Virtual Enframing:

Social Media's Subsumption of the Other into Theyness

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Abstract: *Sherry Turkle's "virtuous circle" will be used to bring insights from Heidegger and Levinas into accord. Turkle argues that the distraction and escape made possible by our devices tend to undermine achieving solitude and genuine sociality, thus posing a danger to the interdependent possibilities of authenticity and ethical living. For Heidegger, the call of conscience is one's ownmost possibility, death. Levinas argues that the call of conscience is instead ethical, instigated by the face of the Other. Rather than conflicting, these two phenomenological accounts of conscience will be shown to be mutually affirming once brought into harmony via Turkle's framework.*

"A great piece of philosophy amounts to more than words on a page—it's the articulation of an idea compelling enough to reach out and move the reader. It should challenge preconceived notions, put words to intuitions that once seemed inarticulable, or force a reevaluation of one's place in the world. This paper manages to do all three of these things. After reading it, I had to set my laptop down and take a walk."

- Daniel Klinestiver
Associate Editor

Introduction

"We will be questioning concerning technology." – Martin Heidegger

Average everyday life in developed 21st-century countries is essentially technological. René Descartes's vision for an "infinity of devices" enabling a "trouble-free enjoyment" of all the earth's goods has been realized: our devices and applications offer a world of utility, convenience, and entertainment.[1] Yet new dangers accompany otherwise seemingly positive developments. Taking Martin Heidegger's analysis of the essence of technology as "enframing" for our point of departure, this paper will examine some of these dangers so as to bring us into a freer relationship with technology, ourselves, and one another. The distraction and escape made possible by our devices, what Sherry Turkle calls "friction-free living," is a danger to the interdependent possibilities of authenticity and ethical living. Her conception of "the virtuous circle" will be used to begin bringing Heidegger and Levinas, the philosophers of authenticity and the Other, respectively, into a constructive dialogue about timeless

1 René Descartes, *Discourse on Method for Conducting One's Reason Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 35.

issues that are only becoming more timely within the sway of enframing.[2]

Part I introduces Heidegger's conception of the essence of technology and then his view of authenticity. For Heidegger, the call of conscience is one's ownmost possibility: death. Part II brings in Levinas's response, arguing that the call of conscience is instead ethical, instigated by discussing the face of the Other. At this point, we will have two phenomenological views of conscience: responsibility to be true to oneself vs. responsibility to the Other. Part III will then bring Heidegger and Levinas face to face for a complimentary dialogue via Turkle's conception of the "virtuous circle," which is the reciprocally dependent interplay between solitude and sociality.

I. Technology, Falling, and Authenticity

Our average, everyday technological disposition, what Martin Heidegger conceives of as "enframing," reduces the earth to base material resources to be exploited, challenged forth and put on call as "standing reserve" (*Bestand*). As both the essence of technology and the spirit of our age, enframing casts a totalizing grid over the world, within which entities are fractured into elements for human appropriation. Uprooted and displaced from their meaningful places and times, things are uniformly rendered calculable and exchangeable, their value ascribed by the standards of usefulness and money, the measures of power and profit. The earth is thereby reduced to a conglomeration of resources to be extracted, expedited, and exposed as to produce "the maximum yield at the minimum expense."[3] Anything failing to fulfill a function within this self-referential grid of serviceability is rendered obsolete or meaningless. Although this situation gives rise to the illusion that we have become "masters and possessors of nature," Heidegger shows how these hubristic and imperialistic delusions backfire.

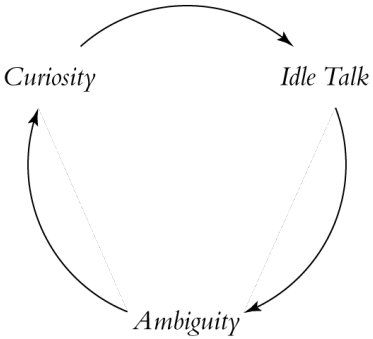
"Dasein" is the subject of Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time*. This is the (human) kind of being that is inextricably absorbed within a world of care and involvements. Dasein lives always thrown within a referential totality of language, things, equipment, and other Dasein. Because Dasein is inextricably being-in-the-world, enframing the world means that Dasein is also enframed. Just as things in the world are put on call as means for the fulfillment of our ends, within the sway of enframing we ourselves are reduced to calculable and exchangeable "human resources."[4] Much has already been written about the negative effects of enframing on Earth's ecology. Instead, we will examine the effects of enframing on personal growth and social living and the problems thereby posed for living an authentic or ethical life.

2 This paper will not try to settle Levinas and Heidegger's disagreement about the primacy of Being vs. the Other.

3 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 322.

4 Ibid, 323.

No one, in Heidegger's account, can ever fully achieve authenticity. Dasein is thrown into the world, "falling" and immersed in Theyness—the averaged understanding of a given public. Theyness provides Dasein with a world of universalized, ready-made possibilities and attainable, though superficial, knowledge. Heidegger characterizes falling as a threefold, reciprocal, interdependent cyclical process consisting of three phenomena: ambiguity, curiosity, and idle talk.[5]



By "curiosity" Heidegger means a superficial and non-committal pursuit of novelty and endless stimulation.[6] Antithetical to being present, to belonging or dwelling, "curiosity is concerned with the constant possibility of *distraction*"[7] (original emphasis). Driven by the uncanniness and unease of anxiety,[8] curiosity propels Dasein from one thing to the next, never allowing the commitment required to gain true understanding that requires dedication and perseverance.

"Idle talk" is the day-to-day chatter and non-committal sharing of information that is a necessary feature of our lives. As the quick passing along of information occurs, we become so inundated by information that we are naturally discouraged from deepening our understanding, thus losing a sense of what really matters.[9] Having no real stake in these conversations, one can pass information along regardless of its truth or relevancy, without taking responsibility for what is said.

The result of curiosity and idle talk is ambiguity. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* adeptly defines ambiguity as "a loss of any sensitivity to the distinction between genuine understanding and superficial chatter."[10] Without first practicing the courage, humility, and patience required for genuine discourse, we lose the deeper senses of meaning, understanding, and belonging that allow us to distinguish between what is genuine and what is not. The

5 These are technical locutions, not to be confused with their typical connotations.

6 Heidegger, "Question Concerning Technology," 214.

7 Ibid, 216.

8 Not to be confused with the typical meaning of the word, Heidegger says angst is the mood that underlies and defines all the others. Our very essence (Dasein) "means being held out into the nothing." This sense of impending nothingness is the "bewildered calm" that repels us into our being-in-the-world. "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 103.

9 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 211.

10 Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/heidegger/.

diminishment of this ability, and the difficulty of its recovery, discourages commitment, thus habituating us to lives of detachment or ironic posturing. This decrease in genuine conversations therefore blurs one's ability to tell the trivial from the essential.

According Heidegger's analysis, this vicious cycle—sustained by the interplay between ambiguity, curiosity, and idle talk—has us freewheeling, lost in the undifferentiated space of inauthenticity. Every human is thrown into the culture of his or her birth. Pre-given notions for how to go about comporting ourselves guide us as we are raised. Thus, Heidegger says, certain universalized possibilities have been set before us to the exclusion of those more relevant to our particular situations. Each and every one of these pre-defined possibilities is itself modeled after what-has-been-actual alone, rather than on the full scope of what is possible for one's unique place in history. Because the universalized possibilities have been made by and for the aggregated masses, no Dasein can discover its "ownmost possibilities"[11] when lost in the vicious cycle. The turbulence levels qualitative distinctions and reduces every other to the same One (*das Man*). We thus implicitly compare ourselves and others to an elusive and universalized abstraction that eclipses our particular possibilities.

It will be argued (via Turkle) that the vicious cycle Heidegger characterizes as falling is only exacerbated by technological media in our age of enframing. However, we will first turn from the subject of authenticity (responsibility to self) to that of ethics, as developed by the philosopher of responsibility to the Other par excellence.

II. Responsibility & the Other

Emmanuel Levinas was deeply influenced by Heidegger's *Being and Time*, attending his lectures a year after its publication in 1927. However, his admiration quickly soured when Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1933. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Levinas, a French Jew, returned to France to fight for the allied forces. He was soon captured and spent the remainder of the war in a German POW camp. After the war, Heidegger never made a public apology for his participation in the party. Some speculate that his refusal to publicly disavow the Nazi party was due to his prioritization of "personal authenticity" over the opinions of the public.[12]

Levinas suspected that Heidegger's focus on the all-encompassing nature of Being and individual freedom had eclipsed the possibility of his appreciation for the radical alterity[13] we experience when encountering others. Levinas's phenomenological project thus turns Heidegger's on its head.

Whereas "the call of conscience" in Heidegger's analysis is the individuating force of death anxiety that compels Dasein to be true to its "ownmost possibilities" in spite of the They, the call of conscience for Levinas is the felt weight of responsibility instigated in the face of the Other[14] (where we understand "face" to be all human expression). His phenomenology founds everything else on this responsibility, which is why Levinas claims that ethics is first philosophy.

Levinas argues that our very freedom is conditioned by the Other. A self only emerges in the face of the Other, as it is in this encounter that it is naturally compelled to justify and therefore individuate its self ("apology," in the Greek sense). This being addressed and having to account for itself reifies selfhood in developing self-reflection, character, language, rationality, conscience, and consciousness (which are inextricably entwined for the French, who have only one word for both: conscience). Conscience, therefore, owes its very being to the Other, which beckons it into the light of Being. This beckoning compels, leading to the naturally felt obligation to, on the one hand, justify one's beliefs or actions to the Other, and also to be hospitable to others just as one desires to feel welcomed by the Other.

Our desire to be welcomed by the Other, which is no ordinary desire, only increases in proportion to its fulfillment. Levinas terms this "metaphysical Desire," which he characterizes in one place as "genuine discourse." Totalization renounces genuine discourse.[15] For the possibility of the fulfillment of metaphysical desire, I must be open to the transcendence of the other that ruptures my totality by calling it into question.

The responsibility to welcome, critique, and respond to the Other renders us vulnerable and can be exhausting. We therefore tend to retreat into the comforting and secure confines of our own totalized worlds. This act of totalization resembles the appropriative nature of our digestive processes, attempting to subsume that which is other to the same[16] via knowledge acquisition. We can never truly subsume the Other, yet conceptualization instigates the imperial delusion that we can grasp, acquire, and possess knowledge of those who are beyond oneself.[17] There is a sense in which a concept of a mere thing surrenders said thing to our power. But a concept signifying an actual other person is necessarily deficient and misleading, as it cannot possibly contain that to whom it refers. A signifier cannot contain its signified. The signified other overflows conceptualization.

11 Think of "ownmost possibilities" as the possibilities which are unique to oneself specifically because of one's particular situation. My possibilities are not yours, and if you tried to fill my role, then the possibilities would change. The fact that this basic truism is novel to some people testifies to the pervasiveness of the They.

12 Iain Thomsons portrays the fallout between Marcuse and Heidegger in "From the Question Concerning Technology to the Quest for a Democratic Technology," *Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (June 2000): 203-15.

13 "Alterity" simply means the otherness of things or people. It is that which is beyond or outside of oneself.

14 "Other" should be understood as the abstract presence of any and all others: past, present, and potential future encounters. The Other is always with us, even when others aren't.

15 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 42.

16 "Same" is another way of talking about that which is not other than oneself.

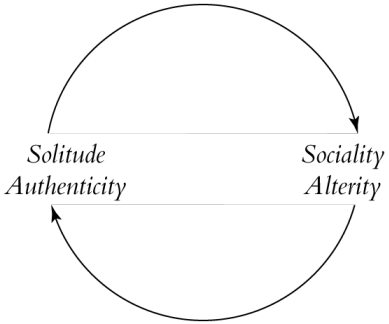
17 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 44, 188.

Equipped now with both Heidegger's understanding of authenticity and Levinas's reversal of focus to that of ethics, I hope to show that these two accounts can find mutually illuminating accord within Turkle's portrayal of "the virtuous circle." By doing so, I hope to show that neither philosopher's phenomenology of conscience need be rejected for the sake of the other. Instead, both of their projects develop a richer understanding if seen as two interdependent facets of our lived experience.

III. The Virtuous Circle

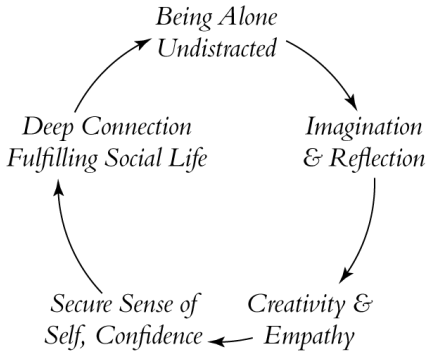
> "Language … has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone."[18]
> – Paul Tillich

In her 2015 bestseller *Reclaiming Conversation*, sociologist and clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle argues that our trends toward short and sporadic, virtually based media of communication are posing problems for leading both authentic and ethical lives. This is because virtual access to one another and instantaneous entertainment hinders what she calls "the virtuous circle," which is the healthy interplay between the interdependent experiences of solitude and genuine sociality. This framework provides a clearing within which to situate face to face both Heidegger and Levinas, the philosophers of authenticity and the Other, respectively.



In our age of an "infinity of devices" and apps, Turkle states that "being alone" has become something seen as "a problem technology should solve."[19] Our phones promise a "friction free life" wherein we will never be lonely, bored, or unheard. However, learning to get past the angst, boredom, or loneliness experienced when by ourselves undistracted is, according to psychoanalysis, essential to achieving solitude, which is itself fundamental in the development of confidence, imagination, creativity, and empathy. "Solitude reinforces a secure sense of self, and with that, the capacity for empathy."[20] Stronger empathy leads to forming deeper bonds with others, whose conversations then provide the rich material for self-reflection and imagination. Imagination leads to creativity, while self-reflection builds the self-esteem and empathy needed for quality engagement with others.[21]

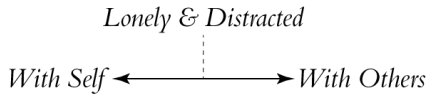
To truly achieve solitude, one must become comfortable with allowing one's mind to wander, free of distractions.[22] However, the gadgets we find increasingly saturating our lives are created for the sake of distraction, offering us enframed ways of escape from raw experience. When we thereby fail to develop a secure sense of self that is confident—it has something to offer others[23]—we become more likely to project onto others. Thinking with Levinas, we see this increases our tendency to totalize, which he says renounces genuine discourse.[24]



By habituating ourselves to superficial distractions at the mere onset of boredom, we become more easily bored by anyone or anything not saying or doing exactly what we are immediately interested in. Thus the loneliness or angst flee when alone carries into social situations, which we then attempt to resolve via the same manner of fleeing—our devices. This is how the virtuous circle of solitude and genuine sociality breaks into a vicious downward spiral.

Reaching out for genuine connection becomes conflated with reaching out for distraction. We begin implicitly treating one another as resources for escape, literally on call (remember *Bestand*?). Enframing in this manner, we are likewise challenged forth by others. Now we feel obligated to keep our phones on when in private. This increases the permeability between the boundaries of our public and private spheres, thus further corrupting our possibilities for being fully present when alone or with others. Turkle characterizes this as a reversal of the virtuous circle, resulting in a process of alienation and indeterminacy.

Because the reciprocal interplay of the virtuous circle is non-linear, "reversal" does not seem conceptually appropriate. I propose that this breakdown of the cyclical model be characterized as the formation of a binary opposition between refractory poles:



We therefore see that our phones are enabling and encouraging fleeing in the face of anxiety into the distractions offered by theyness, thus deafening Heidegger's call of conscience which compels us to be true to our ownmost possibilities. Consequently, this movement drives us to become more totalizing in our ways, thus renouncing Levinas's call of conscience instigated by the Other, which closes off our possibilities for the satisfac-

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19 Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 10.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 25.

22 There is an important possibility for bringing Zhuangzi to bear for which this current rendition does not have time to do justice.

23 Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 10.

24 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

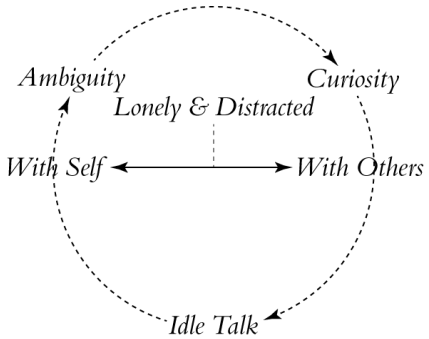
tion of metaphysical desire through genuine discourse. The "friction free life" made possible by our smart phones becomes akin to Frodo's ring, tempting a short-term escape from raw confrontations with our immediate situation. As with substance abuse, utilizing a short-term means of escape weakens our ability to cope, lowers resolve, and thereby strengthens addiction.

Studies show that our tendency to flee difficult encounters is made easier and more frequent with technology.[25] This is a problem, as real conversations often require a little boredom, awkwardness, and the ability to pay attention to what the other is saying, regardless of whether or not what they are saying is what we want to hear. Taking the easy way out (often) cheats us. Levinas would say that what is being diminished by this phenomenon is the twofold act of both welcoming and answering to the transcendence of the other, which is our a priori obligation and the foundation of ethics. Our tendency to shun responsibility to the Other (totalization) is therefore reified technologically by friction free living.

Likewise, Heidegger is brought to bear, as taking a resolute stand toward one's ownmost possibilities brought to light via anxiety is also his key to authenticity.[26] The harder it becomes to achieve fulfillment in solitude, the more we pursue superficial distractions (curiosity), which breaks down the virtuous circle until we find ourselves living in the difference between. This is where I want to inject Heidegger's characterization of falling, which we were earlier referring to as "the vicious cycle."

Having not established a secure center, Dasein becomes lost in the universalized possibilities of the They. Thus the two interdependent and complimentary experiences of solitude and sociality break down into the refractory poles of loneliness with self and loneliness with others. These repellent movements then propel the vicious cycle of ambiguity, curiosity, and idle talk.

Never fully present, lost spinning



in the undertow of the They's leveling turbulence, we are repelled away by both the transcendence of the Other (real sociality) and the necessary angst which must be confronted resolutely in order to come face to face with one's ownmost thrown possibilities. The Other challenges our leveled and superficial totalizations, but we flee into the comforting confines of the They's understanding that renounces genuine discourse and refuses to welcome critique. Rather than taking a resolute stand to our own thrown possibilities, we are seduced by the distractions and pursuits established by the totalized Other in the form of the They.

Various proposals for ways to ameliorate these problems have been put forward by the thinkers drawn from throughout this paper. For the sake of brevity, we will simply conclude by saying that the immediate two-part answer is to take time for poetic dwelling with oneself free of distractions, allowing one's mind—and feet—to wander outside the possibilities provided by devices, apps, or literal paths and roads. Then, when in public, making a deliberate point to practice being fully present to the transcendence of others, thereby cultivating the possibilities for reclaiming undistracted and genuine conversations. As the old Thai Buddhist proverb goes, "When alone, practice right thought. When with others, practice right speech." Consider this insight in the context of our paper: when alone, practice resoluteness in the face of anxiety. When with others, practice genuine discourse with the Other.

25 Ibid, 34.

26 I do fear being pegged as one trying to pound a circular peg into a square hole. It should be said that Turkle only opens the space for which to bring in Heidegger's project. Both thinkers have different things in mind, and Heidegger's own project is infinitely more complex and goes significantly further in depth than can be adequately respected in a piece of this length.

About David McKerracher

At Boise State University, David McKerracher studies philosophy and facilitates discussions for a variety of clubs and classes. His interests focus on human nature and social philosophy. David is also the director of Turtle Island Cooperative, a nonprofit founding a farm and research center for aspiring farmer-scholars.