely internal ones of the self report of the subject himself.

In the online world, things do not need to be radically different. We can regard the moment when someone registers her profile onto sites such as Facebook and becomes known to the circle of people who are already on Facebook as the moment when that person is "born." In the same vein, the moment when someone removes his or her profile from Facebook, thereby ceasing to engage in any activities that are performed by Facebook users, then this can refer to the "death" of that person online. All the activities during these two boundary marks represents those performed by the subject when she is "alive," so to speak. And since it is very difficult in the online world to locate where the subject, cognitive domain is, external factors seem to be the only ones available for fixing identities. In Facebook there are guidelines that one needs to follow in order to be "born" or to "die" there. For example, one has to follow certain rules in order to have one's profile picture show up; one has to register oneself, answer a number of questions, invite friends, and so on. The "birth" of a new user of Facebook can be announced publicly throughout the Facebook world, or it can be a rather quiet birth where the subject comes to be scene quietly without much

fanfare. In the same vein, Facebook also has a clear policy regarding the "death" of its user. Formerly it was very difficult, if not entirely possible, to delete someone's profile from Facebook, but after much protest Facebook then allows someone to delete his or her profile rather completely. Furthermore, it also enables users to "memorialize" a deceased user. An account that has been memorialized will remain, and the user's close friends can have access to the wall of the account to post their remembrances. Thus, in effect the wall of the deceased and memorialized user becomes a grave where close friends can drop by and pay their respect. (See http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=13016 and http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=13941). Here, then, the identity of the person on Facebook is constituted through the information that is posed by the person herself as well as what others post about her. These are the activities that take place after the moment when the user is "born" and before she "dies" or removes herself completely from the site. Furthermore, even if she really dies in real life, her posts and comments can still be available, in the same way as the thoughts and ideas of dead persons can be available to us. The postings and comments of the dead person will remain there and there will be no new additions, in the same way as a dead person cannot write a new book.

The difference between the person and the self should be made clear here before we go on any further. The person is a legal and metaphysical concept. One is a person if one satisfies certain criteria, such as being a thinking, deliberating human being capable of making autonomous decision. Here I have presented a very sketchy argument showing that the identity of the person could perhaps be

borne by external factors such as how other people view the subject and how they judge through overt behavioral qualities whether the subject in question qualifies as a person or not. The self, on the other hand, is different. Here the quality of being the referent of the first-person pronoun is necessary. Being the referent of the first-person pronoun is not as necessary for the person, but for the self it is absolutely the case. Thus searching for factors that identify the self cannot escape from looking at the subject's own cognitive domain, in fact from the first-person subject searching her internal field of thought by herself. Hence it may be feasible to locate a person in the online world, but it is difficult to do the same for the online self, as consciousness does not seem to exist in someone's profile page on Facebook yet.

Focusing on the self, J. David Velleman has argued that the word 'self' does not denote a single entity but "rather expresses a reflexive guise under which parts or aspects of a person are presented to his own mind" (Velleman 2006: 1, 170 – 202). The self functions as a framework by which one can become self reflexive, representing aspects or things to oneself. Hence it seems clear that the self is not made up of the body (there is no single part of the body that is directly responsible for the self; see Klein, Rozendal and Cosmides, 2002), and that it is difficult to maintain that there is one particular set of internal mental episodes that is directly responsible for the self either. These episodes are just what they are, and without any means to collect them, or to bind them together in a single whole, they are just disparate episodes. On the other hand, it does appear, too, that the self cannot be other than these physical and mental episodes, even though we may

not be able to find one particular physical substance or one mental episode that is absolutely identical with it. For if the self were other than the physical or mental episodes belonging to a person, it would be entirely baffling how that is possible. That would mean that our person or our selves belong to some kind of a soul that comes to us from somewhere and animates us, making us a human being we are. This theory, however, has been discredited long time ago and runs counter to the modern scientific mindset. So unless we find a compelling reason to accept these souls, we had better put them aside.

Leaving out the soul leaves us only with either mental or bodily factors that could conceivably constitute a self. No one particular mental episode or physical event belonging to our bodies can be one and the same as the self; this, however, does not mean either that the self can exist apart from these episodes either. Hence a consequence is that it is all these episodes, taken up and bound together in one way or another, that constitute the self.

When we analyze the self in the offline world, all that we have is a collection of physical and mental episodes (unless we posit a soul). A likeness of a person can indeed exist online in the form of portrait images; her voice can be recorded and even synthesized. It is also conceivable that in the future other aspects of the physical entity belonging to a person can be brought up in the online world. Many aspects of the person are being uploaded onto the network, and one is also reminded of a prediction by Ray Kurzweil that in the future one may be able to upload the entire content of one's mental life (or the content of your brain) onto a server to preserve one's own identity and personality for all of

posterity (Hodgkinson 2009). It will also be possible for the detailed instruction to create a physical body of the person to be uploaded too, making it possible to recreate the human body to work with the uploaded mental life. All these may be far fetched now, but the point is only that it seems possible for a self to exist in the cyberworld. Hence the online and offline selves share significant properties together, and an analysis of the one should be possible to be carried over to the other. This, however, should not be interpreted as an assertion that the offline and online selves are absolutely one and the same, for obviously they are not. For example, the online self that may exist, say, on a Facebook profile does not have its own consciousness, nor a carbon-based body. Nonetheless, what interests us here is that there are a number of interesting affinities between the two that merit an investigation into the nature of the online self or the online person.

A key problem in analyzing the self has been the problem of searching for the "unifier," so to speak, that combines all the physical and mental episodes together to make up a real, substantive self. That I have a self is obvious, but it is not obvious how my physical and mental episodes are combined to make up myself. This is known as the "Binding Problem" (See, for example, Searle 1990). Basically the problem is about how the brain combines various kinds of input so that they result in a single, unified field of vision or an episode of conscious thought. However, for self-consciousness, the mind needs to be able to turn back toward itself. It not only has to be conscious, but conscious of its own workings. Self-consciousness implies that the mind is turning to look at itself. Nonetheless, in self-consciousness the binding problem has to be there too, for there is

obviously the problem of how self-consciousness results in an understanding of a single, unified self. Since there is no real difference between the offline and the online self, the role of self-consciousness in creating a sense of self can be carried over to the online world too. Thus, there is an analogue of self-consciousness in the online world, where the person reflects upon herself, her thoughts, and becomes aware of her own self there.

The problem of how to combine the various episodes so that they belong to one overarching self is well known. Kant posited the "Transcendental Unity of Apperception" as a means by which these episodes are combined so that they belong to one and the same subject, which would make cognition (or in his words "judgment" and "understanding") possible (Kant 1997). However, a problem with the Transcendental Unity of Apperception (TUA) is that it is a purely formal concept, and does not contain any particular information that pertains to any particular individual. According to Kant, "it must be possible for the 'I think' to accompany all my representations" (B131 – 132), meaning that it must be possible for me to be conscious of all my mental episodes; otherwise it would not be possible for me to be justified in asserting that these episodes are mine. But what is very interesting here is that Kant is not arguing here that there must be an objective self, the "I" which "thinks." Kant is putting forward a transcendental argument here. A transcendental argument is one that accounts for a condition of possibility of a certain phenomenon, its point being that, for the phenomenon to be an objective one at all, or for it to be even possible, certain conditions must already obtain. The transcendental argument does not show tout court that the

phenomenon exists objectively; that would run against the spirit of the critical philosophy. For example, in arguing about causation in the Second Analogy, Kant's point against Hume's devastating attack on causation is that there are conditions of possibility of causation, such as if an event A were to be the cause of another event B, certain conditions need to obtain, such as that both A and B need to be able to be subsumed under the pure concept of understanding of logical relation. Kant does not rebut Hume directly; he does not argue that Hume's argument is directly false. What he does is that he argues that, if we are to be able to maintain objective knowledge, we need to posit the concept of cause and effect. Hence the concept does apply objectively to phenomena. In the same vein, Kant argues that it must be possible for the 'I think' to accompany all my representations. He does not argue categorically that the "I" has to exist; what he says is that the "I" needs to exist as a condition of possibility for relating disparate representations into a coherent whole, which in turn is necessary for there to be objective knowledge. What the "I" is doing here is nothing more than a place holder, a formal factor that serves to unify various representations together so as they belong to a coherent self.

This is of course not a place to examine Kant's philosophy in any detail. But if the "I" of the Transcendental Deduction here functions as a purely formal unifier, then this "I" would be devoid of all and any characteristic that would qualify it to be the "I" of any particular person whatsoever. All it can do is to perform this purely formal function, which must be the same for everybody. In short, the "I" here functions as the Transcendental Unity of Apperception (TUA).

Thus, my TUA is exactly the same as your TUA, since both function in the same way and cannot contain anything unique to either me or you. Anything unique would be empirical and cannot be part of the TUA. If this is the case, then Kant's TUA is too general and cannot perform the work expected of the individual self. In other words, one cannot rely on Kant's transcendental argument about the "I think" here and use it to argue that the self does exist as an objectively existing being.

Since any attempt at finding the overall unifier of the mental episodes would fall under the empirical side of things (because once a candidate for the unifier is identified, it then falls under the category of a mental episode which is being thought of, which then requires another subject to think about it, and so on), or under the purely formal schema such as Kant's, which is empty. An upshot, then, is that any attempt to bind up the episodes is always provisional and cannot escape from being itself yet another mental episode. When one attempts to bind up one's own episodes, one is then conscious of yet another episode whose content is about the binding, but then that becomes another mental episode in need of further binding. Consequently, the offline self is a construct in the sense that it is not there objectively or ontologically. It is something "made up" in order to facilitate daily living of any human being. For example, it would be much easier for me to refer to you, using your proper name, if you stay relatively stable throughout some period of time, even though analysis shows that there is ultimately speaking to real "you" in the ontological sense. What I and others take to be "you" is a social construct not dissimilar from Searle's example of a bank

note whose value is also a social construct (Searle 1997). In other words, the value of the bank note does not reside ontologically in the material itself, but sociologically through agreement among members of society that this particular type of a bank note has such and such monetary value. In the same vein, when I refer to you, calling you by name for example, I am abiding by certain social conventions that recognize that, relatively speaking, there is a certain person behind the persona that I am now perceiving.

But if this is the case, then it is also similar for the online self. We can look at the online self as a persona that the individual makes up as a front to present himself or herself to the world, and sometimes the person may intend it in such a way that the persona assumes identity of its own, without being able to refer back to the real person behind. The online self is also made up of physical and "mental" episodes. The physical episodes are easy enough to understand—bits of electron working together to present images, sounds, and texts on screen. But the mental episodes are also there, as we can gauge what the persona is thinking or feeling through her use of language and other symbols (such as emoticons) through the Internet. These episodes also need to be connected together in order for us to form a more or less coherent picture of a self working behind. Here one also finds an analog of the Transcendental Unity of Apperception in the online world too. Just as in the offline world, the analog of the TUA in the online world functions to bind the different episodes of postings and comments together so that they belong to one person. It thus functions more as a regulative agent working as a condition of possibility of there being a coherent self behind the various

representations constituted through images and texts that are posted online. So the analog is something like this: “It must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all my postings of links, images, videos, comments, etc. on the social networking site; otherwise no coherent self does not emerge which is necessary for there to be social networking at all. But since the offline self is ultimately speaking a construct, so is the online one.

An interesting upshot of Kant’s view on the TUA discussed here is that the TUA seems to be successful in identifying the self or by implication the person. It seems to succeed in binding up various representations together so that they belong to one and the same self. However, it does not seem to succeed when it comes to securing uniqueness of a particular self or of a particular person. What the TUA does is that it gives me, for example, a means by which I can be certain that I am a coherent self and that all the representations that are flitting across my brain or my cognitive field are indeed mine. However, what the TUA does not do is to identify me as someone who is distinctly different from another person. Since the TUA is a purely formal apparatus, it cannot do this job, because what makes me a unique person, such as someone who is teaching philosophy and who is interested in many subjects and so on, cannot be contained in the TUA function that I have. Identity is not the same as uniqueness. There can be several things each of which are of course identical to itself, but without uniqueness all these things are just a bunch of entities sharing all properties in common (Leibniz’s Law notwithstanding) but having no unique identity of its own (i.e., the characteristic of being itself alone and none other). This is not something that can

be accomplished by the TUA. Hence, in order to account for my uniqueness, external factors need to be considered too. For example, in order for me to be certain that I am unique, I usually refer to the set of characteristics that only I have and are shared by no one else. Since the TUA functions in exactly the same way in all the selves and all the persons, it cannot specify uniqueness. And since Kant's view on the TUA appears to be the best shot given by the internalist theory of specifying identity, we also need external factors too, at least when it comes to uniqueness.

Conclusion

Borgmann's vision of information and communication technologies creating a new kind of reality appear to be confirmed as a result of the very rapid advances in the technology the past decade. However, this should not be a cause for concern. We have seen that the most intimate thing that we can have, our own persons and our own selves, are being affected significantly by the technologies. Many people are constructing their own alternate personas online; even in social networking media, which are assumed to be a place where one reveals oneself to others, are also being used in such a way as to present entirely new personae to the public. These personae do share deep seated metaphysical affinities with the real-life, offline individuals, and the strategies used by those in the offline world to construct their identities are also used in the online world. I have argued that personal identity is constituted more by external factors such as social perception and various sorts of documentation and physical traits than by the internal ones

such as memory and the subjective feeling of being oneself through time. However, this does not seem to carry over for the identity of the self, since this is more a matter of being referent of the first-person pronoun, which points deeply to the sense of being the subject of the various thoughts and feelings. Kant's view on the Transcendental Unity of Apperception might at first sight be able to explain how the identity of the self is fixed, but as we have seen Kant's view succeeds only in fixing identity, but not uniqueness. It seems that external factors are still required for the latter.

In the online world, things are again similar. We can find an analog Kant's TUA in the online world. There must be something functioning as the 'I think' that binds up all of the various texts and images posted online as belonging to one and the same self. This binding, again, does not have much to do at all with the content of what is posted. For that we need the external factors to construe their meanings and how they are received and perceived by the community of other online users, who all together form the social network. But if all this is tenable, then Borgmann's two worlds seem to collapse into one, and we cannot really tell this collapsed world to be either strictly online or offline.

References

Borgmann, A. (1999). *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Butler, J. (2008). Of personal identity. In J. Perry (Ed.) *Personal Identity.* 2nd Ed. (pp. 99-106). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Floridi, L. (2004), Informational realism. In J. Weckert and Y. Al-Saggaf (Eds.) *Computing and Philosophy Conference,* vol. 37.

Goldman, A. I. (1975). Innate knowledge. In S. P. Stich (Ed.), *Innate Ideas.* (pp. 111 – 120) Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Goldman, A. I. (1986). *Epistemology and Cognition.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Goldman, A. I. (1999). *Knowledge in a Social World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture.* Anchor Books.

Hodgkinson, M. (2009). By 2040 you will be able to upload your brain... Available at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/by-2040-you-will-be-able-to-upload-your-brain-1792555.html Accessed 27 November 2010.

Kant, I. (1997). *Critique of Pure Reason*. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Trans.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Klein, S. B., Rozendal, K. and Cosmides, L. (2002). A social-cognitive neuroscience analysis of the self. *Social Cognition,* 20(2), 105-135.

Locke, J. (2008). Of identity and diversity. In J. Perry (Ed.) *Personal Identity* (pp. 33-52). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Perry, J. (2008). *Personal Identity.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reid, T. (2008). Of Mr. Locke's account of our personal identity. In J. Perry (Ed.) *Personal Identity* (pp. 107-112). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Searle, J. (1990). *The Mystery of Consciousness.* New York Review Books.

Searle, J. (1997). *The Construction of Social Reality.* New York: Free Press.

Velleman, J. D. (2006). *Self to Self: Selected Essays.* Cambridge University Press.

Wheeler, J. A. (1990). Information, physics, quantum: the search for links. In W. H. Zureck (Ed.). *Complexity, Entropy, and the Physics of Information.* Redwood City, CA: Addison Wesley.

Zhao, S., Grusmucka, S. and Martina, J. (2008). Identity construction on Facebook: digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior,* 24(5), 1816-1836.

Curriculum Vitae of the Researcher

Soraj Hongladarom is an associate professor of philosophy at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. He has published books and articles on such diverse issues as bioethics, computer ethics, and the roles that science and technology play in the culture of developing countries. His concern is mainly on how science and technology can be integrated into the life-world of the people in the so-called Third World countries, and what kind of ethical considerations can be obtained from such relation. A large part of this question concerns how information technology is integrated in the lifeworld of the Thai people, and especially how such integration is expressed in the use of information technology in education. He has organized the International Conference on Information Technology and Universities in Asia (ITUA 2002) at Chulalongkorn University. His works have appeared in *The Information Society, AI & Society, Philosophy in the Contemporary World,* and *Social Epistemology,* among others.

Department of Philosophy and Center for Ethics of Science and Technology,
Chulalongkorn University