

So who am I really? Personal identity in the age of the Internet

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Abstract The Internet has become a field of dragon teeth for a person's identity. It has made it possible for your identity to be mistaken by a credit agency, spied on by the government, foolishly exposed by yourself, pilloried by an enemy, pounded by a bully, or stolen by a criminal. These harms to one's integrity could be inflicted in the past, but information technology has multiplied and aggravated such injuries. They have not gone unnoticed and are widely bemoaned and discussed. The government and private watchdogs are working to protect the identity of citizens though at least in the United States both the government and individuals all too often side with prosperity when it conflicts with privacy. Still, these information-technological threats to identity have been recognized and can be reasonably met through legislation, regulation, and discretion. There is another kind of danger to our identity that is more difficult to define and to meet, for it has no familiar predecessors, has no criminal aspects, and exhibits no sharp moral or cultural contours. Still that threat to our identity haunts us constantly and surfaces occasionally in conversations and the media. It makes us feel displaced, distracted, and fragmented at the very times when to all appearances we seem to be connected, busy, and energetic. At the same time, the culture of technology, and of information technology particularly, has opened up fields of diversity and contingency that invite us to comprehend our identities in newly responsible, intricate, and open-minded ways.

Keywords Internet · Personal identity · Suger of St. Denis · European Enlightenment · Kantian autonomy · Cyber space

1 Reflections

To understand personal identity today is not an easy task because the technological transformation of our identities has proceeded gradually and almost invisibly. The progress of technology has its own plausible logic, and the culture we have created according to that logic is so familiar as to be invisible. But history as a canvas and philosophy as a pen can help us to trace the lineaments of the technological culture and its effects on personal identity.

The beginning of the modern era is the great fault line in human history. Its tremors started locally, though its consequences have been global if unevenly so. For the sake of economy, I will call the initial event of modern culture the Enlightenment and its transformative force Technology. In premodern times, neither societies nor individuals had a problem of identity. Instead, they had a destiny. Consider as an example a person of the Christian Middle Ages. Suger of St. Denis was the son of a minor noble family and came to be one of the politically and culturally most powerful men of twelfth-century France. But he understood that the course of his life was providential. He was an *oblatus*, a child offered to a monastery and destined to become a monk. But rather than complain about his lot and the lack of self-determination, he looked on his destiny with gratitude. In his account "On What Was Done under His Administration," Suger paid tribute to his "mother church which with maternal affection had suckled me as a child, had held me upright as a stumbling youth, had mightily strengthened me as a mature man, and had

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solemnly *set me among the princes of the Church and the realm.*"¹

Suger met with opposition and hostility as well. His spiritual opponent was Bernard of Clairveaux, a champion of austerity and simplicity and opposed to the prosperity and splendor of the monastery Suger presided over as abbot. Rather than battling and trying to defeat his great adversary, Suger met Bernard with deference and conciliation. Hostility confronted Suger in the shape of robber barons who pillaged and plundered the villages and possessions that belonged to the Abbey of the St. Denis. Though short of stature and peaceful of disposition, Suger took up arms and pursued the wayward noblemen until they were defeated.

As for the destiny of this country, Suger saw providence where we recognize mistaken identities. He thought that Dionysius, the sole convert Paul made when he tried his hand at sophistication before the philosophers on the hill of Ares in Athens, had written a treatise on the metaphysics of light and become the first bishop of Paris. But we know the author of the treatise as the Pseudo-Areopagite, a fifth-century Syrian who never made it to France. And thus Suger was in fact mistaken when he thought of the luminous church he built near Paris as the point of convergence of early Christian preaching, of the metaphysics of light, and of the glory of France. But in substance, he was ingenious and influential. Suger lived in a world that was articulate, both in the sense that the world had a definite shape and in the sense that it addressed humans with authority. Accordingly, Suger had character in the original sense of the Greek word—a personality that was shaped by the impressions of its world.

Medieval society has conventionally been divided into three estates, *oratores, bellatores, laboratores*, the clergy, the warriors, and the worker (Georges 1980 [1978]). Not everyone was, like Suger, born into the warrior class and ended up in the clergy. Did the workers, the peasants and artisans, have character too? The issue that helps us get a grip on contemporary problems of personal identity is not the gradient of status from low to high that we find in almost all societies, but the depth of life, both bright and dark, that everyone shared and that impressed itself deeply on everyone's personality. The members of an estate were devoted primarily to one or another region of reality. But they had part in all three. Suger, of course, was both a religious leader, a politician, and an occasional warrior. But he also knew work and led his masons into the woods to show them the length of timbers that was needed for the new church and that they had claimed were unavailable.

¹ *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, ed. and tr. Erwin Panofsky, 2nd edn., ed. Gerda Panofsky-Sergel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 51.

Peasants, at a lower level to be sure, participated in the life of the church and often had the political savvy of playing the authorities of church and manor off against each other to their benefit.

The foundations of the premodern world were shaken by the explosive liberation of the European Enlightenment. Geographically, it came about through the journeys of discovery, religiously through the Reformation, politically through democracy, and cognitively through the sciences. This radical leveling of barriers and crossing of boundaries was greeted by poets and philosophers of the 17th century in ways that prefigured the problems and patterns of contemporary personal identity. There were then, as there are now, enthusiasm, anxiety, and constructive design.

In 1620, Francis Bacon published his *New Organon* (Francis 2000 [1620]). The frontispiece shows a ship passing between the Pillars of Hercules (the Straits of Gibraltar) into the Atlantic and toward a new world. The content of the book pleads for a new kind of knowledge that would be, as Bacon had earlier put it, "a rich storehouse for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate" (Francis 2009 [1605]). And yet a year later, his compatriot John Donne lamented a world that he found "all in pieces, all coherence gone."

A decade and a half after, Descartes in 1637 provided a device that allows one to establish order and fix identities in a wide-open world (Descartes 1965 [1637]). It was the perfection of the geographical and mathematical grids that had informally been used since Greek antiquity. The Cartesian coordinate system is a means of location, but also one that deepens the understanding and control of spatial structures. Half a century later, in 1686, Leibniz formulated an alternative method of identifying individuals. The force of his principle of the identity of indiscernibles is to the effect that in actual reality no two things are indiscernible, that is, indistinguishable (Leibniz 1958 [1686]). Every individual thing has at last one feature or combination of features it shares with nothing else and makes it unique.

In 1768, Immanuel Kant proposed a design of location and identification that combined the Cartesian and Leibnizian systems and thus cured the weaknesses of each. A coordinate system overlaid on the world allows one to locate a thing, but only after you established yourself as the origin or reference point of the coordinates—*ego est origo*, I as an individual am the center of my universe (Kant 1977 [1768]). But what's the place of an individual among all the other individuals? You constitute the center of your world; I constitute the center of mine. The technological developments that were gathering momentum at just the time Kant was framing his proposal had to answer the question Kant left us with: Can we each be the center of our worlds and, if we can, how are our individual worlds to be coordinated?

At first blush, this seems to be an unanswerable question. If each of us is the ruler of his or her realm, how can conflict and chaos possibly be avoided? Kant faced the very same problem in his ethics. Kant's third version of the moral law tells you not to obey any moral standard unless you have imposed that standard on yourself. That is the meaning of Kantian autonomy. But if each of us is his or her own moral legislator, how can moral chaos be avoided? Kant's answer rests on a distinction he made regarding human nature. Humans are endowed with both reason and desire. Moral autonomy springs from reason in its ethical aspect. As rational beings, we are all alike and therefore impose each on ourselves the same moral law whose crucial norms are equality, dignity, and self-determination.

The most common application of these norms is *human rights*, and Kant of course was not their sole author. They were the convergence of many developments that found their most prominent articulation in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. But Kant's was one of the most compelling formulations, and more important to our purposes, his twofold proposal for centering human identity, the moral proposal and the spatial, are so instructive because they are partial and by their incompleteness give us an outline of the unique and difficult task before us.

Human rights can be a powerful source of orientation and identity when they are violated. People engaged in the struggle for equality, dignity, and self-determination rightly are inspired from within and seen as heroes from without. Adam Michnik, recalling the struggle to overthrow the communist regime in Poland, had said:

The struggle for freedom is beautiful. Anyone who has taken part in this struggle has felt, almost physically, how everything that is most precious within him was awakened (Weschler 1990).

People who suffer hardships and face the danger of losing their lives experience an analog to the medieval condition—the force of circumstances gives their lives definition and identity and often greatness. Everyone must hope, however, that the hardships of the struggle will come to an end; but if they do, so will their blessings. Once human rights are reasonably secure as they are in our country, we are once more faced with the cultural counterpart of Kant's puzzle—how can I be the center of my world and yet live in a world that is sustained by an encompassing order?

In important ways, the culture of technology authorizes you to be the center of your world. Your shopping cart at Walmart is the center of your needs and wants, and going up and down the aisles *you* decide how to fill your cart with the objects of your desires. Within the network of streets, roads, and highways, *your* car is the spatial center of the

destinations you choose. Taught by Galileo and Einstein you can think of your car as the fixed center of your space with the roads obligingly sliding under it to convey to you whatever portion of your space you decide to summon.

The Internet is the most impressive illustration of a person's sovereign and central authority in space, time, and society. The origin of each person's coordinate system is that person's iPhone. You are most yourself in contemplating and manipulating its screen and listening to its sounds. There are irritating ruptures in the fabric of your own private cyber world. There is the meeting you have to attend, the traffic you know you have to monitor, and the children you have to pick up. But just as quickly as possible you close the tears of such interruptions and return to the texts of your cyber world, and you're grateful when those bothersome intrusions from the actual world are transmuted into strands of the Internet, when meetings are replaced by video conferences and interactions with your children turned into text messages.

And how does this work? Why is there no chaos? Underlying the commodities of sovereign choice is an expansive and coherent machinery. It is a network of production, transportation, and communication. It is unyielding in channeling our lives and is demanding our support. Your shopping cart at Walmart is the endpoint of a gigantic system of production and transportation, of tracking and shelving, of buildings and personnel. Walmart lays out the aisles, decides what goes on the shelves, and requires you to pay the cashier. You depend on the government for the roads you use, on the automobile manufacturers for the kind of car you can buy, and on the oil industry for the places where you can fuel your vehicle. The government too began the Internet and still supervises its structure. The IT industry has established the links and servers and decides what kinds of devices with what kind of visual and auditory output will be available to you.

We understand that, although we may have no idea how the machinery of technology hangs together as a whole, each of us must attend to some small element of that machinery. Such attention is called work. The significance of work for our sense of ourselves is conflicted. On a list of eighteen activities, ranked according to their effect on our happiness, working ranks seventeen. Only getting to our workplace makes us less happy (Bok 2010). At the same time, being out of work is a devastating experience. Unemployment makes people "more likely to commit suicide, experience depression, or succumb to drugs or alcohol abuse."²

The world today is divided into two regions, labor and leisure. The division is a result of the Industrial Revolution, and the effect of the split on our sense of identity comes

² Bok, p. 21.

into relief against the rural life that was the normal human condition in most of the world a mere two hundred years ago. On a farm, a person's authority, competence, and intimacy were all of a piece. A husband and a wife could see every day how well the other performed. They depended on each other's work and appreciated it. For the children, parental authority was grounded in parental skill. Children would see what their parents were capable of doing, and their parents were teachers of vital skills as much as providers of food and shelter and teachers of manners and morals.

Today one partner in a family rarely has direct knowledge of how the other performs at work, and the children know even less of what their parents do. So who am I really? A loving and beloved partner and parent who also has a job? Or an accomplished and admired professional who happens to have a family? People over these last two centuries have learned to achieve honorable compromises between their two lives, but stresses are inevitable. Young mothers face an almost impossible task of finding some balance and harmony between work and home. Our society and government have done too little to make the task easier.

Let me now turn directly to the effect the Internet has had on personal identity. There is a conventional way of assigning the Internet its position in space, time, and among persons. The Internet is spatially located in the servers, the fiber optic links, the laptops, iPhones, and iPads. It is used by people at certain times during their waking hours. And people are still pretty much people who sleep, get up, go to work with their colleagues, come home to their families, have dinner, and go to sleep. The Internet, on that view, is just one more item in their lives.

Commonsensical as this picture is, it hides the crucial impact of the Internet on our world. The effect of the Internet is total rather than partial. And rather than being something in space and time and among people, it transforms the nature of space, time, and persons. The transformation is not complete, but it's a powerful tendency. To bring the drift of its effect into view, I will have to over-expose its features. What I want to show is that the Internet has settled on reality like a glamorous fog that has globally dissolved the contours of space, time, and people and at the same time condenses locally into brilliant if flat images of a place, a time, or a person.

Let me give you examples of this double effect of the Internet. For space, the example is the GPS device in your car. Strictly speaking, it is a not part of the Internet, but it is linked to the broader system of information technology we sometimes call cyberspace—the truly encompassing glamorous fog. Some 10 years ago, finding a place you had never been before required a minimal appropriation of the region where that place was located. You had to consult a

map, look for landmarks, stop at gas stations, and pay attention to street signs. You had to allow the space between your and your friend's house to address you with its features and coherence.

When IT settles on space through the GPS device, all the telling characteristics and landmarks recede into the pleasant indistinctness of whatever. Remembering the hassles and pitfalls of map reading and landmark identification, you feel pleasantly relieved. At the same time, your destination emerges with preternatural clarity and unflinching distinctiveness from the screen of the device and the soothing voice of your guide.

Turning to time, I remember the urgency of the now from early in my career when I was teaching in a building at some distance from the department office. I received a long-distance call, and the secretary dispatched a student to summon me from the classroom. I earned a lot of cred from the students in the classroom when I told the messenger that whoever was on the line should call me back. Why were my students impressed? At the time, it was expensive to make a long-distance call, nor could callers ever be sure that they would “get through” with their call at a predictable moment. The recalcitrance of circumstances gave the long-distance call an urgency you did not easily deny.

Today, the caller might have reached me on my cell phone. Its screen would have told me who it was. I could have taken the call or let it go to voicemail. The caller could have left me a message or a text or sent me an email. I might have responded later in the day or the next day or not at all. The now has dissolved into whenever, and so have the boundaries of time that once divided work time from leisure time, time for colleagues from time for family, times of solitude from social occasions.

Within this nebulous time, I can summon at an instance whatever time slice I want; the current Dow Jones average, the score of a football game five minutes ago, the President's response to a crisis, tomorrow's weather, yesterday's exchange rate of the dollar, the paper I have to write, the review I wanted to check. All these items emerge as from nowhere whenever, present themselves with much color and high resolution, only to dissolve again into the concealment of my hard disk, some server, or what now with unintended irony is called “the cloud.”

The demands of the day are not cancelled by the omnipresence of the Internet. But they often get obscured by the abundance of attractive possibilities. The urgency of the now has disintegrated into the elusive excitement of the next novelty that lights up quickly and dies just as fast. It's as though we have exchanged the steady but limited light of a candle for the endless and quickly dying bursts of a box of matches. Suddenly, we find ourselves in the dark with a little pile of ashes. How much time has passed we cannot tell. Once we lived in real time. Now our

experiences happen in the diffusion of Internet time that contains little islands of real time. You have to make it clear when something happens “in real time.”

People too lose their real contours and dissolve into an indistinct someone I need to avoid and have learned to ignore while looking at the screen of my iPhone. But even the fellow professional I had never met before remains uncertain in his significance when I meet him face to face. What has he accomplished? How much of a rival is he? Is he really as young as he appears? Where did he get his Ph.D.? After our meeting, I Google him, and for each of my questions a sharp, colored image of the aspects of his life that interest me appears before me, and in my world one or two of them stand in for the person: He went to Princeton and is the author of three books, all of which fell dead born from the press. Not only do we replace the inexhaustible substance of a person with flat if sharply drawn pictures, we reduce ourselves to the profiles, the “about me’s,” and the home pages of the Internet. We want to be known as a fun-loving this, a widely published that, an athlete, a musician, whatever, but in each case we present ourselves to others as a captivating image with little depth and less context. We are not the helpless victims of the Internet. People differ in their susceptibility to its attractions and distractions. But most of us are at different times and in different ways its accomplices, beneficiaries, and casualties. In some way, the glamorous fog of the Internet has settled on all of our lives.

A moral diagnosis like this needs the crucible of empirical evidence, illustrations that, as Veblen put it, “have by preference been drawn from everyday life, by direct observation or through common notoriety,” by the testimonies of journalists, and by the findings of social scientists. All that evidence shows that there is a dark side to the effect the Internet has had on our world, a world in which we feel displaced in space, distracted in time, and fragmented as persons.

The shadow of the Internet does not fall equally on all persons, nor does it equally dissolve the contours of the several regions of reality. The impact is strongest in our leisure and in personal relations. The glamorous surfaces that screen us off from reality rest, however, on an elaborate machinery that demands direct and disciplined attention. When you have trouble with a friend you can defriend him, but when a server is down you cannot de-serve it. It requires immediate attention. When your iPod is out of tunes, you can download more. But when a reservoir is out of water, you cannot download a monsoon. Still, even rebellious machineries and recalcitrant resources are softened by the availability of information and the sophistication of our devices.

There has been an epochal change in the nature of reality. The world, from now on, will be less hard to the

touch and softer to the ear. At the same time, the world can become more luminous if we succeed in making the Internet illuminate rather than befog our lives. Consider the dinner table between destiny and dissolution. There was a time when the dinner table was your inevitable destination if you wanted to have a meal and conversation. Now you can have food and communication anytime, and so few people sit down to dinner every evening any more. But even when they do, iPhones and BlackBerrys appear and conversation disappears, a phenomenon often described and deplored by some of our best observers and critics. Is there a third possibility between yesterday’s enforcements and the dispersions of today? There is when the Internet is retrained to become the illuminating background rather than the central and beclouding presence.

The Internet has enlarged the diversity that has succeeded premodern destiny. Unlike Suger, we are not destined from childhood to enter a monastery or follow in the footsteps of our parents. Our ancestry as a rule is diverse, our schoolmates come from everywhere, the currents of culture and economies are inundating us from all sides. And so when we gather round the table, we less and less represent the traditional family, abide by inherited customs, or follow a standard cuisine.

The Internet has given us access to more people, different habits, all kinds of dishes and recipes, and ever more to talk about. Destiny has been succeeded by diversity—that’s inevitable. But we can’t let diversity decay into endless diversion. Our task is to listen to the still small voices among the noises of contemporary culture. The dinner table is one of those voices. It calls us away from confusions and distractions, not by necessity, but by invitation to a place of peace and engagement. There are many such voices—the park that draws us to run, the flute that invites us to play it, the books on the shelves, the garden in back. And there are the more public voices of the farmers market, the concert hall, or places of worship.

Right now these invitations matter little in our private lives and less in the public sphere because the voices are quiet, but also because we are hard of hearing. If we learn to listen to the moral prompts of engagement, the actual world will be restored to us. The proper response will always have two aspects. If you attend to one, the other will show up as well. If you experience the ubiquity of the Internet as a slightly nauseating mist and resolutely clear a space of reality within it, eloquent things and practices will come to the fore. Conversely, if the grace of an actual celebration has captivated you, you will keep the distractions of the Internet at bay.

The moral appeal of real things will bring us back to the material engagement that a grounded and articulate identity requires. Our new identity will be different from the identity of Suger of St. Denis. A person’s character will not

be shaped by the implacable impressions of reality; it will have to be the fusion and harmony of the diverse voices that address us. Compared with Suger's identity, ours will be less ordained, more searching, but also more responsible; less focused, more complicated, but also more intricate; less solid, more vulnerable, but also more open-minded.

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